

MIRELA HOLT



Dealing
with the
LAWYER

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Hey beloveds, several readers have enjoyed this as a standalone, but it includes multiple spoilers from the first two books (including who the ‘secret villain’ was in *Handling the CEO*—yes, the ‘butler’ did it).

Triggers in this book: explicit language and acts, violence, loss of spouse/parent, grief loss/depiction, car/cycling accident, mental health issues, depression, panic/anxiety attack, long term care, kidnapping, threat of forced marriage, blackmail, alcohol usage, mentions of pregnancy (not main character).

Here is the least spoiler-y summary (Includes ‘the butler’) for those who, like me, can’t remember what the f happened in the first two books or aren’t interested, as they think this dude on the cover is the hottest (the dark hair did it, huh?):

*

Handling the CEO – Book 1

DJ and Jon have a bickering-fueled one-lunch stand in Marcus's (*this hot dude*), DJ's brother, shop. When they meet in the real world at his aviation company, they still spar more than reconnect. Encouraged by his Vice President, Michaela, they have to band up to fight his rival, Miranda Lexington (who's also Jon's former stepmother) and DJ's ex-husband, Richard, to save McAv Aviation.

They realize someone has been sabotaging them, sending faxes to Miranda, and, after setting up cameras, they catch Jon's assistant, Anya (*this badass girl*). In the end, after a 'whodunnit' round table, the true mastermind is revealed to be Michaela, who was actually working with Richard's father, Senator Simmons. Anya provides key evidence.

DJ and Jon get their Happily-Ever-After.

*

Gambling with the Player – Book 2

Nate (Jon's best friend) and Laura (DJ's sister) pretend to be engaged so he can get his inheritance and she an award. But, as they're already attracted to each other and have to live together, they do more than pretend and obviously end up together. Marcus gets hit by a car.

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PART 1: THEN – LAW SCHOOL

MARCUS

TEN YEARS AGO: FIRST DAY IN LAW SCHOOL

Finally, here.
YEEEEY!

YEEY!

YEY!

Yey...

Right... more 'meh'.

OK. No more complaining. I need to try. I school my face to a smile instead of the frown I have on the inside and start on some small talk with my new classmate, Riley. "So, did you hear anything about the professor? I read on a forum he's a real hardass."

"Who, Michelson?" the tall and broad guy sitting in front of me asks. "Nah, I heard he's a sweetheart as long as you're not late with your project. If you are late, then... well... you're fucked."

"Mmm, sounds *fun*."

The students are gathering now in the large auditorium, for our first ‘Con Law’ or Constitutional Law class. I run my fingers over the wooden desk with pen markings and scratches from the many years of usage. I imagine the hundreds of pupils before me, sitting in the exact same spot, ready to absorb the intricacies of government structure and individual rights.

I can’t think of anything worse!

When I chose this, I decided I’d be a grownup about it. Pick a respectable profession, one to not disappoint my family and be as helpful as my sisters are. It was either this or medicine, but the sight of blood made me queasy. I eventually did my LSATs and applied to Central Florida Law. Probably not the best program in the country, but it’s close to home, and it was easier to get into than I expected.

But now, as I browse through my coursebook full of precedents and lingo, I have to take a breath and brace myself, as there’s no other option. I’m committed to pushing through this. What I’d love to do is probably a waste of time, and I’m not even going to consider it. Maybe work on it on weekends or something. I’m just an amateur, after all.

“Whoever this teacher is, I’m sure she’ll be getting all As,” Riley adds, and it occurs to me he may have been speaking for a while.

“Huh?”

“Dude, focus! I was talking about what babes are in this class. Look at that redhead over there! She’s hot as fuck!”

My head turns and my dick agrees, as the luscious girl in the first row has an emerald silk blouse and... damn... no bra. Maybe law school won't be so bad after all! She catches us staring and shows us a sexy smirk.

“Hmm, I may check if she needs a study partner,” I comment, planning on heading over there to introduce myself.

“What? You mean the grades thing I said?” he asks, confused. “No, not Ginger-Spice, I meant HER! The nerdy one in the corner. Man, talk about two sides of a coin!”

On autopilot, my eyes dart to the back of the auditorium, and right in the last row, tucked in an aisle seat, is a... I can't actually tell what color her hair is. Light brown? Dirty blonde? It's arranged in a bun at the nape. What I can make of her outfit screams 'plain'. Dark brown top and a black cardigan over it. She's writing furiously in her notebook, jotting things down from one of our coursebooks spread on her desk. She has large thick glasses on, prescriptions many people would get Lasik for.

“I guess you won't go introduce yourself to that one, huh, bro?” he jokes. I'm not so sure. There's something about her. She looks focused, driven. But she's not interested in anything but her work, so I shrug at him.

I decide to go say 'hello' to all the other students as in the end, we'll all be in this for three years, so we might as well be friendly.

It turns out to be a great idea, as my worries about this course fade away after meeting them. Including Tracy, the

redhead, and, unfortunately for me, her funny girlfriend, Lea. I got a couple of invitations to dorm parties and even one to a barbeque the lacrosse guys were planning over the weekend.

But I have to face the final hurdle.

With every step up the stairs, something changes. The atmosphere gets charged, like an electricity field hums around me. The air gets sucked into a dark hole as I approach her, and when I finally get one level from her, I pause, expecting... something.

Nothing happens.

She does not lift her head. Keeps writing. I glance behind me, and Riley hides a chuckle behind his fist.

Shit, is this girl really going to avoid me?

“Ahem.” I fake cough. “I’m Marcus. Nice to meet you.”

A miracle! A hitch in the movement of the pen. A deep breath, and I get a blast of dark eyes. Also... freckles. All over her nose and cheeks. But it’s those... bored... eyes which get me. If one could quantify the least amount of interest someone could have, this would be it. Negative a million.

“OK,” is her irritated response. And... That’s it. She goes back to her notebook.

I can’t tell how tall she is, but by the narrow shoulders and small hands, I’d say she’s on the shorter side. That hair is blonde, but probably needs a wash, as condescending as that sounds. The freckles are an apricot orange, peppering her porcelain-white skin.

Still no other movement toward me. This is proving far more challenging than I thought, but I need to know.

Take two. “You are?”

She sighs as if I’ve asked the names of all her hundred cousins. Without looking at me, she mumbles, “Anya.”

Anya misses the grin that explodes on my face, as some part of me values her name more than any one of the other twenty people I have met already.

Two words, that’s all she gave. Precious words by her standards, I suspect. I shake my head as I realize that’s all I’m going to get.

“OK, then,” I say to no one in particular.

I give her another look over, how she pretends not to see me there, but she clasps that pen like a lifeline. She has thin delicate fingers with nicely cut nails. I like those hands.

I wait a bit longer, but no other reaction. The hell with it, the girl is beyond not interested. I spin and go back to my own row.

But, during the most boring lecture I could have ever pictured, I could feel a searing glare on the back of my head.

I didn’t catch her staring, but I knew it was her.

ANYA

SEVEN YEARS AGO: A MONTH BEFORE GRADUATION

“It’s time, Ms. Peterson.”

No, no, no! Not *him*! I pray to all the gods, clenching my fists.

“Professor Engels,” I grunt, struggling to keep my voice level when all I want to do is SCREAM. “I don’t need a project partner. I can do all the work by myself. I’ve been doing that since year one, and I-”

“Tough shit, Anya,” the man cuts me off, done with appeasing me. “Harriett quit to travel the world; we are one short. I can’t let him butt in on another group. I’ve told you time and time again, an attorney needs to work in a team. Lone wolves don’t get ahead. Off you go, play nice!”

He waves me away, and I resist throwing that horrible toupee of his out the window. Maybe shake him a bit. But no such option, as the teacher returns to his computer, ignoring me. I have nothing else to do except leave his office and head back to the auditorium.

I'd growl if it didn't give away my frustration. All I can do is exhale and brace to face *him*. I hum a few chords of Dolly's 'Nine to Five' to remind myself that a girl has to do what she has to, to get where she's going.

Marcus Jara. Fucking Marcus Fucking Jara.

That strong, lean body. Those eyes that give me an adrenaline rush when I get on their radar. That infuriating way he always treats you right, and never uses harsh four-letter words or remembers everyone's coffee orders. As if I would let him buy me coffee!

Somehow, this man, who's not even dedicated to learning what they teach, ended up one of the most popular guys here. He just strolls in, carefree, just being... friendly. With his groupies from all cliques, from the football crowd to the gamer girls, all of them worshiping the nice hipster.

I spent three years avoiding everyone at school, focusing on getting the best grades. By myself. I can't afford to get close to anyone. I may slip. It may be a word. It may be a passing remark. And then it will all go to shit.

There's no option for me to fail now, not when I'm a month to graduation. This last project is vital for my perfect marks and for securing the job I have lined up.

No, I'll be quiet and not make any waves. I'll just get through this, as I have for years.

But 'no waves' may be optimistic, as an EKG on me would show a surfer's paradise as I approach the boy I may have a

slight crush on.

By 'slight', I mean ever since he walked up to me three years ago, I've been wanting to peel those ever-present funny t-shirts off him and mess up his long hair. Mostly shove that bearded face between my legs, to test if his giving personality extends to orgasms.

This man is some sort of unicorn. How he smiles and helps people. He's nice and courteous and none of the other girls badmouth him. Usually, they sigh how he... respected them!

Breathe. Breathe.

Before I started on this course, I prepared mentally. I put on my accent. Planned. I never expected to be hit with gold-flecked brown eyes on day one. Beautiful, warm eyes, I could have drowned into.

But my control is stronger than my coochie twinges, so I stayed strong. Barely speaking to anyone, doing my work. That's the only way I can make sure nobody at school finds out the truth about me. No, the real me is for the brief moments of freedom, ironically, while hiding behind actual masks. Here, I'm captive to my choices and those of my parents.

He lifts his head from his phone as I get near him, removing his headphones. His bestie, the dumb jock, hasn't arrived yet, so he sits there quietly listening to whatever he listens to, probably Jamiroquai. I never allowed myself to ask if he actually listens to pop songs. Maybe he has a soft spot for house bangers. Or maybe I could have a conversation with him

about compositions and the intricacies of harmonic improvisation.

I'm projecting now. No amount of magical thinking will make him look at me twice in this get-up. My clothes feel mismatched to his chill vibe. My loose gray dress hides me. I breathe again, modulating my voice and accent to the 'church mouse' setting. I lower my shoulders and bend forward, getting into 'character'.

"Marcus, it seems we have to do this project together."

And *boom!* There goes that blazing look, piercing eyes, almost knocking me down. His hair is in a low ponytail, and he wears a plain black t-shirt. No, not plain. There's a smiley face on the pocket. He's as delicious as ever with his warm fawn skin and strong arms, but it's those eyes and that smile which almost undo all my prep.

"Anya, I practically didn't hear you. You can speak louder, you know?" he asks, putting his phone down.

I don't answer.

He stares. I stare.

Seconds pass.

I fold first, shielding behind my bag. I open with, "About this mock trial, I'll email you your half of the to-do-list."

"Oh, I thought we're supposed to be preparing it together?"

"*You* want to present in the trial?" Somehow, I don't raise my tone that much, but the clear 'you' is obvious. Marcus may

be hotter than a Levi's underwear model, but the law is definitely not his strong suit. He had to retake a class or two and even now he's only borderline passing. As it's the last project, I'm a bit jittery, especially as I'd lose control of half the work.

He frowns. "If you put it that way, then probably no."

Shit. I should apologize; that was uncalled for. There's no reason why he couldn't do the job. But before I can say anything, he continues, "You do it. You're better than me. I'll just prep stuff. Send me my jobs."

Fuck, I made him feel like crap.

"I didn't mean..." I say, but I don't get far, as his sidekick shows up.

"Yo, Marcus, what's up?" Riley howls from the entryway. "Come out for a sec, the class won't start for fifteen minutes. I want to show you something. Oh, hey, Anya." He lifts his chin at me, and I give him an awkward wave. The regular number of interactions between us.

"OK, got to go. Email me the list. I'll get right on it." Marcus comments as he gets up to chase after his buddy. I nod at him, but before exiting, he gives me a quizzing once over, and even ignoring this simple act is difficult. I want to stop hunching and lower the purse I hold in front of me, but I choose not to. No, I can't lose it with him. I keep a neutral expression.

"Alright," I whisper.

“Alright,” he mimics, and shrugs, making a first step towards the corridor. But his body wants to linger, as he pauses.

I want him to linger. I want him to turn. I don't want him to turn. I want him to go. I want him to stay. I suppress a hiss at my damn mercurial mind.

But he leaves and I let out a puffing sound. That's all I can allow, and luckily nobody was paying attention.

No, I won't unravel because of Marcus fucking Jara.

I can be myself at that fucking masquerade in Jacksonville. Here, they'll never know me.

I *will* keep a low profile and not raise my voice above a whisper. I *will* be invisible.

MARCUS

SEVEN YEARS AGO: THURSDAY BEFORE GRADUATION

“**T**hanks for nothing, jackass!” The girl in front of me smacks her book shut, shoves it in her ratty shoulder bag, and sprints out of the classroom without even a ‘goodbye’. Our professor shakes his head but refocuses on packing his own things, with limited interest in his students’ drama.

I scramble after her, tripping over my own backpack and ignoring the seat screeching on the floor. This one time we weren’t in the auditorium, but in an old and musky classroom, with furniture from the last century. But who cares about interior design, when Anya Peterson just raised her voice at me!

“Anya!” I yell after her, but she ignores me.

She weaves around the crowd in the corridor with unexpected precision, but I have twice her gait and she can’t get far, even in that bizarre blending-in outfit she always wears. Beige oversized cardigan over a brown blouse, probably a few sizes too big, and gray loose trousers. She

could sit next to the wall and people would just pass her by. And many times, I did. But not today.

“Would you stop, for heaven’s sake!” I catch up with my project partner outside the cafeteria. Interestingly, for most of the three years she convinced the teachers to let her do most of her work solo, but she couldn’t avoid it this time. Yet, as she told me a month ago, she communicated with me only via email. I wondered after that day, four weeks ago, if maybe I would have gotten her to open up a bit if I had stuck around, if I didn’t follow my friend to show me some stupid YouTube cat video. I should have stayed.

I have another chance now.

Even though I had to put myself in front of her to block her dash, I got her. She gives me a once over from my sneakers to my lame ‘This shirt is blue’ red t-shirt, and then, the unexpected happens.

“What do you want?” she snips at me, no whispering or mumbling this time. Her dark eyes bore into mine, causing me to catch my breath. The rumble of feet shuffling and conversations around us in the corridor seems far, far away as all my attention is on her, wondering where all of this came from.

“Could we talk about what just happened?” I try to have a civil conversation with her, but that never went well in the past three years, so I don’t expect it now.

She has been by herself all through school, never engaging with us, not making any friends, just studying. During classes,

she only spoke when she had to. In low, measured words, as though she had to think about how every phrase would sound. She usually kicked ass, even if we all had to be quiet to listen to her.

But I definitely never predicted how angry she could be.

“You mean how you almost cost us the mock trial? I can’t believe Mr. Engels made us pair up for this one!” she growls at me, teeth barred.

“We still won.” I try to calm her down, but I’m close to rubbing my eyes to make sure it’s all real, that I haven’t stumbled into some alternate reality.

The blonde tucks one of the loose locks of hair back in her low bun. She closes her eyes briefly, inhaling and exhaling. Her lips are moving, and it takes me a few seconds to figure out what she’s doing.

“Are you literally counting to ten before talking to me?” I ask. She raises her chin and I catch my breath. I don’t remember the last time she looked me straight in the face. A few weeks back, her not fully meeting my eyes was a bit weird. But today... there’s a fire burning in her. And it gets even stranger.

“Maybe up to twenty, seeing as it’s you,” she answers swiftly, then her face breaks into a shocked expression, realizing she basically mic dropped me.

Dazed, I exclaim, “Ha! You’re funny! How did I not know you’re funny?”

Trying to compose herself with another long breath, but obviously failing, she curls her lips at me. In this moment, I can peek behind the veil. And... it's not what I was expecting. Even more surprising, a blazing Anya is causing some parts of me to stir. One organ, more specifically.

Before I analyze what's going on in more detail, why my dick is suddenly finding her so damn interesting, she continues, "Yeah, we won as the defense was run by Riley and Davis, who are idiots! If they were better lawyers, they would've used it against us! You didn't have the correct labels on the evidence!" I'm thrown for a loop when the mousy girl is about to remove my head from my shoulders.

My hands dig into my pockets, centering myself by feeling the rough material of my jeans against my thumbs. It calms me enough to say in a rational tone, "I did have the correct numbering. Only the year was missing from some of the pouches. I'm sorry I forgot, but nobody caught us."

"I noticed!" she seethes at me, and students give us a wide berth. There's no blending in the cream-colored walls around us this time. "You may be just treading water in this class, but I actually care about what we present and how we do our assignments! I've been planning how to approach every exam and every project since we started to make sure I get the best grade!" she yells at me. "I chose each subject to safeguard being valedictorian. Three fucking years, Marcus Jara, and I could've lost it all today."

“Well—great! Good for you, Anya Peterson!” I explode, then realize I’m being a jerk. I pinch the bridge of my nose to walk myself down, as this strange attraction is getting squashed by her furious retorts, making me mad as well.

I don’t get mad. I am the composed one. Even when faced with a girl who has been almost monosyllabic in the past three years and now unleashes a full-blown angry speech.

Her arms are crossed over her chest, and she’s glaring at me from behind her large glasses. Hot.

Hot? *Her?*

“Look, I apologize again for messing up the evidence bags. I had a long night yesterday, and I messed up.” She’s right, it was my mistake, and we got lucky. The last thing either of us needed was a bad mark today of all days. I imagine telling my family I failed this course and that I’d have to repeat the year. My last year in this hell.

She huffs, her freckles moving as she twitches her nose at me.

“Yes, being the life of the party must be super difficult, I guess,” she mocks. “Tell me, Captain America, did you have to save the world? Or just help an old lady cross the street this time?”

“It wasn’t that!” My voice raises again. That nickname is pissing me off and I have to temper myself. There’s no way I’ll win an inch in this conversation. “It really wasn’t, but I

can't convince you. Anyway, just wanted to say 'sorry'. Which I did."

"Fine, whatever. At least this was the last time we have class together. Goodbye, have a good life. Enjoy mediocrity."

Quick sidestep, and then another dash, and my—now—former partner is out the door, leaving me digging my fingernails in my palms after our chat.

I'm stunned at her outburst, but mostly at how on the mark she was. Mediocre indeed. It's hard to be anything but when I can't stand the sight of a law book or the idea of spending my days trolling through paperwork.

Riley catches up with me and pats my back. "Dude, you know better than to try to get through to her. Did she just yell at you? Who knew she had it in her? I thought she was a mute at first."

We move out of the corridor, to the canteen, where he gets a coffee and some fries. None of the scents from the counters attract me, food the furthest from my mind as I'm still a bit confused as to whom I just talked to, and where she has been hiding that personality. And how I could get more.

"It was my fault this time, but she just won't listen! But, man, did I get a telling off. It was weird. It's like she vented three years of pent-up frustration on me."

"Marcus, she doesn't give a shit about anyone but herself and her studies." He shakes his head, watching me. Well, only partially watching me, but mostly scanning for everything with

a skirt passing us by. He's the typical jock with a football jacket and interested in getting it on with every girl on campus. I can't say he is really a friend, more of a proximity-driven buddy, and I don't expect to see him much after graduation. But he's fun to be around and we went to many parties together throughout the years, but that's as far as we go.

However, him talking about *her* rubs me the wrong way and I respond, "That's not a negative, you know. It's how she ended up valedictorian." I recall my own barely passing grades and scowl, as I could have pulled her down with me. Frankly, she did most of the work and I only had one job, which I bungled.

"Whatever. What was she wearing today? Was she going for 'potato'? And does she ever wash her hair?" Built like a brick house, with ginger hair and a tall build, he sticks out and is pretty popular. A lot of our colleagues give him the 'hey man' head nod as they pass us by, but my nostrils flare, listening to him talk about her looks.

"Not sure her outfit is something we have any right to comment on," I defend her automatically. "I don't usually notice her clothes." The lie rolls off my tongue. Also, the moment she started throwing words at me, her ensemble didn't matter. It was all about those fierce retorts and intense gazes. "I was busy prepping for our mock trial. Which you tanked, by the way. I didn't do so great either. If it wasn't for Anya, I would've barely mumbled my way through it."

He laughs. “Yeah, it was the last one. I didn’t give a fuck. Be careful, it seems you’re into our bossy colleague. Your reputation will go down the drain.”

“Funny, Ri, funny. It’s not that.” Did I just lie again? “But even you must admit that she’s a better lawyer than both of us combined.” I can’t say I haven’t thought that proper fitting clothes and different glasses wouldn’t make her rather attractive, especially with her razor-sharp mind. And now that I’ve seen this explosion, I’m confused, as her berating me was beyond exciting.

Sadly, I need to reset myself, as any ideas along those lines would be futile. Anya Peterson has never shown any interest in anyone unless it’s a *Mergers and Acquisitions* book, and her ‘uniform’ has been a constant throughout our studies.

But it is a shame that with our classes ending, I won’t get a chance to count those freckles or explore what else she has to say. I wonder where I could run into her again... I never saw her in any extracurricular activities, but now I have a reckless desire to find out what she does after school.

“Whatever.” He shrugs. “Are you coming to Jacksonville U this weekend? They’re having that masquerade end-of-year party. Nobody else I know from Kerrington wants to make the drive, but I reckon fresh pussy is worth the trip.”

“Mmm, probably. I’ll meet you there,” I hedge. I did already have a hotel room booked, but the thought of driving with Ri and his crew was a ‘no go’. Last time we got lost and ended up on the beach instead of the club.

“It’s not like we won’t recognize you.”

“Meaning?” I raise my eyebrow at him.

“Dude, you have long, black hair and a beard. You give rockstar vibes, only missing sleeve tattoos and a band t-shirt. Unless you get dressed in a football mascot onesie with a giant head, we’ll find you easily. What are you going as, anyway? I’ve got my Joker outfit ready. I’m sure I’ll get some fresh pussy.”

“I’m sure you will. But I’ll keep my costume as a surprise for the ladies.” I point to some girls at a nearby table, giving us some thirsty looks. Weirdly, the cheerleaders don’t make me cast a second glance after getting roasted by Anya Peterson.

“Fuck off, man, give a guy a break on Saturday. Women love that beard on you. Half the track team swooned the other day when you had a man-bun going. But there’s no way I won’t know it’s you.”

I chuckle at my friend, but I’m sure he won’t see me coming. I’ve been working on my plan for weeks now, which was the reason why I almost ruined our debate earlier.

My attention wanders again to Anya. All I needed was a pass so I get my degree, so my family won’t find out how I almost washed out. She was on the other end of the spectrum, nowhere near the loser me.

“Marcus, man, you spaced out there,” my buddy warns.

“Sorry, Riley. I’ll meet you at the party. Try to get there this time!”

“Haha—that was one time, dude! And if I don’t, I’m sure you’ll pick up half or more of Jacksonville’s female population, with your non-swearing, door-opening shtick.”

I don’t agree nor disagree, as women do follow me around, and they enjoy being treated right. After I opened a few doors and helped a girl or two with their bags, I gained the ‘Captain America’ moniker. Ladies actually favor a ‘good guy’, and I do quite well. But maybe on Saturday I’ll allow myself to be a bit less good and let loose a part of me I don’t show here at school. If I can find myself a date to make my blood heat up.

“No promises. Catch you later,” I tell him, and return to pick up my backpack from class.

Walking to my room in the dorms, ready for the final touch-ups on my costume, I still remember a short, fuming girl. And wonder if I’ll ever get a chance to talk to her again this way. With her showing me her true colors and me being dumbstruck.

But no, I doubt she’ll care. I’m better off finding someone at the party on Saturday.

ANYA

SEVEN YEARS AGO: SATURDAY BEFORE GRADUATION

“Do you have to go?” my father pleads as I put some more foundation on, covering my ever-present freckles.

“Dad, we talked about this.” I sigh. “I need this night, this break. Next week I’m starting work. I need... to be myself for a bit.”

“I know, *draga mea*, but...” He struggles to find words as he adjusts his glasses. He must mean business if he’s speaking to me in English. Well mostly, but he usually never uses anything but our native language at home, despite my best efforts to try to improve our US accents. I’ve come a long way. For the first few years I didn’t speak a lot, but between listening in at school, and talking to some of our neighbors, I can act American quite well.

As always, his gray eyes are pained with anxiety. They do that every time I go out as my old self. *Barry*, as he calls himself, wants me to keep my fake persona on at all times, but I refuse and keep doing my makeup.

My room is small, but at least I have one. Even if the single bed is against the wall, my vanity mirror on top of my desk, and I have to shut my laptop every time I want to use it. For a long time, we stayed in an even smaller place, especially when we first got here, and didn't want to spend any more money than we had to. But the moment I got the news about the job working for a judge in Orlando, we both decided it was time to move to a bigger place. We were no longer dependent on only his paycheck and whatever jewels and watches we could sell without raising suspicions or going through our whole backup plan. Even if I had to commute daily, it was still cheaper than getting an apartment in the big city.

This two-bedroom flat, about half an hour outside Kerrington town centre, was perfect for us, even if it wasn't in the best neighborhood. Well, in our situation, it was probably perfect *because* it was not in an area either of us would have been caught dead in seven years ago. But you learn to live differently when you're hiding.

"I worry when you're out there... like this..." He pets my long blonde hair, as he did when I was little, but unlike back then, it doesn't bring me comfort. It reminds me of all the fights we had about it. "I wish you'd dye it at least, if not cut it."

I roll my eyes at him, humming, as I refuse to cut it. Or color it. It's one of the last things which is truly me. Yes, I'm OK with putting grease on it and keeping it in a bun at school, but the moment I get home, I let my curls free. I let myself

breathe and allow myself to look in the mirror and see the person I am glancing back at me.

My father is better adjusted to this life of hiding than me.

The first thing he did when we landed in America was use some shop bought coloring to turn it black from his regular light blond. He always had his cut short, so it wasn't much adjustment for him . I also looked at the boxes he got for me, while holding the pair of contacts and fake glasses I was supposed to disguise myself with. Then I stared at the Vuitton luggage we got away with and the pay-by-the-hour motel room we were in, and decided I was keeping the last vestige of myself.

My mother has been trying to tame my hair ever since I can remember, as it was too wild for the careful image she was projecting. But now that she has no say, I refuse to budge. It's bad enough she made us do *this*.

"It's a masquerade in Jacksonville, miles from here. I'll have a mask on as well. Nobody will recognize me. It's been years, *Tati*, I need these outings." I sneak in a bite of the chocolate, but I'll take another bar with me to eat on the bus.

He's well aware. At first, I did exactly what we agreed, had my cover-up on every time I went out of the house. Didn't even open the door without it. But after getting my GED, and getting into college, going out with my façade on every day, it all became too much. Not talking to anyone, just keeping my head down and my voice low. Coming home and studying for

the LSATs, not having a real conversation with anyone but him for months.

It was stifling. I couldn't breathe. Every time those contacts went in, the blinking turned to tears. Some days I didn't even need to bother with the grease, as I hadn't washed my hair all week.

But one day, I got my leather jacket over some clothes from the old life and told him I had to go to the laundromat. After putting the load in, staring at the tumbling behind the glass for way too long, I went to the bathroom and took my contacts out. Let my hair down. And crossed the street to the bar.

I was stupid. With no other disguise on, I got lucky. Played pool with some local boys. Listened to the jukebox while making out with one of them. Talked about nothings, about his car, about my—real—accent. I laughed.

It was nothing.

But it was everything.

Since then, I went out once every few months. After the freakout my dad had when I walked back into our old apartment, we compromised. I became an expert at finding costume parties around Florida outside of Halloween. He got familiar with complaining each time I did it, but I did not relent. It was my pressure valve.

I huff, grasping my palette.

My father gave up trying to convince me, but he's still mumbling to himself about the risks I'm taking while

watching TV from our second-hand couch. I see him from my room, as he ties his house robe tighter around the middle, and sips from his tea. An old episode of *Wheel of Fortune* is running, and I ignore the noise as I finish getting ready. I need to do my nails as well before I go, maybe put some fake tips on.

He may be upset that I was short with him right now, but I worry about him every day. Just today, I had to remind him to go get his blood pressure medication from the pharmacy. I need a night to let loose, not having to panic if he has the keys with him when he goes to work.

This week that valve is close to exploding. There's no way I am staying in.

Fuck Marcus Jara, the fucking golden boy of Central Florida Law. Golden boy who almost cost me my perfect grades, a prerequisite for me starting my job with the district judge. Three years of careful planning, on deciding every day to study and do lesson outlining and trips to the library instead of saying 'fuck it'.

Now that I remembered *him*, how close he was to me on Thursday as he tried to apologize, I was even more determined to go out. His clean, soapy smell and tempered language.

Gods! I spent three years keeping it in and I lost it on the last day. With him. My fist hits the table, rattling the makeup and hairbrush.

That is one bridge I won't cross.

One-night stands with strangers I'll never see again? Check.

Giving into the draw to Marcus, even if he would find me remotely interesting while I'm covered up like a non-sexy librarian... Not happening.

It helped that he fucked up. I can calm my hormones now, reminding myself that he is just a lazy, hot, do-gooder, nobody I needed to keep stealing glances towards.

I may have been a tad harsh with him though. He only made one mistake. The rest of the work I assigned him was good. But I was so mad that it was all painted red.

"Argh," I muffle, getting back to my contouring.

I let out a long exhale, stopping my mind from drifting too much into the lane of 'what if' with my study partner. He could never be more, not without exposing both of us to dangers of my past life. And his life is too perfect, with his degree in hand and all the friends he could ever want.

My degree... that piece of paper I fought so hard to get. Another uphill battle with my father, who wasn't a fan of me getting such a high-profile degree. Or any, for that matter. He would have preferred me to do as he did, take a menial job, one which my mother would never suspect I would do. A store assistant like him, ideally.

I put my foot down again, as ever since I first stumbled on a *Law and Order* episode on TV one afternoon, that was the only thing I ever wanted to do. Especially since I can't indulge in my other passion, that would truly be too risky. It's part of

why I can't talk in my real accent, or get too open with strangers. One day one of them may ask a question or may know someone who would be too easygoing and slip something. The Eastern European community is pretty tight, and everyone knows someone back home. And then... no, not going to happen.

Being a clerk for a federal court judge is the right call. I can practice law but not run the risk of ending up in front of too many cameras, as for example, in a high-profile hearing as a trial attorney. Nobody notices the support staff, so I can blend right in, as I have been doing ever since we came to America.

I would have loved to be a trial lawyer. Or even in corporate, fighting large scale lawsuits and finding the missing piece of paperwork to get the best deal. Does this want made me too similar to my mother? Maybe. It doesn't matter; clerking will have to do. But I won't be psychoanalyzing myself tonight.

It's bad enough how my nerves frayed this week. When I burst and told him he was a jackass, I was myself. And I loved it. I crave the freedom, the truth of being who I really am in public.

Enough of Marcus Jara.

I'm going out to find myself a good lay and relieve this pressure. He will not be the one I'll tell my secrets to.

Memories of my teenage years, when I used to party and have tons of fun, sweep over me. Days of having phone calls

with girlfriends for hours. Boys, drinking. Pranks and running from my bodyguards. None of the things I can indulge in now.

But I'll take what I can get, ignoring the need that eats at me every day, to spill the truth about me. Choosing a beautiful outfit, I run my fingers over the soft fabric, sighing at the thought of wearing it. With the perfect heels in mind, I go pick a mask.

MARCUS

SEVEN YEARS AGO: SATURDAY BEFORE GRADUATION

Adjusting my cuffs, I step into the hall, having to avoid at least five Minions and three Miley Cyrus's getting inside. The term 'masquerade' is interpreted loosely; not many people have a proper mask on, many just dressed up for Halloween in June.

At least JU rented a hall in a five-star hotel, and it's set up for a ball, with crystal chandeliers and flowy white drapes, making the place look far fancier than a ratty hall back in Central Flo Law. The lights are dimmed, and a smoke machine in the corner pumps a gray haze, surrounding the moving bodies. A stage is set up in a corner, a live band and everything you would expect at an end-of-year party.

My face itches with this damn 'five o'clock' shadow. Partially because of my black leather mask, but mainly because I haven't properly shaved since I got into law school, more than three years ago now, just trimmed my beard. Having the lower half of my face out in the open tonight, it's a bit of an adjustment. But not as big of an adjustment as not

feeling my hair down my back. I need to stop myself from running my fingers through my short hair now, unused to the length—or lack of. It's even shorter on the sides. I chuckle, thinking about the face the barber made when I told him to chop it off this morning and give me a clean shave.

But it was overdue. And it completed my look for the night, along with some 'special occasions' cologne I got as a present from my sister and had never put on before.

The bar is packed, so it takes me a while to get my Martini, then I do a survey of the room trying to find Ri, but no luck. I spot a few devils and several fake nurses as I lean by one of the pillars, a bit away from the dance floor. A couple of dark-haired girls check me out in return, one dressed in a Playboy bunny outfit and the other as a slutty nun.

No time like the present, I suppose, as I need to get my furious classmate out of my mind. I lift my chin at them, and the nun smiles back and comes closer.

"Hello, Mr. Bond, is it?" she guesses my outfit correctly, her purr going straight to my dick. The habit ends just under her ass and a blingy cross is nesting between her sinful breasts. Her brown eyes don't make my heart palpitate as some other dark eyes that tripped me this week, but she'll do.

"It is indeed, luv," I play with my fake English accent. "And you are? Marie-Therèse by any chance?"

"Who?" The brunette is visibly confused, clearly the name of one of the most important figures of the twentieth century

not part of her repertoire. But I'm not here looking for a conversationalist, not when she has those hooker-heels on.

I hear a huff from the other side of the column, but I ignore it.

"Never mind. How are you enjoying the party, darling?"

"Oh, it's amazing. So glad I came. Is that a gin? I love gin." She points at my glass, and this time it's a full-on snort that catches my ear, loud enough to be heard over the music in the background.

"Umm no, it's a Martini. You know... shaken, not stirred?" I can't help myself from explaining one of the most known Bond-related quotes.

"Oh..." The not-very-knowledgeable nun squirms and gives me a sultry wink instead of continuing the useless discussion. "Maybe you want to get out of here, you know, to show me your gun."

A feminine giggle breaks through this time, and now I *need* to see what's the ruckus.

"Excuse me," I tell the girl in front of me and circle around the post.

Nobody. Damn! Maybe a slight trace of perfume. A perfume I recognize, as it's probably one of the best known in the world.

I look around, and a flash of yellow is moving away from me, so I follow. Twice this week, I find myself chasing after a woman.

But this one is visibly slowed down by her spiked-heeled stilettos, and not even those well-defined calves can hurry her along. It's the flare of her hips which almost makes me pace myself instead, hugged by a fantastic neon blue dress, ending halfway down her thighs. Double damn!

Her angel wings are damaged, her feathers ruffled, with gray ends instead of white, but what really draws me to her is the mane of platinum curls down her back. They seem to be flowing with her as she struts across the hall, and the bounce on them calls me to sink my fingers into the coils and drag her to her knees.

I got lucky this time. She's stalled by the throng of people watching the band prep for their next set, and I place myself a hairsbreadth from her. From the way her spine stiffens, the mystery girl knows what's coming.

"Running away, luv?" I lower my mouth close to her ear and get hit with a whiff of Chanel No. 5, exactly what I expected. Her dress is strapless, revealing her delicate creamy shoulders behind the wings, but the hair still hides her face.

"I figured a secret agent would enjoy a bit of a hunt." The Angel has some sort of accent. Russian? Balkanic? Definitely East European, and my prey just became a tad more interesting, even if she's probably faking it as I am.

"I do, huntress, but in this one you are the spider, and I am the helpless fly."

She chuckles but still pretends to watch the stage. I'm glad I caught her in between songs; at least I can hear what she's

saying.

“Why do I think you’re anything but helpless?” she counters, and before I can add anything, the woman twirls on her pumps and I’m confronted with a white cover over half her face. It’s a gorgeous mask, with swirls of lace and beads intertwined with sparkly sequins. But it doesn’t cover some amazing aqua eyes burning at me. Nothing could hide those light blue gems.

I have to literally take a step back to take her in. Those hips are just enticing, and even the curve of her small breasts pushed up in her snug outfit leaves my mouth watering. She does a similar assessment of me, perusing me from top to bottom, licking her lips.

There’s a golden pattern on the middle of her dress, making my brain whirl, trying to pinpoint why it’s so familiar.

“You ran away pretty fast there. Was the conversation not riveting enough for you?” I ask instead.

She rolls her eyes. “Maybe I didn’t want to find out about your *weapon*’s caliber.”

“Maybe you want to check for yourself.”

“Maybe I don’t want to know what Walther you carry.” The right side of her mouth lifts into a knowing smirk and I am slightly impressed she knows 007’s weapon of choice. “Perhaps I’d prefer you to serenade me with ‘Writing on the Wall’.”

Now I'm extremely impressed that she also knows the theme song from the latest movie.

"Are you a Sam Smith fan?"

"No, not really. More of a country girl myself." She appears a bit embarrassed by that statement as she glances to the side.

"Three cords and the truth, huh? I can play a bit of Tim McGraw on the guitar," I volunteer, and a smirk is back up.

"At least you didn't make a joke about my 'country' hair. Are you that 'cool' guy who plays 'Wonderwall' at parties?" she mocks, but the way she leans toward me, she's interested.

"No, I'm not that douche who picks up women by playing lame songs," I huff. "I play mostly classic rock. And not for an audience."

The next 'hmm' from her is one of curiosity, so I smile at her, letting her make the next move.

"Now that we established all that, I could use some more revelations," she says mischievously. "For example... how you move."

Resisting is the last thing on my mind when she pulls me in a corner of the dancefloor, as the music finally restarts. A slow song comes on, and I get her back again, a flurry of gold in my face, but I don't mind at all, as she moves in front of me. Her hips sensually follow the beat, an open invitation for me to touch her, which I RSVP with pleasure. I growl as my fingers dig into her soft curves, and her ass brushes against my groin, then she spins to me again.

“So, what sort of funny opening should I use to get you interested, but not *too* funny that you’d think I’m too brainy?” she challenges, and I laugh at the world’s best pickup line, guiding her in the slow dance.

“I should ask the same thing, Angel. You’re already interesting and I find your smarts hot as hell. I’m not as brave, so I’ll play it safe. Why are you out tonight?”

“Out on the prowl.” She throws the gauntlet, but only makes my lips curl up again. “I love the anonymity of masquerades and carnivals,” the girl continues. “You can be anyone you want. You can be the best version of yourself. Or the worst, and nobody will ever know who you really are. Or a version of yourself you thought you buried a long time ago, a ‘you’ you hide in the real world,” the blonde continues in a wistful tone. She looks over my shoulder, swaying in my arms, but a million miles away.

Her comment transforms in my mind into... perhaps you can even *be* yourself, realizing that it may apply to both of us.

“That tells me that you are not big on getting to know your prey, huh?”

It’s her turn to grin as she snaps herself out of the meditative state. “Oh, I’m extremely interested in getting to *know* all sorts of *parts* of my quarry.”

“Well, at least you didn’t say ‘victim’, Dexter.”

“Ha, you never know. We are in Florida, after all.” She catches the reference to the serial-killer TV show set in our

state, and I give her a congratulatory twirl, her small hand secure in mine as I spin her. Her long nails are also painted neon blue, and I can imagine them scratching my back. Her curls float around her, the lights of the chandeliers making her locks glisten. I grow feverish as she comes back into my embrace, and lets me lead again, giving me a wink. Unlike the nun, this wink calls to me, tempting me to yank the mask off her.

“Huntress, I suspect I got quite a few bits about you as well,” I gambit.

“Hmm?” She stares at me disbelievingly. “Do tell, James... what did your spy training teach you? I’m dying to hear what you observed in the whole five minutes we’ve known each other.”

“To start... you’re familiar with movies, and even better, songs...” I guide her in another pirouette.

“Wow, don’t quit your day job. I got a few Bond references and a show, not exactly hard to spot.” She makes a cute harrumph sound. Darn, she’s adorable.

“You also used ‘quarry’ in an actual sentence. This tells me you’re well read. That, combined with being familiar with what gun Bond had, tells me you have a high attention to detail. Your snort about Marie-Therèse back there... you’re not clueless.”

“Hmm.” She scowls, and I mentally pat myself on the back with my bullseye assessment.

“You can dance without stomping on my feet even on those heels, and you are comfortable enough to let me lead. So, I guess you’ve had training, at least some classes.”

“Are you a psychology student?” Her voice catches, and I wonder if she’s worried that I’ll notice too much about her.

“No, just perceptive. So, how did I do?” I ask as a pleasantry, though based on her demeanor, I got a lot right.

She pauses, narrowing her eyes. “Passable. C minus. At best.”

“We both know you’re full of shit, I was right on point, Angel.” I laugh again. “Do you want to give it a go?”

“Oh, James, I thought you’d never ask.” That smirk is on full blast again, and the sight of those sparkling eyes warms me even more. “As this is not your actual accent, having dropped the cheesy ‘luv’ and ‘darling’ pretty fast, you have a great ear. You haven’t moved your hand too far down my ass, so you’re a gentleman. This suit must have cost a pretty penny from whatever department store you got it from. Your finger pads are rough, so you do a bit of manual labor. You’re muscular, but not like a bodybuilder, so you probably don’t spend hours in the gym. Your tan and build tells me rowing or running. Something along those lines. How did I do?”

“Angel, unlike you, I’m not afraid to admit that you’re mostly right. But it’s cycling. And my suit is not from a department store.”

“Mmm.” She’s pleased and gets closer to me, still letting me lead, and she feels fantastic in my arms. The room is hot, and the smoke isn’t helping much more than making us act as though we are in our own world, separated from everyone else in the room. We sway to the music, appreciating the rare find of having someone who can read you so easily.

“Do you want me to talk in my actual accent?” I offer.

“Fuck no, James, why break character? I’m enjoying this. Probably more than I should.” Her tone shows me it’s as unexpected for her as is for me, and I chuckle at that. There’s something about her which draws me to her. Her confidence, her accent. How we pegged each other just right.

“What are you thinking about?” the girl asks, then corrects herself. “Hmm, usually I don’t want to know... what is it about you, James?” She tilts her head, and what I can see of her face behind her masks shows a quizzing expression.

Then it hits me, completely unrelated...

“Is that an original Persephone dress?” I gasp unintentionally. It’s a few years old for sure, but the geometric shapes don’t lie. It’s worth thousands even now, as it was a limited edition.

The blonde takes a step back with a shocked look on her face, which is exactly why I don’t talk about fashion. There’s only one thing I can do, so I tighten my hand around her middle and pull her flush against my body.

“Trust me, Angel, I’m not gay, if that’s what you were thinking.” Her left hand curls around the lapels of my suit while she grasps a Prada gold-sequined clutch in the right, as she stares up at me. “If you could squirm a bit more, you’d figure that out pretty quick. One thing you got wrong, but that’s what everyone mistakes about me. I’m no gentleman.” I give her a slow grind, and my dick, already hard the second I saw that smile on her, stirs, readying for action.

A lazy smile pulls at her lips, and the little firecracker does exactly that, shifting against me, one of her legs running behind my leg as she holds herself up against my suit.

“It wasn’t what I was thinking. But now that you confirmed that, James, would *you* like to know a secret?” she whispers, and I most certainly want to know, so I nod.

“This dress is so tight, I couldn’t wear panties with it.” The grin widens, and I can’t stop my groan.

My other hand goes straight to the curve of her fantastic ass, giving it a run-over and indeed, not finding anything under the stretchy fabric.

“You’re a very naughty Angel,” I rumble, picking her up with one hand, and pushing her against a nearby pillar. We are at the back of the room, far from the crowd, and casting a quick glance around me, there’s nobody in our vicinity, and I’m ready to play.

“That’s because I am the furthest thing from an ‘angel’,” she replies breathlessly, the ‘r’ in her speech coming out low and deep, a demand for me to do what I crave. My fingers sink into

her plump behind, and my thigh goes between her legs. I lift her so her face is at the same level as mine, the blonde basically straddling my leg.

“What’s your name, tarnished Angel?” I ask, but she avoids my gaze, choosing to lower her hand along my chest.

“How about we skip the real names, James? No names, no questions.” Her digits graze my belt and I buckle my knee against her core, and the whimper she makes is the sweetest sound in the world.

I do it again.

And again.

“Come for me like this, in the middle of the party.” The words slip out of my mouth without realizing, my lips brushing against hers, as I keep the pace against her center.

After a quick pause from her side, where I thought for sure I’d get slapped, she nods.

“Yes.” Her mouth meets mine, and I lose it. She tastes of dark chocolate and oranges, and I can’t help myself to not sample all of her. I glide my tongue against hers, tilting my head for better access. Our masks press against each other as she begins moving herself against my thigh.

The wings are bent now, caging her in and hiding our activities from prying eyes. Anyone could see us making out, but no more than that. My other hand travels up her dress between her legs, finding her wet and hot. My thumb strums against her clit, and my mouth captures her sexy mewls.

“Like this, princess?” I ask in a low tone, but she freezes, and I wonder what I said wrong.

“Not ‘princess’. Anything but that.”

“What should I call you then?” I recommence circling her nub with my finger in sluggish motions, and she moans again. Somewhere in the background, the band is going through their set, and the music almost covers her response.

“Nita. Call me Nita.” Her accent makes it sound like ‘Neetah’ and I smile, kissing her again.

She tries to touch me as well, but I grunt at her, “Hands against the pillar, Angel, it’s my time to play.” She listens to my order and flattens her palms against the marble, getting her neck nibbled on as a reward.

My dick is rock solid and threatens to break through my pants. But I persevere in making her come instead, increasing the movements with my finger, and the woman in the blue dress continues grating herself against me.

“*Da, exact așa!*” she wails in what I assume is her native language, and it doesn’t take more than a few more touches for her. The moment I bite her lower lip, she shivers in my grasp, and I have to catch her scream in an even more punishing kiss as she flies in her orgasm, leaning against the column. I am glad the music started picking up, the noise levels covering our ‘performance’ as well.

We’re both panting for different reasons, her coming down from her high, me trying to keep her up and not come in my

underwear.

“*Exact... asha?*” I try to replicate the words. “I hope it meant ‘just like that’.”

She smiles, and it’s mesmerizing. Despite not seeing all her face, I feel as though I got hit with the power of the sun. Between her grin and piercing eyes, I have to lower her before I stumble down myself, my chest puffing with pride for triggering that.

“It does, actually,” she confirms, beaming. “And your pronunciation was not bad at all.”

OK, I definitely scored a few points here, and I take note to keep doing that if I get that joy on her face.

“What other words could you teach me?” I ask, my lips still close to hers.

“Oh, a lot, James, *multe*,” Nita murmurs and my member twitches. “But first, how about I help you with your... very large... problem there?” Her hand grabs my length over my trousers, and I stop a strangled cry.

“*Hai cu mine!*” she continues, and by the way she takes my hand and drags me along, I figure out that it means to go with her.

As I’m no idiot, I do. Riley can find me later. Or not at all, by the look of the sizzling blonde I am pursuing.

The huntress leads me through some maze-like corridors. Entranced by her silhouette, I’m not even aware of what route we take, and somehow, we end up in a conference center. She

tries a few doors until one opens, revealing a small room with just a table and four chairs.

I want to switch on the lights, but I'm stopped by the short woman who bats my hand away. She pulls me in, invading my mouth with her sweet tongue, savoring me this time.

"Should we be here?" I comment in between kisses, as it's not exactly an area for the partygoers. There's a whiteboard on the wall, and someone drew some sort of flowchart on it from what I can make out in the dim light.

She doesn't reply, but somehow, I can read her so easily.

A thrill goes through my whole body when I get her simple smirk, expressing, *"Probably not, but I won't tell if you won't. I'm being a bit naughty tonight."*

I raise an eyebrow at her, even though it's partially covered. I respond with a silent *"Let's break some rules, Angel."*

She gives me that amazing grin again, needing no explanation.

Holding her head with both my hands, feeling those soft curls and angling her just how I want her, I kiss her in return, exhilarated by the whole encounter. She must be in the same lust haze as me, as her hand anchors on my belt, slipping a finger beneath the waistline, making me throb.

Nita lets me move her against the table at first but then switches places with me. The room is lit only by the hallway light, permeating through the frosted door, and it's enough to make the outline of the woman in my arms.

Her fingers cup my jaw, and she whispers, “my turn.”

I’m not about to disagree, as she descends, tracing my body with her small palms. She scrapes along my shirt, and my blood races with every movement.

When she finally stares up at me from the floor, angel wings still on, tips spreading on the floor, she’s hesitant. It’s as if she wants to ask me a question and is troubled by the prospect. Pursing her lips, she gives into her curiosity, and something blooms inside me, knowing this girl wants to learn something about me, despite her initial ‘no questions’ rule.

“OK, this will be weird, seeing what I was just about to do. But, how about your suit—is it Saville row?”

“No,” I answer truthfully, but I am barely focusing with the sight of those pale eyes gazing into mine from behind her white satin mask.

“Hmm... Liverano? Dormeuil?”

“Neither, but you seem to have a lot of knowledge of high-end tailors.” Which gives her even more points in my book. Did she actually compare my suit to those brands?

Nita glances away for the second time when I hit too close to home, so I’ll file this under how she reacts when I breach a delicate subject. “Maybe.” She nods. “So?”

My breath hitches, but watching her kneeling at my feet, a beautiful stranger with no preconceptions about me, with no reason to judge me or misunderstand, I say what I haven’t admitted to anyone yet.

“I made it.”

“You... made it?” Nita gives another run over of my two-piece, and nods appreciatively. I’m delighted that she loves it. This look on her... it’s the best. “It’s just as good as any of the branded ones I’ve ever seen. Fashion student?”

“No, and you said no names. No questions.”

“You’re right. But so there’s no confusion, it’s an amazing suit, and you should be proud of it.” Her straightforward statement makes my brain stutter, and the wonder in her eyes makes my heart explode.

I’m in so deep with this girl that I never want to dig myself out, as she continues, “How about instead, I’ll show my appreciation.” Her nails slide my zipper down and I forget all about my hobby, as the woman pulls my dick out and does another lick of her lips.

“Well... James... I can confirm the dumb nun was right. You’re definitely... packing.” Her cheeks make way to a wicked smile, and I never heard a better compliment, and never in this delivery.

She gives me a stroke with a perfect grasp, and I have to hold on to the table. I glimpse at her just as she puts her lips over the head and begins to take me in without much fanfare. The woman is clear on what she wants, and how deep she needs it.

I hit the back of her throat and she chokes on me a bit, but she’s undaunted, bobbing her head up and down, trying to get

all my length in. Despite her efforts, I know I'm big, maybe too big for her. Her hand helps at the base of my cock as well, and the sensations overwhelm me. I restrain myself from doing what I really want. To grab her hair and pump her mouth until she can't breathe, until her nose hits my skin. I'd do it again and again until her throat feels raw and my cum flows out of her mouth.

No, I can't give in. I get too rough, too out of control.

"Q sent you out with the largest 'pen' in the MI6," Nita comments and doubles her efforts.

Shit, her mouth on me is heaven, warm and suctioning me just right. But I keep wanting more and more. I want it all. And I give up resisting my urges.

"Get up, and lose the wings," I direct, and she's confused for a second as I tug her up. The girl takes off her props and throws them to the side.

"Lay on the table, head over the edge," I tell her, and I worry she may bail, yet what I get is total compliance and a luscious smile. Her head leans backward, and the end of her golden locks graze the floor.

"Now, this is much better." I'm speechless at the ease with which she just changed of position. One moment she's all badass and leading me to a room, then doing exactly what I tell her in the next. And how I love her following my orders. I can't remember the last time I experienced such a rush, as seeing her do what I asked. The control I have over her makes

my dick throb even more and my mind steers into dominating thoughts, imagining all sorts of orders I could give her.

I'm even more awed by how she lifts her arms over her head and pulls me towards her, and my aching shaft is now millimeters from her upside-down face.

“James, stop holding back. *Dă-mi pula aia mare și groasă, fute-mă!*”

Damn! The language change makes her voice raspy, and I'm not sure I can curb my impulses when she's spread out for me. Her boobs are close to slipping out from her dress, her knees slightly parted and her tempting lips spurring some serious come-hither words in a strange dialect. Though ‘*fute-mă*’ was pretty self-explanatory.

Nita obviously thinks my internal monologue is taking too long.

“For fuck's sake, I'll tap out if I need to.” She grabs my trousers and opens her mouth, driving my hardness inside, and my brain freezes, witnessing my length sliding all the way in, the new angle giving me a lot more space to maneuver.

“Shit!” I gasp. I repeat myself as the woman begins to rhythmically move my hips a few times, showing me exactly what she wants. Then, something snaps.

“Hands between your legs unless you need to tap the table,” I order curtly, my voice dark and almost unrecognizable.

She nods again, my dick still in her mouth, and does what I tell her, peeling her dress higher and touching herself. Her

pussy is pink and swollen and glistening from her earlier release, driving me delirious with need.

“Open them wider,” I command, and her instant compliance is the biggest turn-on. My fingers sink under her dress, freeing her nipples from the confines of the material and I finally begin to truly move.

I invade her mouth, forcing my shaft down her throat without any regard for anything else getting all the way in, the furthest I could have imagined. Her moans travel up my spine, but they only spur me on, and I pinch a hardened nipple with my right hand while keeping myself steady on the wooden surface with my left.

The moaning turns into mewls as her hands move faster and faster around her folds, then she slips two... no three of her fingers into her channel and part of me wishes I was on the other side of the table, watching the show.

But this part of me is thrusting in her mouth like a beast, with unbridled madness over me. Her spit coating me is messy and beautiful as I pound Nita's sinful mouth as she asked me.

A moment of clarity strikes me.

“If it's too much, tap out,” I remind her, yet I'm not that sure I can stop, as she's sucking me in, her tongue massaging my erection with every stroke and the sensations overwhelming me.

Instead, she opens her legs even more for me and the noises her wet core makes as she pleasures herself are in line with my

own unraveling grunts. My balls contract as I grab both her tits, squeezing them and holding myself up, and I roar, sinking all the way in, letting go of everything. My cum shoots for what seems like years, and I blank as the woman in front of me releases some muffled howls around me, in her own climax.

Her palms push me away finally, and I wobble on my feet and have to catch the edge of the table to pull my zipper back up.

“Shit...” I say again. “I’m sorry.” I notice I’m still using the silly English accent, but at this point, it’s probably for the best. I shouldn’t have given in to my instincts.

“What for?” The blonde gets up, pulls her skirt down her thighs and resets her breasts within the garment. Her mask is still on, but even in the low light, I admire how red she got from having her head tilted down. But she doesn’t appear upset at me using her, more... aroused? Her tongue traces her lower lip slowly. She’s beautiful even with half her face covered, her hair a mess, flustered. There is a blush over her chest which calls me to lick those mounds sticking out of the dress.

I risk it, “Never mind. Come up to my room.”

ANYA

SEVEN YEARS AGO: SATURDAY BEFORE GRADUATION

James Bond looks at me with desire, his black eyes fixated on my lips. And he is glorious. With his magnificent tux and bowtie, short dark hair and strong jaw, he wiped Marcus Jara from my mind. I don't know why he has an old Casio watch on, but this man is something else.

I spotted him as he walked in with determination. He surveyed the room as though he really was a spy, and the crowds parted when he approached the bar. Even I trembled a bit as he moved like a leopard, all smooth and purposefully. I lost him for a second, but by coincidence, he was nearby when I heard that nun making a fool of herself.

I couldn't resist eavesdropping on the conversation or making some ridiculous noises at her replies. When I walked away, I didn't strut away at full speed, but did exactly what I planned. Made him chase. How galvanized I got knowing he was behind me, and having his warm breath caress my shoulder, opened up the whole evening to exciting events.

Being hit by that scent of his, an expensive cologne I can't name but one I know I will remember long after this night.

The disarming way he read me. And the ease with which I read him back.

The memory of that cock of his makes my thighs clench again, and a vision of him railing me until morning sends a shiver through me.

The second he told me to come right there, in the events hall, my pussy obeyed, and I couldn't resist. And now, when he commanded me to touch myself while he fed me his massive dick, I was lost and found in one. I didn't have to think. To worry. To plan. I just had to sit there and take it, to be used and needed so much that his grasp of reality vanished and fucked my mouth like he would my cunt, in harsh, rough strokes. It made me so wet that my fingers drowned in my juices.

It was probably the single most freeing moment of my life. More than that time at that bar. This... it's a chance for me to be truly me.

In the end, that's why I am here tonight, isn't it? For one last night, I can wear my last dress, I can let my hair down and dance. Have one evening to myself. No pressure, no expectations. No checkboxes to tick. My father isn't waiting for me. I don't have anywhere to be tomorrow. My degree is secure.

This man here—I'll never meet him again. There's something about him. I want him. And... and maybe I want

him to see me. Not my face, not just my body, but me. More so, I can get to know *him*, even if it's only for a few hours.

I can never be myself with the perfect 'Captain America', but maybe... I can be... with James Bond.

"OK, but with one condition. Tell me why you're not a designer."

"What if I want to learn things about you, too?" His hoarse English accent awakens something in me, and I want to kneel in front of him again.

I was expecting his counter and tilting my head, assessing him even more while he aims at me with those dark eyes of his, I answer, "Fine, Mr. Bond. But we may veto questions if too personal."

"OK."

"OK."

We are at a stalemate, staring at each other, hoping the other takes the next step. Vibrations coming from his pocket break the silence, and after he checks the text, he smiles.

"In case I didn't have enough reasons, my friends won't make the party. So, come on, Angel, spread your wings on my bed."

The man hauls me over to his chest, his tongue sneaking against mine, and this is exactly what I craved. His long fingers are again in my hair, his hands owning me, his possessive grasp making me wet again.

On the way back to the elevators, I stop by reception, asking for a bottle of water.

“Don’t be surprised if I won’t go to a room with a guy I just met and expect to drink whatever he has stashed in there,” I comment. His face, or what I can see of it, transforms into an expression of what I read as... respect. It makes me even more sure this is a good idea.

“But you’re OK to go upstairs? Do you want to call someone to let them know where you are?”

I tilt my head, caught off-guard by this guy who’s happy to fuck my mouth but is concerned about my well-being. My lips tug into a sneaky smile.

“Hmm... Perhaps you may be the one who’s in danger here, James. You followed a mysterious dame to an empty part of the hotel and now you’re taking her to your room.”

He laughs, taking my hand in his and leading me to the elevators. “I’m good. I’m twice your size, after all.”

I giggle as well at that, but for different reasons. Tall and muscly as he may be, I could take him down in about five ways. Fingers in the eyes, followed by a knee in the groin. Elbow to the neck followed by... knee to the groin. And other variations ending or beginning with ‘knee in the groin’ I’m trained in. But that’s not something you’d tell a stranger. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past few years, is that it’s better they underestimate you.

But this man screams safe. As he puts himself between me and other people in the corridor. As his palm gently presses against my lower back. As he opens the door to his room, but goes in first, turning on the light on the nightstand so I don't wander in a dark place.

The door clicks behind me, and I put my water on the side table, taking in the fancy suite. He must be rich if he can afford a night here, with beautiful paintings on the walls, heavy burgundy curtains and even a sitting area with a couch and two armchairs. The bed itself is a work of art, with a magnificent designer fabric headboard extending halfway up on the wall, with small wings on the top giving it a 'king bed' vibe. The sheets are similar to the ones from the hotels I used to frequent, with a stupid thread count and probably an amazing feel.

Although the space is beautiful, and the man delicious as he watches me do my survey, I do a quick escape route check. There's one entrance, and I can spot at least two side lamps I could use if I need to hit him with something. And a bar cart in the corner, with bottles and glasses. I open the bathroom and closet doors briefly, ensuring nobody is hiding there. Perfect.

I move closer to the bed and wait at the end of it, and James doesn't disappoint.

"You like the room?" He's behind me, as he was when we started dancing. He smells my hair—which shouldn't be as sexy as it is—puts his palms on my stomach, tracing my sides, then climbs to my breasts, where he cups my boobs, giving

them a squeeze. He needs to have his hands on me, touching me all the time if he can. His nose runs along my shoulder, making my head roll back against his strong chest.

“Mmm,” I mumble, the press of his fingers over my dress intoxicating, his hold on my body addictive.

James finds my zipper and slowly... oh, so slowly, peels my gown off me, and helps me step out of the garment after it falls on the floor. He leaves me naked, in just my neon-blue stilettos and my white mask. Taking a step back, he picks up my frock, putting it away. I can sense his heated gaze taking me in. There's a hiss as he analyzes every divot on my back and the curve of my ass.

“Turn around and take my clothes off. Don't speak,” he commands in the same low voice he used downstairs, the excitement of his order flooring me. His eyes blaze as he holds still for me to do as instructed.

I comply. First, I run my fingers along the lapels of his jacket, and I lazily push it off his well-defined shoulders. I catch it before it falls, and give it the respect it deserves, laying it on a nearby chair.

He nods in agreement. “Continue.”

Button my button. His shirt reveals delicious dark-haired chest, and a happy trail I just must kiss. Which I do. Kiss by kiss, from his pecs down his stomach, I kneel again in front of him, unbuckling him. But I don't get to touch that cock again.

“Get on the bed. Spread your legs. I want to see what I missed in the conference room.”

I scramble on the expensive sheets, doing exactly what he asked.

The man watches me touch myself as he lowers his own trousers and underwear. And by watching, I mean zeroes in on my body, like a predator, those focused eyes behind his leather mask increasing my own exhilaration.

He fists his massive cock and steps closer, as I put two fingers in my channel.

“Stop.” He orders. I stop instantly. “Give me your hand. Let me taste you.” Bending over me, he licks my digits, his eyes never leaving my face, even through the sexiest groan of pleasure that escapes him.

“Perfect. Just perfect,” he says, and I’ve never been so wet in my life. He puts my hands how he wants them, palms touching the headboard. My lower limbs twitch, aching to find friction.

“Ah, you want to close your legs. Don’t. Do not disobey. Keep them open. And leave your hands where I put them.”

That voice. Those words. I want so much to touch myself more. To feel him. But I don’t, and hiss through my strain. He rises, walking around the bed, appraising my pose, studying my elevated breaths. Smiling at me.

“Good girl.” The praise almost unravels me right there and then.

“I want to taste you properly, but I need to get inside you first.” I nod as he finds his wallet and rolls a condom on.

James lines himself to my entrance, and before pushing himself towards me, he whispers, “If you speak, only do it in your native language. Or to tell me to stop.”

My brain can’t even acknowledge his words, amazed at the sight of his athletic torso, as I am slowly impaled by his substantial cock. A strained ‘*da*’ from me is barely audible as he enters my soaked slit gradually, allowing me to get used to his size, and I definitely need it before I’m chock-full of his dick.

“Damn,” he gasps when he’s fully in. “You’re so tight, Nita. So tight and beautiful.” A vein pulses on his neck. “I need to move,” he heaves.

And, gods, he does.

He sets off in a bruising rhythm, so harsh, so perfect, that my hips move on their own, matching his, as my moans provoke him. With every mewl coming from my mouth, the more he pushes himself in, stretching me, sending waves of pleasure, and I can only accept his hammering into me.

It’s marking me, imprinting himself into me, with every hit of his thighs against mine, with every onslaught of his cock deep in me. All the while piercing me with his dark eyes, watching my breasts move with each push, reading all my emotions.

“Just like this, Angel, take all of me. Shit—it’s squeezing me so much,” he pants, and then sees my hands slipping off the headboard. I try to touch him, but with a grin, James pins both my wrists. He uses the left to hold himself up, as he fucks me harder than I’ve ever been fucked in my life. His strokes are brutal and long, the glide of his shaft against my wet cunt magnificent, sending jolts of lightning up my spine. I can read every line of pleasure on his face, the way the muscles strain against his neck, giving away his euphoria.

I’m shaking, soaring, ecstasy obliterating all conscious thought into mist, shredding my control and any ounce of clarity.

“Come, good girl... come for me,” he directs between thrusts.

I can only follow with another, this time louder, “*Da!*”

My orgasm is so intense I clench my inner muscles around his cock, and jerk against his hold, but he doesn’t let me lose and continues to plunge into me, staring me down. James freezes me in place with laser-focused attention as if he’s recording this singular event. It’s beyond anything I’ve ever experienced—shattering bliss, ripping a scream from my throat. I come and come, riding the high with him, as he lets go as well, releasing with a deep roar, a sound so rough and so dominant I almost come again.

He falls next to me, and his absence is a void I wasn’t expecting. I’m missing something fundamental, the connection we had when he took over and made me combust. The

rollercoaster of emotions is jarring, and I just want to return to having him inside me. I need him back.

We're both heaving, but the dumbest smile paints my face, and when James notices, his matches. We stare at each other grinning, our masks doing nothing to hide the impact our out-of-this-world sex had on us. The disguises are there and yet they are not. They mean nothing in the end, as whatever just happened transcends our faces and our outside world alter-egos. It was the purest expression of ourselves. The raw and the real.

We both clean up in the sumptuous bathroom, then we lie facing each other in the bed again. My palms are set in prayer under my head, and his ear rests on his bent arm. His boxers are back on, but I only have a sheet over me.

"It's Romanian, by the way," I confess.

"Hmm?"

"My language. It's weird, I rarely slip back into it. Often, I only think in English, can't even find my words in Romanian." I won't mention how I can't write with diacritics anymore either.

"Did I pound your vocabulary back in your head?" A dazzling, proud smile graces his face, and against his darker skin, it's blinding.

"Ha ha." I poke him. "Apparently. I only use it with my dad, as he often refuses to speak anything else."

"Have you been here long, if it's not too personal?"

“Around six years. No, seven now. I was seventeen when we moved. I won’t go into details, but it was not an easy move.”

It was a mess. We ran in the night. Thank the gods we bought jewelry in Paris. With our suitcases full of designer clothes and accessories. Even more thankful that Ionuț, the bodyguard, didn’t suspect when I slipped a sleeping pill in his drink before we made our escape. We walked right by the drowsy hotel receptionist, wearing our sunglasses at two in the morning like movie stars, and slipping into the first taxi in the line. We stopped a couple of blocks from the forger’s place and rolled our luggage to pick up our new passports. Then another taxi to the airport.

“Hmm... Just you and your father?” The man notices my mind wander but doesn’t press on.

“Yes. Only us. Why are you asking?”

“A coincidence. My father died when I was that age, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry. My mother is still alive, but I often wish she weren’t. No, don’t give me that look, she wasn’t abusive per se, just... not great. But she was the reason we came here. How was your father?” I change the subject, as even here, in anonymity, there’s something too painful to talk about her too much.

“Amazing. Warm, funny. Kind. His smile lit up any room he was in. His laughter was full. He listened to me when I spoke. Spent his days working as an accountant to keep a roof over

our heads. But what he really loved was music. We had tons of records and reel-to-reels. Between him and my mom, we had a wonderful childhood.” A twang of hurt goes through my heart, imagining it. I can hear the discomfort in James’s voice as well.

“That sounds... beautiful. You miss him a lot,” I manage to say. “He doesn’t sound very different from mine. I was his entire world growing up. He wanted more kids, but my mother refused. He loved her with all his heart, and I think deep inside he still does.”

“You’re still close to him now?”

“In a way, there’s no escape from being close to him.” I flinch, and my muscles tense. “He’s a good guy, but... soft. If I wasn’t there to remind him which bill to pay and when, who knows when he’d get around to do it. I help him a lot, with shopping, taxes, day-to-day stuff.”

“Sorry, Angel, but he’s an adult, he could probably do it himself.” Of course, he makes sense. I had to find a sensible one-night stand.

“Umm, perhaps.” I stare into nothing. “Maybe now that I graduated, he can do more. It’s me who has to learn to let go.” How easy it is to just tell 007 all this. All these thoughts I kept to myself, but they weigh on me so much, on top of my studies, my career.

“And your mother?”

“She...” I should stop talking, but it’s him. Something about him, here, makes me go on. “She barely acknowledged my existence unless it was to serve her. To show how a woman can ‘have it all’, a family and a career. Some days I worry I’m just like her, so focused on my work that I’m nothing more than that. But school is what I’m good at, and something I can control. I don’t want to end up that way, though. To use others as pawns in her sick power games.”

The image of the dress she had that night, the golden sequins, the fit and cut on the side, how beautiful she was. How cold and distant her light blue eyes were. Ice. How she hurt me, treating me as a commodity.

“That’s tough, Angel. But if you use the best parts from your mother, that’s not wrong. And you thinking about it, tells me you are a better woman than her.” He pulls me to him, encompassing me with his strong arms. Powerless to resist, I just go with it, burying my masked face against his naked chest, staying there for a minute. My head’s spinning as I go through wheezing breaths, trying to swallow the lump in my throat at the memory of my mother’s emotionless decision and how I can’t escape her legacy and her influence on me. James just holds me. Without any need for an explanation.

After a few minutes, I push him back gently, and move the focus back on him. “Tell me more about your dad. Was his death the reason you went into tailoring?”

“The opposite, in fact. After he died, suddenly, of a heart attack, my sisters banded together to help my mother, with

bills, with fixing up the house. I wanted to help too. But everyone said I needed to focus on finishing high school and getting into a good college. Finding a good job was implied.” His hands grab at the sheet as his mouth draws in a straight line.

“And the good college was not... design oriented?” I pick at the obvious sore point.

“I didn’t feel I should. My big sister used to be a professional dancer. And she never pursued a glamorous career, stayed local to be with our family. She was married to an awesome guy. He was the son of a billionaire, but who chose to be a carpenter. Charlie... died last year and Laura is learning to move on. It’s not easy, but she’s a badass.” He pauses, the image of his strong sister fighting through her grief resting heavily on his mind. But he doesn’t dwell.

Letting the sheets go, he plays with a lock of my hair, continuing, “My other one had a bit more leeway and moved to California for college. She’s a pretty big deal now in programming, working on aviation software.” He runs little circles on my back, and the movement is so soothing to me, like his beautiful voice, in that magical accent.

“I was the only one still living at home with my mom when my dad passed. I had applied to a few fashion programs before. But in the end, it didn’t sit right with me to gamble my life and leave all the burden on my sisters. So, I picked another degree. One more stable.” His sigh is saddening.

“OK... I get why you did that then. I too had to sacrifice a lot for my parents. My wishes are less relevant too. I need to put him first, as he put me first before.” His judgmental face comes to mind, but I send it away. We did what we had to. Until I can find a way to get *Barry* off that warrant, I’ll keep on hiding with him.

“You do understand.” His relief is overwhelming. It’s so strange, how this stranger reflects my own problems back. “It’s not like my wishes didn’t matter, just I had to balance a dream, a fantasy, versus the security my family would get if I finished this course and got the perfect job.”

“But is your family aware of how good you are?”

“Hmm... You really think I am?” he gulps, restlessly shifting in the bed.

“I thought so earlier. But let me have another look.” I get up and find the jacket. I put it on, my naked breasts caressed by the soft lining. “It’s super comfortable.” I button it and turn to him.

“This sewing is exceptional...” I say, running my fingers on the lapels. His eyes dart to my contrasting skin between them. “The stitches are even, beautiful in fact, a work of art.” My voice is breathless, as I draw on the button with my index finger, doing lazy circles. “The material is soft yet sturdy. The wool is heaven.” I pass over the sides, trailing to my thighs before rising again. “You picked this fabric?” I ask him, but my palms still roam all over the garment, appreciating it in a way he was not expecting.

“Yeah, I did. I thought of double-breasting it, but it wasn’t right.” He’s talking, but his face is focused on where I am touching myself over his jacket, generically, my cleavage.

“It didn’t need it. It’s simple, but elegant.” Smiling, I roll the sleeves up, and come back to bed, putting him out of his misery.

“That blazer looks too good on you. I’m never having it cleaned now that it had your bare skin against it.” He plays with that button and his gaze narrows to my navel behind it.

“Ha... funny.” I bat his hand away. “You never answered my question—what does your family think about you choosing something else instead of design?”

“Uh...” James gets up suddenly and sits on his side, hiding his face from me. “I never told them I can sew to this level.” The muscles on his back tense, and his head tilts forward.

“What?” I roll out of bed again and go in front of him. Cupping his jaw, I force him to look at me. His eyes pierce mine, shrouded by his mask as he expects my next question. “Why didn’t you tell them? Are they old school? That ‘gay’ comment you made in the hall?”

“Not at all. My sisters are funny and strong, kickass women who swear far more than I do and can drink us both under the table. They would love me no matter what. And my mom... she taught us all how to hand sew when we were kids, but neither of them are great at it, DJ only managing to stick herself with the needle, mostly. I stopped for a long time until one day I discovered her old sewing machine. With a couple

books and YouTube tutorials, I managed to do a few things. But I was a fourteen-year-old boy. I couldn't tell my friends that, or I'd be the laughingstock of the whole school. Day after day, my secret just burrowed in deeply, and I couldn't find the words with my family either."

"They think you went to this college—let's call it dentistry school for this conversation—because you wanted to?" I ask, shocked that somehow this sexy, confident guy is living such a lie, even bigger than mine. At least I picked law school.

"Mmm... yes. It's even worse.... I absolutely suck at... 'drilling teeth'." He uses hand quotes. "I barely passed. The fact that I'm graduating is a miracle. My folk think I'm doing great. They know I'm not top of the class, as our head of year is a real superstar and I can never get to that level, but they expect I'm close in ratings. When I'm bottom of the barrel."

"That's messed up. But how do they think that?" I run my fingers over his short hair, then down the back of his neck, and rest my palms on his shoulders.

He looks contrite. "I say some.... 'oral hygiene'-type of terms a lot. I make it out that I'm knowledgeable."

"You're faking being a... good 'dentist'?" My arms leave him and cross against my chest. "What will happen when you start 'practicing'? If it was really a medical profession, which I hope it's not, you could hurt people."

"I know! Don't you think I know?" He gently pushes me away and heads to the bar cart, pacing around it. Pouring himself a drink, he pinches the bridge of his nose, in a motion

I've seen somewhere recently, but I can't pinpoint it. "Look where I am, in a hotel room with a stranger, explaining to her and myself what a screw-up I am."

Ignoring him, I move to my own water bottle and take a sip as well. And decide that what he needs is what the real hardass me would do. Not the timid Anya Peterson, and definitely not Nita, the sexy one-night stand.

"Oh boo-hoo, pretty boy. Pity party for one at table twelve, please!" He's taken aback by my sudden change of tone. I make my way to him, cracking my neck to look at him without my heels on. The difference in height feels inexistent as I dominantly stare at him from behind my mask. "Did you just say that one sister is working in aerospace? And the other was married to a rich guy?"

"Umm... yes." He nods at me, putting his glass down.

"That means your family is either minted or close to. And I suspect it's the former, based on this hotel room."

He winces, glancing at the high-end sofas and Egyptian-cotton sheets. "I admit, my sister DJ has points with this chain and let me use them. They did pay for my college. But it doesn't mean I don't need to pay them back."

"Why?"

"Why?" He recoils.

"Why do you need to pay them back? Did they ask for it?"

"No... but..."

“But nothing. Your story is how you have a great family, who indeed, had a bit of a difficult time a few years back, but are now in a good place financially. Your sisters seem awesome, and, even without having met them, I don’t think either will judge if you don’t actually want to be a... ‘dentist’.”

“Hmm. Never thought about it that way.” James tilts his head, looking at me as though I showed him electricity for the first time. The room feels large, with just us sitting in the middle of it, me glaring at his ridiculousness, and him awestruck by the simple thought he could do whatever the hell he wanted. I tell him exactly that as I encroach into his space a bit.

“Mr. Bond, you wasted probably years trying to please your family.” My voice softens, and I trace his abs with lazy strokes. “If you don’t try to please yourself now, what’s the point? Some of us don’t have this privilege to do exactly what they dream of. So...” I poke him in the chest. “You better cultivate it.” I give him a wink, and he gives me a small smile in return.

“Angel, that sounds too easy to be true.”

“You won’t know until you try it.” I shrug.

Nodding slowly, probably a million thoughts going through his mind, James is on the precipice of making a life changing choice. Seconds fly by, and it’s clear he’s piecing together what I said with the reality of his world. I hope I gave him the corners of his puzzle and he can build from there.

But the man surprises me, with a move different to the one I thought he'd make right now, especially after snapping at him. Curling his hands around his jacket, he drags me against his hard body.

His lips find the corner of my mouth, and he presses on gently, yearningly. A string of little kisses along my top lip goes on forever, but I don't mind, his worshiping touches are a balm over me which I never knew I needed. Being cherished, reverently embraced. Nothing like I imagined I would get tonight. Emotion breaks through my hard shell, and I'm weak with him. His cologne, with hints of sandalwood, earthy and solid, is making me burrow into him.

His hold on me shifts, and he cradles my head, his fingers in my locks. As his tongue skims mine, my knees buckle a bit. I lean on him, my palms flattening against his skin. James seems to enjoy my frailness as he growls, and easily picks me up, putting me back on the bed.

“This time, Angel, it's my feast. My ‘thank you’, to you.” I don't get a chance to reply. My legs are parted, and the predator is back online, none of the earlier insecurity showing.

His thumb runs along my clit, and shivers radiate through me. The combination of his darkened gaze and the slow moves is unbalancing, yet absolutely mind-altering. With every targeted stroke, I am stepping out of my own body. My eyes roll as my back arches, enjoying each time the pad of his finger touches my swollen folds. I'm probably making ridiculous noises of want and craving.

But then he stops. I raise my head to chastise him, but the sight of him sucking his thumb as he did earlier with my own fingers makes my breath hike again. The image of him savoring me, lids half-lowered, like I am the best thing in the world, is not one I'll soon forget.

What James says next is branded into my memory forever.

“Exquisite.”

One word. It destroys me. His mouth is on my sex, and then... There are no worthy descriptions. His tongue laps me up. His fingers pump in me. The moment he sucks on my clit as his finger curls over my G spot makes me utter nonsense in every language I know.

“*Doamne, James, da,da,da, așă!*”

He hums against my cunt in approval of my ramblings and doubles his efforts. He breaks all preconceptions of what oral should be. He owns me. His lips and tongue and fingers, all work in tandem.

I climb and climb, my legs shaking, my blood pumping, and when I fall, I don't just fall. I descend into a well of pleasure so deep, that all light is gone, along with every notion of where I am, as I have the best orgasm of my life.

Silence.

I can't even open my eyes for a few minutes. I manage to lift my head eventually, and the self-contented grin on his face gets a pillow thrown at it.

“Smug bastard,” I pant, and James laughs. He laughs so freely, the hotshot, knowing exactly what he did to me. If I had the energy, I’d lob another cushion, but he wore me down.

“Well, Angel, aren’t you a bit violent...” he comments and lays in bed next to me, his head on the pillow I just chucked.

“You don’t even know the half of it.”

“So, tell me then.”

I hesitate. Yet James’s expression behind his mask is so open. So safe. His scent lulls me. He is security and calm, overlaid on the mystery and freedom of not using our real names or showing our full faces.

“I have a bit of training. Self-defense, weapons, etcetera,” I admit.

“OK, that’s not what I expected you’d say.”

“Growing up... growing up you never knew when you needed to be vigilant. So, my parents hired a few people to make sure I’d be prepared.”

“Cool, kinda sexy actually. I could use a bit of... grappling.” He gives me a once over, and he licks his lips as the thought of being bested by a woman entices him.

“Anyway, moooving on, James. Both of us need a break from ‘hand to hand combat’.” I graze his side, and he chuckles. So, I do it again.

How long has it been since I had a bit of fun? Since I tickled a guy instead of just fucking him? I’ll take what I can get out

of tonight.

“I understand a lot of your story, you know. I have my own version of ‘dentistry’. Let’s call it ‘accounting’. That’s what I truly wanted to do, even though I have to compromise slightly. But I have other responsibilities. I can’t be fully free. Every day I put on a mask better than the one I have on tonight. More of an armor. As it protects me as much as it hides me,” I confess, and with each word, the weight that has been pressing me down for years is lightening.

“Are you in danger?” How easy it is for him to guess the truth. Scary, how well this man I won’t meet again can pinpoint the reality of my life.

I pause a bit, wondering how much I’ll allow myself to reveal.

“Not danger you would recognize as such.” He narrows his eyes at my bullshit, and again, I slip something too real. “My... father... he depends on me. I have to be there for him. And what I do in the world outside this hotel is all for him. He sacrificed his cushy life to help me, and I’ll do anything for him. But unlike your case, there’s no other support system. No billionaire brother-in-law. Just me.”

“I’m sorry, Nita.”

“Don’t pity me, James. It is what it is. I deal. That’s why I told you, live while you can, do what you want. For me... I have nights of freedom like this one. Where I can frolic with secret agents with delicious fake accents.” I roll more towards

him, hiking my leg over his hip. My palm cups his cheek, and I kiss him deeply, explaining exactly what I long for.

He breaks away briefly, lifting a strand of my hair, checking something in my eyes. Whatever he sees, he nods.

“On your arms and knees, Angel.” His dictating tone again, and I jump to submit. To give him my worry, my fears. To have him take charge of me. All I never knew I needed.

He does not disappoint.

Something beeps. I groan. My fingers crawl from under the cover, trying to silence the alarm, but it's not on the nightstand where I usually have it. Come to think of it, why am I on the left side of a bed? There should be a wall there.

And that's not my alarm.

The sun is up already, illuminating the beautiful light gray wallpaper in the hotel room, and as memories of last night come flooding in, I'm horrified I fell asleep instead of ducking away.

“Oh, f... shit! I got it, it's mine,” a man voices from behind me and I wake instantly, as it hits me full on. James Bond. His suit. His orders and my reckless abandonment to them. Sharing too much with him. Being... me.

What was I thinking? Well, whatever it was, it's time for me to go.

I'm naked, his jacket must have gotten lost between our acrobatics, so I sneak out of bed and tiptoe to my dress and pull it up as fast as I can, still not acknowledging the other person in the room.

Nope, not going to turn around at all.

“Sorry I almost used that sort of language just now, I don't usually do that. Are you planning on escaping without even looking at me?” His English accent is gone. His voice... there's something overly familiar about it. Too familiar.

He doesn't swear?

“Yes?” I ask rhetorically, still not facing him.

He chortles, and I appreciate I'm being ridiculous.

“Oh, the hell with it,” I snort and face the music, expecting a slightly awkward goodbye with a hot guy. Instead, my world shatters as his face is revealed.

“Anya?”

“M-marcus?”

My hand goes in panic to my mask, but it's not there. In a frenzy, I search for it and find it next to the bed. My bag's there as well. My chest is tight; I'm not getting enough oxygen. The overwhelming sensation of dread drowns me. I collect my things with lightning speed and dart for the door, slipping into my shoes as fast as humanly possible.

“Oh, no you don't!”

Marcus Jara posts himself in front of the exit. He's in his boxers, and he's as dazzling as he always is at school, even with short hair and no beard. As enticing as yesterday when he was playacting. But he wasn't really, and I wasn't either. His brown eyes with flecks of gold are glinting in the morning sun, breaking my resolve with every second I stay there, frozen.

"Your... eyes..." I slip up, but I readjust quickly, and I grunt, "Move!"

"Yes, I had contacts on, I took them off after you passed out. And I'm not moving."

"Get out of my way or I'll move you myself," I bristle, but it's more posturing. I doubt I'd ever apply my skills on him.

"Yes, yes, I got it, you can *La Femme Nikita* me out of the way. But are you really going to run? After all we did yesterday? After all we shared?" His hands are on his hips, but just as last night, he doesn't make me feel threatened. He's frustrated and probably as tired as me, but it's still him. James. Marcus.

But I can't deal with this. He... he's too close to know this much about me. My head twists to the side, avoiding him. This is not what I signed up for. I shouldn't have done it.

"Is that how it's going to be? Pretending last night didn't happen?"

"Ja... Marcus..." I sigh in defeat and start spinning the truth. "We had a great evening, but neither of us expected this

to be anything more before we started, so why would it be any different in the morning?”

“You’re going with that crappy line? I was there, Nita, Anya, whatever your name is. You and me, we laid our truths at each other’s feet. It was more than just sex and you know it!”

Too close again. Every word darts too close to my very core. I’ve already allowed him too much. I need to make this go away, regardless of what my dumb heart is telling me. To jump into his arms and never let him go. There’s too much at stake.

“It’s Anya. And I was pretending, the whole thing was an act!” I huff, hopefully unwavering and strong. “All of it was just make believe; you can forget about it. Nice bang, Marcus! Congrats. Great cock, but now it’s morning, I’ve to go.”

“I see... All lies, huh?” He lifts his eyebrow at me, unconvinced. “If that’s the case... why are you still talking in your Romanian accent?”

I gasp and my palm covers my mouth, as if that’s going to wipe the sentences I said so far. Physically shaking myself, squaring my shoulders, I reset myself to my American accent.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m going now, don’t talk to me again. P... please...” I can’t explain to myself why I mumbled the last ‘please’. Why my knees were barely keeping me up, and my skin was cold all over. But probably it’s the last word, how I whispered it, what convinced him, as he moves past me quietly, and I have exactly what I asked for. The exit.

My fingers tremble approaching the handle. I inhale slowly and press it.

“Anya, don’t walk out on this, on us.” His last attempt almost takes me down, and I do stop, one foot out the door.

But the image of my father in Paris, telling me what my mother was planning, begging me to run away. The knowledge that if my mother ever found me, she would drag me back to Romania and I’ll have to do what she asks, or else who knows where my dad will end up. Or anyone else she would find helping me. All these trump whatever connection I struck in a masquerade ball with a boy. A beautiful boy, who sees me too well for his own good.

“I... I’m sorry. I wish I could stay. But I can’t.” I glance at him one last time. The sadness on him makes my heart bleed, but I have to carry on.

With every step I take away from him, from our bubble of a room, I try to stop my hiccups, and struggle to wipe tears pooling in my eyes. But I fail miserably. By the time I catch a taxi to the bus station, I’m weeping.

I return to our apartment, hoping *Tata* won’t judge my red eyes or my walk of shame too much. He’s witnessed me come back at the crack of dawn before, but no point tempting fate, especially as he wasn’t pleased yesterday. I can never tell him how close I was tonight to being revealed. How right he was on the risk I was taking.

I won't talk to Marcus again, and it will be like it never happened.

My body freezes as I remember his hand holding mine, running his index over each of my fingers as we talked throughout the night about nothing. About music, about books. What Disney movies we watched growing up. How he loved John Bonham's *Moby Dick* drum solo, but he can't play the drums. I needled him, telling him I prefer Phil Collins. He asked if I meant the Genesis duet or 'In the Air Tonight'. I picked the right answer as I got kissed so hard, I almost rolled off the bed. Of course, he knew music! When I tapped the intro to *E.T.* on the bar cart, he tapped alongside me, and I melted as he underestimated himself on his percussion skills.

No. Enough.

I have to realign myself. There's no use, I can't go back. I have to box it all in my mind and seal it, not dwell on what I can't have. It was one night... it shouldn't be possible to have these feelings I have.

The key turns slowly, as, hopeful as I am that Dad is asleep or out at the shop, I'd rather not get a well-deserved lecture.

But the keychain slips from my fingers when I find my father collapsed in the middle of the kitchen. All I hear is a tea kettle whistling, a sound I will always connect with my world imploding again.

MARCUS

SEVEN YEARS AGO: GRADUATION DAY

“Oh, Marcus, we’re so proud of you!” my mother cheers as we take pictures outside after I get my degree. My robe feels like a lie. My smile most definitely is as I’m struggling to hold it.

The Florida heat is overwhelming me as well. The sun hits as never before, and I’m sweating underneath my clothes. Though it’s probably not because of the weather.

“Hey kid, nice going.” My sister Laura is grasping her four-year-old son’s hand, trying to stop Javi from running off. “I can now unleash all the lawyer jokes I’ve been hoarding. Prepare to get roasted!”

She loves to haze me, but this time... it all falls flat. The reality of being an attorney is no longer scary. It’s no longer... anything. Because of a feisty angel, it finally means... nothing. And I’m relieved.

It’s probably for the better this graduation ceremony was short, as our valedictorian didn’t do a speech. I haven’t seen

her. She probably graduated in absentia, rather than face me. But the memory of a connection I made with that girl in one night... I thought those romantic movies were shit. That it couldn't be possible to bare yourself to another and have them do the same in one event.

None of the so-called friends I made in the years here are so in-tune with the real me as Anya Peterson is. How I love the glades more than the sea, the quietness and the loudness of it all at once. The peacefulness of the reeds moving in the sun. But when I'm not there, I hit the road on my bike and that makes me just as calm for some reason.

It was the same for her. I doubt many know she's a vegetarian because she watched her grandmother catch and prepare the chicken that were kept next to her house. How she hates fiction books written in third person, but somehow got through *Harry Potter* without tweaking it until she tried to reread it. And then she was... 'Wtf did I just read?' She made the cutest nose twitch when she said that, and I was glad that I was lying down, or I would have fallen. Well... fallen even more.

It's not about the big things. It's the small things that made her more. Which made her genuine and human and beautiful. I had to let her go that morning, but I won't let her away from me for long.

But for now, I need to face the music.

"Yeah, Lau, mom, about that... When we get home, we need to talk." I fiddle with the cap I'm holding, staring at my

feet instead of my family.

“Talk about what? The obnoxious BMW you’re going to get from your first pay check from some fancy law firm?” My other sibling, DJ, struts over in her high heels and designer dress, predicting Laura’s jokes direction. “By the way, you never told us what jobs you applied for. I’m sure being a junior lawyer won’t be glam, but you’ve got to start from somewhere.”

“Mmm, about the job,” I start, but by the confused looks on my family’s faces, I probably shouldn’t do this literally fifteen minutes after graduating. But I have to. Ever since Anya ran out on me, I’ve realized that, despite the wasted three years, I won’t be happy being an attorney. I can’t do it. I withdrew all my applications.

They wait for me to continue, but my lips can’t say the words. They stare at me, then at each other.

“Yo, Marcus, look at us, man!” Riley interrupts just in time as he stops by our group, giving my family a chin up salute they roll their eyes at. “I can’t believe we made it! It was pretty touch and go there for a bit.”

“It was,” I agree. “But it’s finally done.”

“Yup, by the way, did you catch Anya? She looked like death, worse than ever.”

“What? She was here? Where?”

He points to an alley leaving the park and I spot her immediately, walking fast.

“Hold this!” I throw my cap and gown at him, and ignoring my family’s questions, I run madly to catch her. Again.

I duck and dodge through the crowd of parents, professors, and students, each step my heart beating faster, not so much because of the exercise, but because I haven’t seen her in almost a week.

“Anya!” I cry out for her, but she’s too caught up in her own world, standing at the bus stop. I reach her and press on her arm. She jumps and spins toward me. Shit, Riley was right. Her eyes are red, but at least she isn’t wearing her contacts. Her hair is in a haphazard bun on top of her head, and this time I don’t think she put any crap in it. It just wasn’t washed in days. Her brown shapeless dress is back on, but she has trainers and a leather jacket on, even though it’s a million degrees today. It seems she simply picked up whatever she found in the morning.

Then I take in how she stares at me, the shadows in her eyes, the sagginess of her skin. Her lips and face are pale.

“What do you want, Marcus?” she snaps at me.

“Are... are you OK?”

“That’s not your problem,” she replies with venom in her voice. The more I observe her the more I figure out she’s nowhere near OK. The way she holds her arms around her waist, the way she grasps her degree in her right hand awkwardly. How she is close to tearing my head off.

“I disagree, but today is not the day to have this fight. Can we please talk sometime?”

“What’s there to talk about? We graduated. You go your way, I’ll go mine.” Her eyes are cold, and her left hand moves to rub the opposite forearm.

Taking a deep breath, I continue, knowing damn well she doesn’t mean that, “You’re not fooling anyone, there’s more to it than that, *Nita*. I’ll give you a call later.”

“Don’t bother, I blocked your number. You keep imagining things that aren’t there. Go back to throwing your cap in the air. Leave me be.” She turns away from me, but I refuse to let it go so easily.

“I’m not imagining that night, though, am I? I’m not imagining the stories about how you used to sit in that massive tree for hours pretending it was a spaceship taking you to new worlds? Or when you confessed your favorite band growing up was Roxette, because your mother had a cassette she played on repeat, and you were trying to get close to her?” With each of my questions, her spine stiffens, her entire posture getting increasingly rigid.

I hope she will look at me again, but she keeps herself facing away from me. “Or,” my voice lowers, and I whisper in her ear, “when you came so hard I could still taste you for days? Did I imagine that as well?”

I’m a hundred per cent not making up the blush on the back of her neck now. Her exhale and drop of her head should relax

me. Instead, I realize it's because the bus is approaching, and she can escape.

“You need to forget about me,” she states harshly, finally glaring at me. “Did you talk to your family about your ‘great’ career in the law? Did you tell them you want to be a tailor? Or were you too chickenshit? Why are you here talking to me instead of them? Go sort your own life and let me be! Maybe you’ll be a better tailor than a lawyer, though that’s a low bar!”

Her words are knives, and she knows exactly how to make me bleed. I wince and take a step back.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.” She’s at least honest now, ashamed of herself. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.” Another breath. “Your suit was beautiful. But please... let me go.”

“Anya... I... I couldn’t not see you. I can tell them later.”

“Yeah, right,” she huffs, back to being angry. “You know what? I’m not OK. But I’m definitely not here to be your crutch while you get yourself together right now. Go deal with your own problems!”

“And I will,” I say through my teeth. “But can *you* please agree to...”

“Stop it!” This time she yells. “Instead of focusing on me, how about you sort out what you want to do in your own life? And I’ll do the same. That night was just a night, it didn’t mean anything.”

I try to touch her, but she slaps my hand away. I try to come closer to her, but she pushes me away.

“Anya...”

“You need to let me go, Marcus Jara! I do NOT want you!” she roars, and as the bus gets there, she climbs in, completely ignoring me.

I’m stunned and lost and unsure of how to react. I need to do what she asked. I should.

She’s moving along in the vehicle, then sitting down in the back, averting her eyes from me, forcing herself for some unknown reason. But I spot the second she wipes the tears. How her head drops in her hands.

I whisper to myself, “I’ll give you space, Angel, but when you’re ready, I’ll be there.”

INTERMEZZO – ANYA

A bout two and a half years ago

Washington DC is cold and the idea of going home tonight in the freezing snow is as appealing to me as getting another call for more money from Florida.

But I have to put my files away and leave work.

My boss, Federal Judge Harry Wilson, only has one meeting left, and even though he never told me with whom, he already waved me off, wishing me a good evening.

It was the job I needed, clerking for him, and only one step away from getting a job for a supreme court judge. He was kind and taught me more than I imagined I needed to know. He says if I keep going at the rate I am, he will write the recommendation letter himself. And that would make it all worth it. All the sacrifices, all the regrets and the hiding. Just to get one good thing in my life, something I fought for and got, even though it is beginning to be a dry dream, not really making my heart flutter.

As the blizzard's picking up, I'm dragging my feet, rearranging my emails instead of going home to my empty flat. The door to the office opens with a bang, jerking me from my admin work as a tall man walks in. Dressed like everyone in DC in a ridiculously expensive suit, watch to match and dark, impeccably cropped hair. The craftsmanship of the suit unearths a memory of another dark jacket, but I shove that right back down.

"I'm here to see the judge. Tell him Senator Simmons is here," he commands with an irate tone, one marking him as a 'guy in charge', not used to people not doing exactly what he demands. Great. Another BDE jackass. I fucking hate DC.

"Of course, sir, you can walk right in." There's no point explaining I'm not the secretary. I've learned my lesson in the past, and it was better this way. Less of a chance of anyone asking too many questions.

He moved to knock on the door, but then turned to me. "Don't I know you?"

"No, I don't think so, Senator." I take him in more. The suit... the haircut? Nothing came to mind. Yet when I look straight at him, and see his face better, I freeze.

"You're Andreea's daughter... what's that name... hmm...."

Fuck! I gasp in panic, and stumble on a reply, making sure my American accent is spot on, "You're mistaken, sir. I'm Anya Peterson, just a clerk here."

“No, no, it is you! I thought you disappeared years ago. With your father. Wait till I tell her I found you! I always meet her at events when I visit Europe.”

“No!” I cry out, losing my facade.

“No?” He glares at me as a cat would a mouse caught in a trap. “So, I was right then...”

I get up from my desk, crossing my arms around me, and do something I never thought I’d do.

“Please Mr. Simmons, please don’t tell her I’m here,” I beg, my heart beating so fast I think it would explode.

He observes me slowly, his eyes roaming all over me. The seconds when he analyzes me are excruciating. My hands grow clammy, and I hold my breath, waiting for his reply.

“Fine, I won’t call her. She’s a cunt anyway...” He smirks. I exhale in relief, but before I can thank him, he continues, diverting my path forever. “I’ll keep this a secret. But you’ll have to do a little thing for me.”

“What?” I’m trembling by now, imagining a million things he could want.

“Ah, don’t worry, I’m not like that.” His creepy smile is not putting me at ease at all, more to the contrary. “You’re not my type,” he adds, pointing in disgust at my disguise and my large glasses, which I kept using, even after almost five years since I graduated. “But this is Washington. A favor will always come in handy. I’ll be in touch.” He winks at me in the end, before

finally going into my boss's office to discuss whatever he was there for.

I run to the ladies' room and collapse on the cold tiles. I struggle to breathe as the image of his predatory grin cuts through me. He has me. And he can ask anything from me, and I would have to comply.

A few months later, Kenneth Simmons returns. A few months of me not sleeping, not eating. Only watching the door, my phone, or my email for any communication from him. Even the judge was beginning to worry about me as I lost weight and the bags under my eyes were becoming more and more obvious.

My boss is at the doctor's, but I have paperwork to go through, cases to prepare for him. Yet I stop everything the moment that jackass strolls into the office.

This time, he brings a woman. She's probably approaching sixty, with short silver hair, but her designer dress and subtle jewelry give away just how much money she has, and her keen eye for creating a professional vibe.

"Ah, there she is... little *Anya*." The senator leers at me, marking on my fake name.

"This is... her?" the lady asks confused, probably not expecting a 'librarian'. "You're sure she can do the job? She looks so... plain. She's a lawyer?"

“Yes, she is. Her resume is pretty impressive. She was the valedictorian. And has been clerking for several judges, all for them vouching for her. Harry even said she’ll work for a supreme court judge in no time!”

“You asked other judges about me?”

“Relax, honey, it was research. We needed to make sure you’ll fit the brief, for that favor you owe me for not spilling your whereabouts to good old Mommy. How is she these days? Her company is doing well.”

“I wouldn’t know, I don’t keep track,” I lie, but I can’t let him realize how much his words worry me. “What do you want me to do?”

“Simple, really. Michaela here,” he says, nodding to the woman, “needs an executive assistant for a CEO.”

“OK... and why do you need me specifically?” I narrow my eyes at them, as it can’t be that simple. “There must be plenty of EAs out there.”

“Ah, but that won’t be your real... activity, so to speak. There will be times where we’ll need you to perform some tasks... faxing, moving meetings.”

I still don’t understand. Those are normal jobs an assistant would do. What are these two getting me into?

“Jobs the CEO won’t be aware of. In fact, they may cause him some problems along the way.”

The way she phrases it, it hits me. “You want me to sabotage him? That’s wrong, I’m not doing that.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” the senator intervenes. “It’s nothing really, just send some documents to a third party and fiddle with his calendar. And to make things even sweeter, I talked to my friend at the State department.”

“What?”

“Yes, he reached out to some of his contacts in Romania, and, if you accept the job, he’ll make sure your father’s record is expunged. The arrest warrant, gone, even before you start working for McAv. Or I can call your mother and get him thrown in jail. Your choice.”

Time stops. Everything stops in that instance when he offers me the world. A chance to get away from the hiding, the years of panicking for my father’s wellbeing. Years of being concerned that one wrong move will send him to prison for getting me out of there.

“Is... is that all you want me to do?” I whisper my question.

“Pretty much,” Michaela responds. “It’s important that my involvement is kept secret. You’ll be interacting with Jon’s rival, Miranda Lexington. You’ll be sending her people documents and information about the suppliers, etcetera. She doesn’t know I’m behind this, and I want to keep it that way.”

“Why?”

“I’m currently the Vice President of McAv Aviation. And if it all goes as planned, the future CEO.”

Her grin frightens me more than the senator’s, but I have no choice. For my father, I have to do it.

But staring at them circling me, predators that they are, from somewhere deep inside, from a place I don't want to name as it's from *her*, I find the strength to take a bit of control back, and to say, "I want more than what you offered."

About a year and a half ago, a week after the start of 'Handling the CEO'...

A beautiful brunette in a burnt orange dress shows up in front of my desk at around nine in the morning. It's my boss's appointment, but my heart stops when I realize who Dahlia Jara actually is. It really is *his* sister.

Fuck. I want to shuffle away fast. I did not put two and two together when I read her last name. I didn't even allow myself to consider it. But now, when brown eyes and a familiar bone structure are in my face, I can't stand it. Worse, I think I saw her years ago, at graduation. I hope she doesn't recognize me.

"Mr. McMaster is busy but, give me a second. I can call him," I mumble, avoiding her as much as I can.

"Hmm." She purses her lips. "He does know I have a meeting with him, right?"

Technically, Jon thinks the meeting is tomorrow. That's what Michaela wanted, to make sure McAv's rivals announce a press conference to discredit Ms. Jara. But I hate having to lie to him. I fucking hate it. He's a good guy and a great CEO.

So, I took to heart my other directive... sow chaos in his calendar. I emailed her to come Monday instead of Tuesday, hoping that at least I can disrupt that bitch Miranda and the VP a bit. Maybe give Jon and Dahlia a chance to discuss their contract without a setup.

“Nonsense, you *know* Jon’s sorting that hangar emergency.” That grating, sweet voice again, and there she is, giving me a pointed look. “Ms. Jara, delighted to meet you, I’m Michaela Jones, the Vice President of McAv. I’m so sorry, but if you step into my office, I’ll keep you entertained until that’s resolved.”

Dahlia lifts her eyebrow, and a memory of Marcus Jara doing the same is too much to bear. “OK, nice to meet you. If the CEO is busy, I can come back another time, though I would’ve appreciated being told in advance if that was the case.” She’s pissed. Maybe she’ll storm out and not go through with it.

“Oh no, it was a completely unplanned issue. He should be along in a bit. If you could please go ahead, it’s on the opposite end of this corridor.”

The programmer nods and heads towards the VP’s office, but the old lady flares her nostrils at me.

“How the hell did that happen? I told you Tuesday!”

“I thought you wanted me to mess his schedule up! I did!” I seethe, but I can’t let on that I am aware of her bigger plan.

“You... you... foolish girl.” She runs her hand through her short hair. “Never mind, we can fix this. Let that bitch know it’s on for today. Luckily, the press conference room was set up. They should get the media there asap. Go fax some more papers and tell Jon that Ms. Jara is here in an hour. Let’s give them time to get ready. Stupid, stupid girl,” she mutters, but goes to find our guest.

Fuck. Fuck. I have no choice but to do as she says, and I use a burner phone to text Miranda. I don’t usually have it as all phones and bags are checked at the door, but I hid one, nonetheless. Shit. My plan backfired. Jon and Dahlia are about to get pressured into working together.

Enough, I need to start preparing some insurance in case this all goes to hell. I’ll start gathering some files and evidence for them. Maybe I can help.

INTERMEZZO – MARCUS

Pedal. Pedal harder. Hell yeah, I can get it, I can get over this small hill. Just one more push... YES!

I've been training for this triathlon for weeks now, and not even the heat in Florida in August can make me stop. That's why I'm out now at half-past six in the evening, cycling through this narrow road away from town.

I obviously can't listen to music as I need to be aware of my surroundings, but I use this time to plan my next line of suits. The ones I did for the Kerrington Typhoons, our local football team, were a hit. Now the yacht club wants to give me a chance to showcase my designs. And from there... who knows. But I've never been more content in my career. Finally, after years of work, I step into my store and people on the street nod my way. They know who I am. The other shop owners as well, we are a little community there, and I love every moment of it.

My girlfriend thinks I'll be the next best thing in men's fashion-wear, and I hope she's right. Marie is a quiet girl, with

a thriving book editing career, and we're happy together. OK, perhaps it isn't a love story to write a novel for, but we... work. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Someone to share your life with.

Maybe she doesn't give me jolts of electricity every time she touches me. Or make me want to play Phil Collins. After so many years, I've pretty much given up on *that* dream. Almost. But some days like this, with only green around me and the open track in front, I think of *her* light blue eyes and the way the sun would hit *her* hair on a day like today. But I change gears on my road bike and pedal faster instead.

I'm almost halfway now and have to turn back at the next junction. Well, well, my time is pretty good, as I glance at my smartwatch. Yep, a few more weeks of this and then I'll be meeting my sprint targets with ease. Just a...

A shadow to my left, too near, way too near. A massive red truck.

I swerve right.

I fly.

I fall.

I hit the ground.

Blackness.

PART 2: NOW

*There are two chapters (marked with *) where the characters only speak in Romanian, but for the readers' benefit, they were written in English. (and for the authors benefit, who doesn't write properly in her native language anymore. It all sounds weird. Don't tell my mother.)*

MARCUS

“**M**arcus, are you even listening to me?” Marie’s voice wakes me from my daydreaming. Her brown eyes are staring at me in disappointment, an expression I’ve been too familiar with in the past year or so.

“Uh, sorry, I was thinking. What did you say?” I pick up my coffee but it has gone cold. I realize how long she must have been waiting for me to respond to whatever she asked me. The diner we’re in is pretty busy, lunchtime bringing nearby businesspeople as well as regulars. The fake leather red booths in the back wall were full, so we had to settle for a table by the window. Which was my preference, as I was closer to the place of my focus.

My girlfriend shakes her head, her blonde chin-length hair following the movement. “Just thinking? More ignoring me while looking at your old store from across the street. I can’t believe we are back at this place trying to have lunch, and again, you spend half the time longing for your shop. I said we needed to talk.”

Pivoting to her, her frown is obvious. She's right to be upset. I'm the one in the wrong, as I've been for months.

"What about?" I ask tentatively.

"Marcus... I do like you." Her sigh fills me with dread. "But I don't think I can do this anymore. Ever since the accident..." I glance at the brace around my right wrist. I try to make a fist, but as always, my fingers struggle to curl all the way in, stopping myself before I damage anything. "Ever since the accident, you've been different. Broody, quiet. I tried to be patient while you did your physio... but you stopped that months ago and nothing has changed. You keep coming here every week and don't even go inside your store."

"Babe... Marie... I don't know what to add to that. I..." With an effort to find my words, I try to touch her hand with my left, but she pulls away.

"We need to take a break. I can't be with anymore until you get out of this funk. I wanted to be supportive. Went with you to your appointments, didn't press you on deciding what to do with the shop. Tried to be there for you, but you... you're not here for me." The hustle and bustle of the restaurant is dimming as background noise, as I'm beginning to understand where this is going.

She continues, "How long has it been since we went on a proper date, not just come to lunch here? Do you know what the latest book is that I've been working on? Or the last time we had sex? It's been two months, Marcus. And even then, you weren't 'present', just going through the motions."

“Uh...” is all I can respond, as my constant tiredness makes my responses sluggish.

We’ve been together for a year and a bit now, and even though my mother introduced us, we got along. I had my men’s clothing shop, which was becoming well known here in Kerrington. And then, one stupid mistake. One evening ride on my road bike last August while training for a triathlon. One ride. And one Ford who swerved into me to not run over a damn bird.

As I fell on my right side, I broke my leg and my arm. But my wrist was the worst impacted.

My right hand. My dominant hand, which, despite three surgeries and months of physio, never felt the same. My hand, at which I can barely look properly, let alone try to force it into my old behaviors. Every day I fear that one wrong move will destroy any progress and I’ll never be able to use it at all. There is no pain, there hasn’t been in months, but I... I can’t. Should I try to use my left? Maybe? But my brain can’t even consider it. It’s so alien to me, and I’m stuck.

I glance again over at the dark space, still with one of my favorite three pieces suits in the window, with the ‘Marcus’s Tailoring’ sign still hanging on top of the entrance. And the way-too-finite ‘Closed’ notice on the smoky glass door.

“Marcus, you did it again!” The woman across from me huffs, picking up her purse from the back of the seat. “I can’t believe you can’t even pay attention when I’m breaking up with you.”

“Marie, I apologize again. Would you please... tell me how I can be better.” There is no power in my tone, however, only resignation, as both of us recognize there’s nothing she can actually ask that I can give her right now. I am numb and detached from this discussion, however hard I try.

“Tell you? Marcus, when we met you knew exactly what to do. You had a confidence about you. That’s what attracted me to you in the first place. I get you had a traumatic event, but you... stopped being you.” She clears her throat, hesitating on her next words. “I’m not equipped to tell you what to do. We never talked about you going inside the store or taking your brace off. You told me it doesn’t hurt. I don’t understand why you don’t just try to use it! Maybe I should have pushed more, but now it’s too late.”

Take it off? Try to use it? My pulse quickens, thinking about how I could damage my hand even more if I didn’t have the bind. Imagining my sewing machine again. The suits I never finished. The merchandise still on display, which hadn’t been seen by another person in months besides the cleaner my sisters employed to dust the place from time to time.

“This is exactly what I mean. You’re stuck, and I can’t be stuck with you anymore. I’m sorry I can’t stay anymore; I hope you can find a way to move on. Goodbye.” This time Marie dashes out of her seat and by the time the door from the diner closes behind her, I barely process what happened.

Should I run after her? Beg her to take me back? I should. I really should. She’s good for me. Decent woman. But my feet

are glued to the floor. My ass is still on the wooden chair, and I can't find in myself the impulse to chase her. In the end, she was right. I'm a mess. A goddamn mess. And it's probably for the best for my girlfriend... ex... girlfriend to find herself someone who can be there for her. Who remembers the last time he kissed her or why.

So, as the waitress refills my drink, I lean back and go back to watching my past.

The Uber to the office is quick, and I wish it took its time instead of returning me to the purgatory which is my life. The sleek glass elevator back to my floor is fast as well, everyone already having returned from their lunches. Just me dragging my feet, trotting along to my fancy nepotism-fueled office.

What a joke! A proper office, not one with the other associates in the bright-colored and modern open-plan area. With a beautiful dark wood desk, law books in an elegant bookcase along the back wall. A meeting area with brown leather couches and a walnut table.

My sister Laura volunteered to design my office for me... and the inspiration she used was my darn shop. She even put some dark green throw cushions, but I gave those to a lady from HR. They were reminding me too much of my old décor, my gorgeous velvet chaises. Memories of my past life, a life I can't get back to now.

I told my sibling she didn't need to redecorate, that I was only supposed to be there to assist McAv Aviation's Head Legal Counsel for a few months, but there was no arguing with her.

Another pang of sadness hits me. Laura didn't even get a chance to see the space all done up before she got put on bed rest with her high-risk pregnancy. It appears baby Win—her husband, Nathan, picked that name, and I am still trying to figure out why—needs peace and quiet and their mom horizontal.

Laura and Nate surprised everyone by getting married the day after they had their baby's three-month scan, so I'm perfectly aware how they live by their own rules. They got together during a crazy fake engagement scheme neither of them 'faked' well, after having met at my other sister's, DJ, and her boyfriend's, Jon, housewarming party.

Jon McMaster, the CEO of McAv Aviation, where I'm currently employed.

This is how the nepotism came into play. Poor Marcus, in need of work after his paying-the-bills hand got mangled. And even lamer Marcus for letting his sister DJ talk her partner into giving me a goddamn job here. The man, totally under her spell, found me a junior lawyer role despite me never practicing after passing the bar exam!

So here I am, in my posh office, the Jara family disappointment, in my very own pity party.

I barely have time to check my emails when my boss, Olivia Nkosi, walks in, with her Gucci monogram polo dress and sky-high Jimmy Choo heels, which I am sure my fashion-passionate sister, DJ, has in about three colors.

“Marcus, you got a second to join me in Jon’s office? There’ve been some developments about the incidents. Ramsay Lexington is here as well.”

“Yes, sure, I’ll be right there.” Taking in the frown on her face, a usual occurrence when she talks to me, I get my notepad and hurry after her.

As we approach the CEO’s office, my palms start to sweat. To make things worse, she stops us before going in.

“It would be better if you keep quiet in there. You’re a junior lawyer, not sure why you were even requested.”

“Umm... OK. Who called for me?” I’ve been trying to keep a low profile, but it’s hard when I have an office and most of the staff don’t. Ms. Nkosi has been riding my ass a lot lately, pointing out every mistake I make. And I’ve been making quite a few of them since I started.

“Jon, obviously,” she huffs as she arranges her bracelet. “Just... don’t say anything.”

I nod. There’s no point doing anything but sitting there, being quiet, and having Olivia handle the meeting. She hasn’t been ecstatic about my presence in her department and has been throwing short comments about my performance for months now.

This is proving to be one shit day.

We hurry down the corridor, passing the modern open plan area with laptop touch down-areas and beanbag chairs in a corner, McAv's attempt to a Silicon Valley decorating style, to get to the senior managers' offices zone, specifically, to our CEO's corner office.

"Come in." Our boss waves us in and we take our seats in front of his large wooden desk. His massive frame is impressive even with him sitting down, and his deep cobalt Armani suit fits him to the T, as always. I can't stop my eyes from noticing his tapered jacket's excellent stitching and quality fabric. Old habits are hard to beat.

"Here they are! Paul, are you hearing us OK?" he asks the man dialed in, who's our private investigator.

"Yes, boss, loud and clear," the voice crackles through the spider phone on the desk.

"Carry on, Lexington," Jon demands from an older man, who's on a couch on the side. "Tell us what you found on your end."

"Not much, McMaster. All our seats have been checked and are fitted at the right torque, and the bolts are intact after inspection. The fixings supplier reports also show the parts are within spec. The issue must be in your company." The bald man is dressed for a round of golf, in a racing-green polo shirt and khaki slacks, but the power and command in his eyes is undeniable. The man is not a billionaire by chance, as we all listened to him, and his final phrase shook us all.

Jon hisses and Olivia squirms in her chair, as his news is not good at all. McAv and LexAviation both make private jets here in Florida, and until last year they've been rivals. But since Miranda Lexington, Ramsay's ex, tried to blackmail her way into getting our firm to fail and got caught, he and our CEO have enjoyed a more friendly approach. Together, they got better deals from suppliers by collaborating on certain projects instead of competing.

However, last month, one of our new customers reported one of the seats in the cabin was vibrating too much. The mechanics and engineers were amazed that the bolts were almost coming out. Ever since, Jon has been running around with his pants on fire. After sending people all over the globe to check, they found three more airplanes with this problem, all built in the past six months.

The Aviation Authority got involved, and our planes got grounded for a while, until we fixed the issue as fast as we could. The investigation team didn't find anything wrong with our processes here. The suppliers can show documentation as well, but we think they're at fault, so we're suing them. They are countersuing.

To try to make our case, Jon asked Ramsay to confirm if he had the same problems.

"Fuck!" The green-eyed man in front of me loses it, running his fingers through his shoulder-length sandy-brown hair. "I really thought checking with LexAviation would be a good idea."

“It was,” Olivia intervenes. “But if there’s nothing there, your engineers need to continue with the measurements and processes checks. Maybe start from scratch.”

“Fuck!” he swears again. “I’ll ask them, but they’ve been going through drawings and tech specs for weeks now. I’m beginning to suspect someone is sabotaging us.”

“You think a third party is involved?” Lexington’s voice is skeptical.

“I don’t know, but after last year, everything’s possible.”

I open my mouth to add something but my supervisor is giving me an annoyed side-eye, so I resist asking ‘Are we sure it’s not Miranda?’, as in, Lexington’s ex. Olivia asked me to be quiet, and to be fair, I’m not sure why I’m even in this meeting as it’s way over my pay grade.

“I thought it may be your wife, even looked into it before this meeting,” Jon says to his counterpart, and I feel a bit better that I wasn’t the only one wondering.

“After I divorced her, she moved back to New York and has been trying to launch a clothing line. She has no interest in aerospace anymore,” the older man confirms. “And your VP is still behind bars.”

Jon’s fingers tap on his desk. “Thanks, Lexington, for trying to help. Guess we’ll continue with the root cause on our end, then.”

“No problem. Ping me if you need anything else.” The billionaire gets up, and with a nod to us he goes out the door,

and we're left staring at each other.

"Besides the checks, anything else we should do, Olivia?" Jon asks.

"Just stop writing things down, last thing you need is a paper trail. I don't have to remind you not to let any of your staff talk to the authorities or any media without me or someone from my team present," the lawyer easily responds.

"That goes without saying." He nods. "I do have an idea I want to run by you. I was thinking we could bring in some fresh eyes."

"What do you mean?" my direct manager taps her index over her jaw. "We already have an investigation team, and our department is prepping for the trial."

"Yeah, but they aren't the most 'out of the box' thinkers, are they? Also, the mountain of paperwork and the boxes sent by the supplier are killing us. We need more people." Jon touches his short beard as he checks Olivia's response.

"That's true. But we can't hire just anyone to look through our information. They'd need to be at least familiar with aviation and ideally with our company."

"There is someone you could use. It's a bit left field, but she knows her stuff," the CEO pitches. I'm in the same boat with the Head of Legal, unsure who he's referring to. "Before you got hired last year, Olivia, we got some of the contracts revamped, and she gave me a folder of ideas on how to change them. The USB she had also gave the manufacturing people

some direction on how to improve things down the assembly line.”

“Uh, you don’t mean...” She looks stunned and I just glance between them, even more confused.

“Yes, that’s exactly who I mean. Those contracts were some of the best I’ve ever seen, better than what my previous vice president would have drafted. She’s an excellent lawyer.”

“You want me to hire HER? She did help in the end, but she also spied for Miranda!” My boss is fuming, glowering at my sister’s boyfriend.

“I also talked with the Chief Engineer,” the man continues, raking his fingers through his hair again. “He too was gobsmacked how the simple suggestions increased their productivity. And she has no engineering background, just someone with a keen eye and a sharp mind.”

“Jon, that’s a stretch. I could never trust her to run around by herself. Who would supervise her?” The woman brushes her long dark hair from her shoulder and crosses her arms, clearly unconvinced by our boss’s idea.

The CEO puts on a smile and adds, “You can ask Paul, who’s still on the line, to look into her in parallel, maybe dig into her past a bit.” Then the smile turns into a grin. “As for who will keep an eye on her while she’s here... I have just the man.”

When I see who he is pointing at, I gasp. His finger is aiming... straight at me.

“Me? You want me to babysit this... spy?”

“It wouldn’t hurt if you did something a bit more practical.” My direct manager makes a veiled remark on how I sometimes lose focus while reviewing legal documents. Great. I’d do an eyeroll if I didn’t have both of them staring at me. “Though, Jon, I have to say, I’m not at all pleased to get another employee shoved down my throat,” she adds, and I check an non-existent lint on my trousers as she means me. I’m the plant which my sister’s partner hired without consulting her.

“Having someone who won’t be fooled by her will be necessary,” the man says. “And he knows the business as well. This would be a good use of his time.”

“Hmm...” The Head of Legal is unnaturally quiet. But she can’t very well tell the CEO of a company employing five thousand people, and herself, to jog on.

“Trust me, Olivia, this will work,” he reassures her, spotting her hesitation. “Especially since Marcus already knows her. Both of us will be at ease if she’s being followed around by someone we trust. He should probably go find her. Her address is still on file. Chris, my EA can give it to him, but...”

“I do?” I butt in his monologue. “Know her?”

“Yes, DJ told me you went to law school with her.”

“I did?” This would probably be the time to stop with the two-worded questions. But my brain is going through all the women I had classes with back then, trying to figure out who would have ended up tangled in corporate espionage.

“Hmm, clearly, your sister didn’t tell you the full story of what happened last year.” The man is cupping his chin, his eyes boring on me.

“Who exactly is it?” I croak. The seat I’m in is suddenly uncomfortable, the squab too hard, the cushion too soft, as my worst fears and most sought-after dreams come together.

Jon pauses dramatically, then sighs and drops the bomb. “Anya Peterson.”

A bucket of ice water is thrown over me when I hear that name again, after seven years.

Anya Peterson.

The best goddamn law student at that school, who would run circles around me. Who I have to oversee?

Anya Peterson.

The one who got away.

ANYA

“OK, I’ve got all the information I need, I’ll go through the documents and photos you took, and then will get in touch with your landlord’s lawyer.” I sigh at the sight of the pictures of mold in the woman’s apartment.

“Do you think you can get him to fix the place?” Her blue eyes, a shade darker than mine, meet mine in hope, maybe too much faith for what I have to work with.

“I can’t make any promises.” Hedging comes naturally after so many months of avoiding telling my pro bono clients how difficult it is to get a big property management company to actually care about a lowly place in this neighborhood. “But I’ll do my best.” She again reads too much in my polite smile and touches my forearm.

“Thank you so much. I know you’ll help. That mold... my kids can’t stay with their father anymore, but living with me isn’t much better.” She winces.

I escort her to the exit, where she makes me jump as she hugs me briefly. “Thank you again, Ms. Peterson. You are a godsend.” I bob my head to mimic hers, but obviously less enthusiastically. The woman doesn’t realize my discomfort and gives me a wide smile. When she finally leaves, I notice how she walks with her head held high, as if she has a chance.

The meeting leaves me drained, as do many of the other clients since I started working here at Legal Aid last year. The chances of getting more than a patch job from the landlord are slim. The best result is for me to threaten them a bit, and they send someone to do some temporary—and cheap—fix, just so no one can say they haven’t done their duty.

I return to my desk and glance at the stack of cases waiting for me. Many are similar to this one. Women trying to get their overdue child support payments from their husbands. Men trying to get to see their kids for more than a weekend a month. People struggling with our legal system, who can’t afford a fancy lawyer and come to us, like we are knights in shining armor... guardian angels. Ironically, they come to me.

Me, with so much red in my ledger that I doubt any amount of alimony I win or how many broken water pipes I can get repaired will ever wipe. The things I did... the things I had to do at McAv last year... the lying and the spying... they press on me even if I win one of these trials. My mother would be proud. I am not.

Yet being here is beginning to be more than just clearing my conscience. I enjoy it. A lot. Getting them a little win, a minor

success in their lives, is more satisfying to me than filing papers for any judge. The joy on their faces is enough, and some days I forget why I started here. I hope when I have to find a better paying job I'll still be able to come back here and help when I can.

Carrying some files for the copy-machine, I'm sadly remembering I won't be able to keep this low-paying job for long, as the last bracelet I had to sell will only pay for so much. Soon, after I let my earrings go, I'll have to take a corporate job as I can't see myself going back to clerking again.

"That lady was impressed with you."

That voice. It can't be. Can't. The buzz I'm so used to in this workplace quiets. There's an eerie silence over me, the noise of creaky chairs and keyboard keys absent. I no longer smell the musty, humid office. Instead, it's an earthy cologne. A scent I thought I forgot, but which hits my nostrils like a hurricane. Him within my reach. Him and me, again.

I turn so fast that I hit the wall of lean muscles behind me, and my papers fly all over the office.

"Fuck!" I cry at the same moment he grunts, "Shit!"

White sheets float around us as I stare into those eyes again, after seven years. He's slightly taken aback by me as well. Unlike the last time I saw him, when he tried to talk to me again and I told him to forget I ever existed, I'm looking more like myself. The self he saw only briefly, in that horrible

morning when I walked out on him, not the Anya Peterson who he ran into daily in law school.

My platinum blonde hair is in a half up half down updo, with most of my curls floating behind me, and I'm no longer wearing my stupid dark-colored contacts and ridiculous glasses. That's the least I got back beside my peace of mind. In my high heeled suede boots and dark brown knee-length dress, I'm brave enough to not cowl away from Marcus Jara. Even though he's a dream in one of his—I suspect—custom suits. It's navy, which complements his light brown skin and dark hair.

Time had not only made him bulk up a bit but also made him have a well-seasoned vibe. It's how Keanu in *Bill and Ted* evolved into *Sweet November* Keanu and made every lady in the world sigh. I stop my mind from wondering how he'll look in a few more years, if he'll become *John Wick* Keanu and cause the female population's clothes to instantly combust when he walks into the room. Having seen him with a beard, that's not improbable.

“What are you doing here?” I cross my arms over my body. Transported back in time, the pull to him is so powerful and the seven years fade with every second he's here.

Yet the more I look at him, I notice the shadows under his eyes. The brace on his right arm. The fact that his jacket should have had a handkerchief, but there's none there. How his shirt could use ironing. How the knot on his tie is sloppy, and the light green color doesn't match well.

“Umm.” He takes me in for a few more seconds, his eyes roaming over my body, giving me the chills. As his eyes find mine again, the sparks dance around us once more. We’re back to that dance floor, where I made him laugh and he made me unravel. His breath quickens, and mine stops. His lips call to me again, imprints from that night having never left me. His fingers flex, as if they remember the feel of my skin. And my...

“Are you going to clean that up?” My colleague Velma breaks the spell as she approaches, bringing a cup of coffee from the kitchenette. “Good, you found her.” She nods at my former law school partner. “He has a case for you, so I thought... what’s one more, right?”

With a harrumph, I focus on Marcus again. “You have a case for me? Did you let your license lapse? Also, did you miss a couple of haircut appointments?” I decide not to show him how he affects me by making a dig at his appearance, as I lift my eyebrow at him. But surprisingly, he lifts his back at me.

“No, I can still practice law. If you have a minute, I’ll tell you what it’s about, but shouldn’t we sort the mess first?” He waves at the paper explosion and starts picking up some of the sheets.

I scrunch my nose but join him in collecting my case files. The hardest part is avoiding looking at him more than I have to. My mind whirls... Why the hell is he here? How did he

find me? Does he hate me after that last day when I screamed at him?

“Shoplifting case? Really? Who prosecutes for *that*?” Marcus reads one of the sheets, and somehow, I flare at him touching my things.

“Give me that!” I pinch it from him and put it in my pile. “A district attorney angling for a promotion, that’s who... and my client’s innocent. The store owner’s daughter put that lipstick in her bag. And once I get some camera footage, I can prove it.”

“Hmm... you need help with that? I can ask DJ to look into it.” Right... Dahlia Jara, one of the best programmers in aerospace, is going to jump to help me with a shoplifting case. After I spied on the company she worked with. Sure.

I want to tell him off, but I hesitate. I do need that video. The owner’s security firm won’t give it to me, and the police aren’t keen on doing any actual investigating. I bite my lip.

“Maybe. But I’m not defending your sister if she gets caught for hacking.”

He chuckles, “I think she’ll mostly use her sway and Jon’s first.” My former boss’s name makes me cringe. The image of him rightly angry at me for what I did almost makes me drop my papers again, but I get through it, and we get them all sorted. We walk through the busy open plan back to my station, and I can sense the curious eyes of all my colleagues following us around.

Pulling the old chair, with a broken seatback and even worse adjustment, I use my desk as a barrier between us. I set my elbows on the faded wood, and glare at him, faking annoyance. Yet, as I try to fit a loose strand of hair back in my non-existent bun, I'm mostly masking my insecurities caused by him showing up here.

Marcus doesn't wait for an invitation to sit. But then all he does is stare at me again.

"So..." I ask him to start talking before I get lost in the rhythm of his breathing and the dumb attraction I still have for him. Fuck, he's hot. Too much. Too close. "How did you find me here? I don't exactly have my picture on the website or a LinkedIn profile."

"First, I went to the last address I got from McAv," he replies with a grimace. "I didn't mean to be so stalker-ish, but that's the one Jon gave me."

"You went to my apartment?" My voice rises. I didn't need him, of all people, to see where I live. A wave of shame constricts my throat. I know exactly how bad it looks, though maybe not as bad as it could be.

"I did," Marcus confirms with a serious face. "Any... are you safe there? It's not the best of neighborhoods. There were homeless people everywhere, the businesses around the block were boarded. And the building... the building looked two minutes from a code violation. Or ten." He has a wrinkle right between his brows I never remembered, or maybe it's just new. It's noticeable now, when he scowls at me.

“It’s... it’s a place to sleep. The people there know me. I help them with legal advice a lot.”

“But still...” He’s unconvinced, question marks in his demeanor.

“The folk there... are a community,” I explain, wondering in which episode of *Punk’ed* I’m in, to have this conversation with this man in the middle of the Legal Aid open plan. I keep waiting for the cameras to roll in. Yet as though no time has passed, the words just unfold when he is there, looking at me with those warm eyes. “Some days I come home late, and Ms. Phan across the hallway calls me in for dinner, whether I lie about having eaten or not. Mr. Roderick teaches kids how to work on cars, so they don’t get in trouble. It may look a bit decrepit, but... it’s home. And yeah, the bus is a bit slow, but I can listen to music and relax.”

Did I just throw a full-blown monologue at someone I haven’t seen in forever? I don’t do this, vent at people, explaining my life.

But he nods, then grins, brightening every cell in my body. “I may have met your Ms. Phan. She was the one who pointed me here.”

“She did? How did you convince her?” She may be a tiny old lady, but Ms. Phan is a vault when it comes to me.

“I have my ways. I told her we went to school together. And promised I’d get her dog a treat.”

I barely suppress a laugh. “That will be interesting, seeing as Ms. Phan’s dog is not real. She carries a toy around in a dog pram.”

Marcus’s shock makes me lose my resolve and as a burst of giggles escapes me, it startles us both. He looks at me in awe. Like I’m snowfall on Christmas Eve and the Fourth of July, fireworks all rolled into one.

A blush may be creeping up my cheekbones. Tucking a strand of hair behind my ear this time, I get my bearings and—with some difficulty—ask, “So, why exactly are you here?”

“Right.” He coughs, resetting himself as well. “Jon sent me. Apparently, you had some great insights about his company. And he’s wondering if you wouldn’t want to help us... him with something.”

“What?” If I wasn’t already sitting, I would have needed to. “Jon McMaster wants... me, of all people?”

“Everyone is impressed by those files. And it shouldn’t be a surprise. You really were amazing in law school.”

“It’s not that... it’s...” I fiddle with the Post It deck on my desk. “Did you hear what I did to him? How could he... ever... ever trust me again?” My voice falters.

Marcus flinches. “I don’t exactly know how you ended up a spy, but I’m sure you had your reasons; otherwise you wouldn’t look so ashamed right now. It’s just... McAv is in a bind. I probably shouldn’t be telling you this without signing an NDA, but... we had a couple of seats’ fixings come loose.”

“What? That’s impossible. I’ve audited the processes. Everything is up to spec.” I remember watching them on the line. They checked the torques every time, and there was a lot of training. “You need to give me that non-disclosure agreement right now, before I hear any more.”

“I have one with me.” He lifts his briefcase and then glances around us. “Could we also not talk about this here, out in the open? Probably not for everyone’s prying eyes.”

He’s right. Already Velma had gathered some of my other colleagues, and they’re ‘curtain twitching’ at us, trying to listen in on what we are talking about, but mostly gawking at him. Goddamn him for looking so good.

I almost say ‘*hai cu mine*’ again, as I did that night, but stop myself. There’s no need for another déjà vu.

“We have a meeting room here,” I volunteer. Collecting the key from the hook by the printer, I head down the corridor.

Somehow, we end up in the same positions as after the party—Marcus Jara following me. As I struggle with the lock, I feel him behind me, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s a hairsbreadth from me. If I were to take a step back, I’d be plastering myself all over him. The largest part of me wants to do just that. To lean back, have his strong arms embrace me, have his lips nibble on my neck. I’m thankful my hair hides the goosebumps all over my skin.

“Is it broken?” he asks, way too close to me.

“Life in Legal Aid, what can I say? The budget for remodeling isn’t high on the priority list.” With a bit of finagling, I open the door and let out a long exhale as the conference room is quite large, and nothing comparable to the small space from years ago.

Well, large and in definite need of an update. Only a few of the seats match, and the air conditioning is broken, so a delightful smell of dampness greets us. The scratches on the table are proof of years of usage, maybe of being third hand-me-down pieces of furniture.

But it’s still a meeting room, and my brain almost has me checking for my wings. It all comes tumbling down on me with every minute I spend with him. His presence takes over the surrounding air, and I want to touch that suit on him, to check if the fabric is as soft as I remember. Before I check my face, looking for my old mask, I plant myself across the table from him and extend my hand, attempting to project a semblance of strength.

“NDA, please.”

“Right...” he replies, appearing as disconcerted as I was in the entrance. After a few moments of him frowning and picking the wrong sheet, I finally get to sign it.

Marcus then describes the investigation, the lawsuit so far, Ramsay’s assistance, and the reasoning for him being here, as crazy as it may be.

“That’s impossible. McAv is better than this. The issue must be at the supplier,” I huff. “Again... really, am I the only

person in the world who can help?”

“It’s something you can raise with Jon. I... I’m not that high up the food chain. Simply helping out.” He squirms in his seat. It’s obviously not something he wants to discuss, but I can’t stop myself and let slip a question.

“So, you’re still a lawyer? Did you not do the tailor thing?” I know the answer, at least about the second bit.

Once every few months, I stumbled upon a memory. When I saw a suit in a window. Or someone ordered a martini at a bar, and I may or may not have checked in on him on social media. Nothing creepy like creating a fake profile to Facebook-stalk him, just a quick googling. And then I scolded myself for being stupid. Or had a big drink, when he had a photo with a woman next to him.

But today, I see things no search engine can show. The desperation in his eyes as he glances at his brace, a flash of sorrow in his expression. I put my foot in it with my last question.

“I was. Not anymore. Accident.” His tone is soft, flooded by hurt, as he lifts his right arm briefly, then hides it under the table.

I freeze, way out of my emotional range to handle a sad Marcus showing up out of the bloom in my office. I open my mouth to say something, but nothing sounds right. And again, my lips can’t formulate anything. I must look like a fish, but he isn’t exactly staring back at me, mostly avoiding me. I need to turn this around.

“Guessing they expect me to jump at the opportunity?”
Focus on the job. Focus on work.

“No idea. I am just the messenger. If you accept, the babysitter. Well, the supervisor officially.” He surprises me with his honesty, but the bleakness in his phrases makes me wince. But I refuse to give into the hollowness surrounding him. I have plenty of that on my own.

“So, they don’t trust me after all, huh? Good.” I nod. “I do have my day job, bills to pay, and all that.”

“Jon also offered to pay your old salary for the duration and a bonus at the end if you can dig up what is happening.”

The man has an answer to everything. I could use the cash, the realization causing me to bite my lip again. How insecure I must appear! But making things right with McAv is worth the humiliation of going back, if I can help them.

But being supervised by Marcus Jara? I’m glad he doesn’t notice my thighs clenching, being shielded by the rickety table, imagining what supervisory directives he could implement. In that low rumbling voice, which still haunts me at night.

Whatever I’m hiding, that eyebrow he lifts tells me I’m not very good at it. Not when he’s in the same room as me.

“What about my cases? People depend on me,” I divert again.

“Hmm,” he mutters, wheels turning. “Could you ask anyone else to help you? Do it part time? Or do you have any time off

left?”

I scowl, as I do have PTO days. My boss has been begging me to take them now, to be back when another colleague goes off on maternity leave in a few weeks.

“Ah, by the pursed lips, you do have time off you could take.” His mouth lifts into a small smile as I school mine into a straight line.

I roll my eyes, but frankly, I want to help. I need to. To give back what I stole from Jon. To be able to have a full night’s sleep, free of my guilt.

“Yes, ‘detective’ Jara, I do. I would need a couple of days to take care of some things. I’m still not convinced there aren’t any actual investigators or other lawyers who could do this.” I won’t abandon everyone here though, I’ll come by at weekends and help with my existing cases.

He shrugs, rolling a button on his suit. “They ran out of ideas. There’s just so much time until we have to go to trial. We’ve been keeping it on the down low. The authorities are happy with our openness, and they know McAv has years of history with no issues. But the clock is ticking, and we have to find the evidence that we aren’t responsible, and that it’s the fixings company.”

There was always only one answer for me. From the second Marcus finished his tale.

“OK.”

“OK? You’ll help?” His eyes are hopeful. They glint at me and spear my soul with an unexpected light.

“Yes, Marcus, I will. There’s... there’s much for me to atone for.” My sigh is too loud, too revealing. “I’ll be there on Monday. I need to finish up a few cases, and handover others.”

“I never doubted you,” he whispers, and reality shifts.

In ten minutes, Marcus Jara flayed me open, with his smile, with his anguish. Still looking at me like I am... more.

Damn him.

And damn me for just sitting here facing him.

Neither of us moves. We stare at each other, the sound of our breaths the only thing breaking the silence. The temperature in the room turns blazing furnace, as he gives me a slow once over, the weight of his gaze making my vagina throb. The traitor, she wants him, still.

The rest of me desires him as well. My skin needs the rough pads of his fingers to run over it. My hair cries for his hand to grasp my locks and hold me where he wants me. My lips want to be ravished by his grueling kisses.

And worse, my heart craves to feel safe again with him, to be able to tell him my history, my fears. I want to talk about music again with him. Maybe watch a Bond film.

But as he, as baffled as me, rubs his neck, I notice a scratch on his skin. It’s similar to a specific *activity* graze. Someone with really sharp nails drawing blood in a heated moment. I’m snapped from my trance. Of course, he has a sex scrape! Was I

expecting a man like him to be single? Damn. Stupid, stupid me.

To make matters worse, he catches me glaring. And to my horror, he addresses it. With a fucking smirk.

“Ah, this little thing?” He points to the chafe.

“Not my concern,” I reply sharply, but red flashes in my vision, and a burning sensation spreads through my chest.

“Oh, I see... too bad, Giselle worked hard on that one.”

“Gi-selle?” Not sure how I even asked with my jaw in pain from clenching my teeth.

“She’s one fine lady,” he continues, his eyebrow going up again, enjoying my squirming. “The softest hair. Very loving, usually. But some days... the claws come out.”

“Mm.” If I had any superpowers, he’d be pink mist by now.

“The beaming is annoying as he pours more salt on the wound. “Yeah, she loves to sit between my legs.”

“Great,” I mutter under my breath. “Best wishes to you both.”

“Too bad she loves the vet more than me. She always gets cuddling, while I sometimes get a furball thrown up on my carpet.”

“What?”

“It’s a cat. Giselle is my pet.” He puts me out of my misery, with the most annoying grin.

Shit, I was jealous of his cat. “Who did you think it was?” he pokes, the bastard. Knowing damn well what I imagined.

I sit there, stunned. I waiver between slapping him or kissing him. Years of hiding veto my impulses, luckily.

“See you at work, Marcus.” My dismissive tone is harsh. Too harsh maybe, but the fucker played me.

He hesitates a bit, still smiling at me, but then gets up with a sigh, picks up his briefcase, and moves to the door.

“Just to be clear, Anya.” I jump in my seat as he turns around at the last minute. “I’m a bit of a mess right now. But even so, I don’t need glasses. There’s still something here between us. Neither of us may be ready, but there is.”

No bullshit, no concealment. He looked straight at me and said that. Out loud. In one sweep, he disarmed me again, no defense in my arsenal strong enough to resist the directness in his tone.

“Umm.” I should be embarrassed that I can’t speak. I should tell him to go again. I should deny it till kingdom come.

He nods at my petrified expression and leaves the room, but not before a sneaky smile and a crippling, “I’ll see you Monday, Angel.”

MARCUS

Sunday lunch with my family came around too quickly for my brain to process seeing Anya Peterson again. And my own reaction to it.

Alive.

There is no other word I could use for how it made me feel.

With papers floating around us like confetti, her hair around her like a halo, she looked closer to a celestial being more than my dreams ever did her justice. And I did dream of her throughout the years. Too much. Part of me had been planning and hoping for her all this time. Simply getting near her this week was worth it.

Even prickly as ever, it was her, and I could not get enough. The way she was affected by me, as I of her, was an earthquake in my body. Tectonic plates shifted and I was on my way to being rebuilt. She wasn't a balm to my sadness, but a revolution against it. She took no prisoners; she didn't treat me any differently.

It was a relief.

Irritable, bad-tempered, and lying to herself about how attracted to me she was still. Actually, no, that last part wasn't true. She was an open book, despite her best efforts. The red in her cheeks, the staccato in her breath. How she was jealous of my cat. All spurred me on, and instead of thinking about how lame I am, I needled her. I got too close in that corridor, losing myself in the Chanel perfume in her hair. The smiles on my face were real. If I would have touched her then, I couldn't have stopped myself from doing more.

The smile I have now is real too, as she was working at Legal Aid, of all places. Despite the 'evil spy' story horrifying me when I first heard it, I took a moment to think back on her, how she could not have changed so much. It took me less than five seconds to ditch the idea that she was a villain. I was right. Helping single mothers and young girls fight the system. Those weren't the actions of a criminal. That was what a person committed to giving back does, a person who will come and assist us because she wants to help.

Maybe that makes two of us, in need of offsetting our past. But my brace doesn't allow me to escape. An ever-present reminder that some battles can't be won.

"Hey, kid, is your hand OK?" my sister Dahlia, or as we call her, DJ, asks softly. The worry in her eyes matches the concern everyone around me has had ever since my accident. I hate it.

"That's Laura's name for me. You don't have the clout to pull that off." The ironic eye roll that follows is so her. Her

dark brown hair is in a ponytail. She has been wearing it that way a lot in the past year. It started after getting together with Jon. But I'd rather not think about exactly *why* she has her hair up too much. Probably for the best, I cringe internally.

Her brown eyes narrow on me. I don't even know what to tell her anymore. I woke up with my family around me. Grateful and hopeful. I got surgeries. I did physio. The therapist kept telling me to push myself, but I... I couldn't.

“Ha, funny, *hermanito*. Seriously, are you alright? I was talking to our esteemed sibling the other day. We're worried about you. You do know she's seeing a therapist, right?” she presses tentatively, skirting the subject.

“Laura? Laura, our sister? The ‘baddest bitch’ in Florida?”

“Yes, she's been going for a while, to deal with all that happened with Charlie's death. She even sat in the passenger seat of her car a few months ago, before she got put on bedrest. You know she couldn't even look at that seat usually.”

“How did she manage that?”

My elder sister is the strongest person. She was there for us growing up, always taking care of us. She went through a lot, from the death of her first husband to recovering from her injuries when her son was three. Laura never let on that she needed help. Just soldiered on. Hmm, I guess hiding runs in the family.

“Probably a combination of the sessions and Nathan ‘convincing’ her by other means.” She makes a face, neither of

us wanting to picture what my brother-in-law did to persuade our sister to face one of her greatest fears after the car accident.

“Wow, her admitting she has a problem and talking to a professional isn’t something I would’ve pegged her for. Why are you only telling me now?”

“Mmm, we were wondering if you’d want to talk to them or someone else.” She glances at my hand. I shake my head.

“Tried that. I went a few times, but I just didn’t make any progress,” I confess. I did go, especially after getting out of the hospital. It was just too... clinical. Or maybe I just didn’t gel well with the shrink. But I gave it up, even before I stopped my physio.

“Uh, OK.” She’s a bit disappointed, but then switches subjects. “We got used to you zoning out, but there’s something different in how you are today. There’s an... not sure...”

“Is it good or bad?”

“Good, definitely good. There was a ghost of a smile on earlier. Riiight here.” She pokes at my cheek, and I bat her hand away. She giggles and goes to pour herself a drink.

We’re on our *mamá*’s veranda, a beautiful wide porch overlooking a lush garden and a pool. Sunday lunches are a bit of a tradition, and even though we don’t get together every week, we do it often enough. This is the first time in a while I’ve felt like less of a burden. And I missed it.

My mom is inside making lunch as we wait for Jon to bring his sister Tabitha from the airport. It's the first time doing it here for a while, as ever since Laura was stuck in bed, we've been going to her house. But today we're supposed to Zoom her and her husband. Unfortunately, that worked badly last time, as having them eat in their bedroom, while she's stuck in bed with her pregnancy, is a bit weird. Another cringe memory hits me, recalling how two weeks ago I had to tell her to hide her vibrator which was left on her nightstand, luckily before we started eating. She laughed at my red face, and Nate joked that 'at least it wasn't the big pink one'.

DJ places a gin and tonic in front of me.

"So... what's up?" she starts again.

"Mmm...nothing." I avoid her stare as she sips her drink through a straw, not letting me off the hook.

She puts the glass down and wipes her hands on her jeans, pressing on. "Yep, you tell that to Jon and Nate. Girls have a sense about these things. You're lucky Lau isn't here, or you'd get a cane up your ass if you don't start talking. How about I call her in? She could find a virtual cane."

"Fine, fine, no need to threaten me with the wrath of the Dragon." I exhale, giving up trying. "Did Jon tell you I'm supposed to be supervising Anya Peterson?"

She nods. "Yeah. I reminded him about her when he asked me what I would do. I told him to think outside the box. The last time we saw her, I don't know, something about her made me think she could use some help. The idea of you baby-

sitting her is a bit funny, but you do know her, so it's actually clever. Is that a problem?" I don't get to answer as DJ takes one look at my face and a long 'ooooh' escapes her. "I see... not a 'problem' at all, huh, lil bro?" She chuckles, and I have to poke her back.

"It's not that," I lie. "It's just... why did you suggest her?" I should have guessed she was the mastermind behind the proposal. She has a soft spot for people in trouble.

"Well, for starters, she fooled everyone at McAv for a long time that she was bad at her job while doing an in-depth analysis of the company. Secondly, the way she was upset when Jon and I went to ask her for information. If I would have found her laughing an evil laugh, while touching her pinkie to her lip, I wouldn't have bothered. But she wanted to help us, and wasn't happy about what she did, spying for our competitors. Who else better to assist than someone looking for redemption, who can also kick ass?"

"Hmm, that's true... You may be closer to the mark than you think. She's working at Legal Aid now."

"Ah, that just proves it. Wait, you went to her?"

"Yeah, earlier in the week."

"Ah, so that's with this smile." I didn't even notice I was doing it again. My sister wasn't going to let me live that down. "You two had something going on, huh?" She gives me a smug grin.

I wince. “Yes and no. I... I’m not sure what we had. Besides her hiding from me for three years, and then... one night... when she was different. I was different.”

“That’s all it takes, silly kid, one singular event to find someone.” She’s probably reminiscing about her own meet-cute with Jon, a couple of years ago, in my shop. “What happened to her?”

“Anya told me to never talk to her again and then ignored me. Blocked my number, etcetera. I even went to her apartment, but they’d moved out with no forwarding address. She had no social media either.”

“Ouch, moving houses instead of being with you. Do I need to send you a link to some websites to learn how to *please* a lady?” She wiggles her eyebrows at me, and the lemon from my drink ends up in her hair. She shrieks, music to my ears.

“It wasn’t that, you idiot! She... she had some things going on with her family. And probably other stuff she didn’t tell me about. But...” But I remember how she responded to me in her office. How she didn’t deny the connection between us.

“There’s still something there, huh?” she finishes the sentence. “And the problem is? Besides that your ex just broke up with you? Not that Marie ever put that dreamy look on your face.” She rolls her eyes.

“You didn’t like Marie? I thought everyone was happy I finally was with someone.”

I tried to hold on. After Anya ran, I had this strange period when I was trying to ‘conjure’ her back, to wave a wand and have her ‘poof’ next to me. But with every passing month, and then a year, then two, I still couldn’t find her. She had no Facebook, no friends to stalk. Despite my best efforts, one day, defeated, when a girl asked to buy me a cup of coffee, I... agreed.

I can’t say I’m a player or anything to that level. But I dated a couple of girls in the past seven years. Dated but always looked for a smirk or a whiff of something. Maybe a pair of light eyes full of fear and lust.

There’s no surprise my relatives were not enthusiastic every time I brought a girl home. They knew what I didn’t want to admit. Those women weren’t right.

“Umm... more in the lines of ‘accepting’,” my sister clarifies. “We played nice but weren’t hopeful. Lau and I were a bit awed you that dated someone *Mamá* and her friends set you up with. Felt a bit like... settling from where we were sitting. The two of you did not scream ‘fireworks’.”

“Huh... you never said anything.” My elder sister shrugs as a slideshow of polite family dinners and dry conversations flash through my mind. I just went along with a ‘good enough’ girl, when I knew the truth, and so did my relatives.

“It reminded me of how you were in law school. When I came home to visit, and you were just... meh. Not overly excited about your classes.”

“You noticed that?”

“Duh... probably it was easier for me as I didn’t live in Florida or see you every day. But I remember the relief in your eyes when you finally let us know you didn’t want to be an attorney, that day of your graduation. This is similar.”

“Hmm...”

It was the night of the graduation that I finally told them the truth. After I chased Anya to the bus stop, and she ordered me again to leave her alone. When she lied that night and said it didn’t mean anything. When she tossed my secrets back at me, and I decided I would be the man she needed me to be.

That hit home. She was right. I became obsessed with her, my brain ignoring the elephant in the room. That sheet of paper in my hand making me a lawyer, paper I never wanted to use. And if I couldn’t get through to her, I could at least take a step in the right direction in other aspects of my life.

My family’s reaction was... unexpected.

I turn to my sister.

“DJ, you remember that day? You all stared at me and weren’t really upset. That shocked me.”

“Why?”

“I thought you’d be bothered that you paid for my education, and I was throwing it all away.”

“Well, you didn’t exactly throw it *all* away. You still give us a tip or two in the spirit of the law, etcetera,” she reminds me with a wink. “It’s not like we can’t afford it. We would have

been even happier if you would've let us to pay for your design course."

"No, that would have been too much. It was bad enough you paid for law school. I did get a scholarship, so that made it manageable."

"That's because you are an awesome tailor, Marcus. I hope you don't forget that," she says softly, but my eyes dart straight to my brace. "After the accident, your spark was gone, I'm glad that there's something to help you relight it. Even if it is... Villanelle," she jokes and sticks out her tongue, a distinguished action for a thirty-six-year-old.

"Funny and 'original', Deej, calling Anya after the blonde villain in a TV show. But we just met again. She's skittish, and that's calling it lightly. I'm not in the best place to date. Marie dumping me did me a favor. I need to get my head on straight. Need to find some purpose."

"Hmm, if you say so. Don't be a dumbass and let this girl run away from you if you want more." She downs her drink and, hearing our mother calling her name, pretends to get an important 'call' and walks to the pool area to avoid getting called to kitchen duty.

"I'll try," I mumble, staring at the bottom of my own glass.

"You better, lil bro, or I'll release cabin-fever-momma on you." She has the last word despite her being on the 'phone' and shows me the middle finger. I wave her off with a head shake, neither of us wanting to involve my older sister Laura,

who will want to micromanage the whole business via video call and four-letter words.

Yet either way, I don't think Anya Peterson is going to be as easy to accept this thing between us. But I lost too much. I got her back in my life, I'm going to give it my best. With her, my best involves giving her space, but I learned my lesson, I won't let her slip away again.

I will be there for her, especially with what I pieced together of her past.

“Hey, DJ?” I call after my sneaky sister, and she puts down her device. “Can you help me with something on my phone?”

“What am I, IT support? I'm a fucking programmer, not the gal to help you set up your Insta profile.”

I ignore her constant complaints, obviously. “If I can be your one-eight-hundred-lawyer every time you have a legal question, damn right you are.”

She puffs at me, but relents, and with one last pun, she goes to find her laptop. “Fine, let's see what pyramid scheme site you clicked on and now you can't stop the music.”

ANYA

I shove my briefcase between the sofa that doubles as my bed and my small pull-out shelf at the end, using every bit of space in my tiny studio to the max. My desk is on the other wall. My kitchenette, if I can call it that, is tucked into a corner. Just a sink, a microwave and a hotplate, with the fridge under the counter. At least it's clean and mine, and all I could afford. I did my best to add a few touches, a cactus or two, some pictures on the walls and three strings of fairy lights. I put out more around Christmas. And my little tree.

With a sigh, pick up my old Lego keychain from my desk, and run my fingers over its faded and battered form, still rattled by meeting Marcus. He wasn't OK, with his rough appearance and dark circles under his eyes. Yet he had the same effect on me as before. It's been years. I shouldn't keep wanting him.

Fuck, I know I've tried. I tried seeing other men, mostly in the few months after graduation. I needed to destress, and I refused to find him. I needed something. To get out of the

nightmare I was living in. To use my relief valve, which worked so well in the past. But I felt dirty. And unsatisfied. So unsatisfied. With each passing month, I went out less. With each passing year, I gave it up. There was nothing in those men. Shallow ghosts of one real thing I had for a night. I stopped. I can't even remember the last time I was with someone.

But the scent of Marcus Jara permeating my nostrils this week. The way he looked at me...

Shit! I check my watch and know a visitor is about to stop by, as she does most nights around this time. She does not disappoint.

“Open up *con gái*.” An angry Vietnamese woman pounds on the door, calling me ‘girl’. There’s no choice but to answer her, or she’ll just keep at it, now that she saw a light in my apartment.

“Yes, Ms. Phan. How can I help you?” I ask, leaning against the doorframe.

“Oh, Anya, so glad I caught you. Did you know someone bought the old diner across the street?”

“They did?” I struggle to imagine it, as the decrepit restaurant has been abandoned ever since I moved back to Kerrington about two years ago.

“They must have, otherwise why would there be a blue car parked outside again?” she comments.

“Maybe they’re stopped there for a bit...” I try to discourage her from reading too much into it, but once she makes up her mind, there’s no changing it.

“Nonsense, they got there about fifteen minutes ago. I saw them pulling in a few moments after you walked up. Who would come by at this hour?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of it.” As the unofficial ‘gossip girl’ of our building, she’ll be extending her antennas, and by the end of the week we’ll all be familiar with the driver’s shoe size and coffee order.

“But that’s not what I came for,” the short lady changes the subject. “I was wondering if the man who looked like that FBI agent on TV found you.” Her brown eyes light up as she looks at least twenty years younger than her actual age. She still has jet black hair cut at shoulder level and a sparkle in her cheeky smirk.

“Who?” And then I realize she means Marcus.

“The boy who came to find you. He was very sexy, wasn’t he?” She winks at me.

“Ms. Phan... you are aware he wasn’t really the actor, right?” My neighbor is addicted to cop TV shows. *CSI*, *NCIS* anything with initials.

“I know, I know... but wasn’t he a pretty boy, *con gái*? That’s why I sent him to you. He has a well fitted suit, just like those FBI agents. He has a kind voice.” OK, so it was *Criminal Minds* not *CSI*.

“Ms...” I start in dismay, but she shushes me.

“Oh, girl, you need someone. You’re so much better. Look at you, dressing normally, talking in your own accent. There’s no reason now not to have a boyfriend, is there?”

I try to dispute that. But all I can do is cross my arms and glance at my feet. Ever since I got fired from McAv, I let myself be a bit more like... me. The voice inside my head making me hide, quieted. The looming threat wasn’t so frightening, after I got out of the godawful deal. I may have felt horrible for taking advantage of it, but I needed to dig myself out of the dark hole I was in and fight back.

So, day by day, I won something of myself back. My hair. Some of my clothes. My eyes. My accent. I even bartered legal advice for martial arts classes, and I have... a hobby. I had a red belt before; I’ll get it again.

“Anya...” Her voice softens. “You’re allowed to carry on living. Your mother isn’t coming after you. Your father is safe. What’s wrong with the boy?”

“Nothing. He’s perfect,” I answer too fast. But it’s the truth. Marcus Jara, with his amazing family, his fall-back job. Even with his imperfect suit.

“My mom may still come after me someday.”

“It’s been fifteen years. She’s not coming. When you finally broke down and told me everything last year, after you lost your job at that aviation company, I wanted to tell you then. But I will now. You can’t go on living this way. With no

friends your own age. No relationships. Give yourself a chance, girl,” she finishes softly, and breaks my heart.

“I don’t know...” I shuffle my feet. “I still look behind my shoulder every day. I... I’m not sure.”

“Maybe you just need a little push. Or a handsome man,” she jokes and presses her hand against my chest. “Opportunities like this don’t come around often. You got this far. We are ready if your witch of a mother comes here. Go one more step. If you don’t go for it now, then when?”

This question does something to me. When Marcus came in, looking as delectable as ever even with his sadness over him, I still wanted him. I ached for the truth I can live in with him, the safeness he oozes. Yet, instinctually, I reverted to my default settings of saying ‘no’ to myself, to denying what I want. To not lean for him. But my resolve is not what it was. I didn’t push back as hard as I would have, as hard as I did after the masquerade.

With the last of my neighbor’s words, the lock on my wants, the one which was just hanging in there, sprung right open.

“He... we have history,” I admit to her.

She smiles, looking back at her door, with her fake-dog pram parked next to the entrance. “That’s even better, you’re already advanced. My husband and I met in school but never got together until later. But we had a lot in common. So why don’t you go give Mr. Hottie a try?”

The old lady has hearts in her eyes. But the reality of it is... so do I.

“How about you do a little thing for me?” she continues, and her smirk should worry me.

“Go on...” I say, somewhat concerned about what’s going to come out of her mouth next.

“If the boy makes a move, you could try not biting his head off.”

“Why would I bite his head off?”

“Anya, you’ve been living here for almost two years now. Every man in the building is slightly scared of you. Which is generally good, considering where we live and you being a pretty little thing.”

I harrumph, but she’s right. I had to stop some local guys thinking I’m available and may have been a bit rude to a few of them. May have kicked a few in the groin and poked a few in the eyes.

“But if you could, maybe not smack the door in his face,” she continues, ignoring my huffing.

“No promises. He... he has it pretty good, a nice family... Everything with me is... complicated.”

“Give the man a chance, it wasn’t a knight in shining armor who came by. He was just a man, *con gáí*, who was insecure and hopeful when I saw him. You’re a good girl, always helping people in the block with their law issues for free. You deserve to be happy too.”

“It’s my job, Ms. Phan.”

“It’s your job when you’re at Legal aid. At nine o’clock in the evening when Jorge from the shop knocks to talk about his son’s bogus drug charge for having a bit of weed on him, that... that’s more. So please, Anya, give him a chance.”

I study her as I try to deal with this. Dressed all in black with her strong opinions and directness, somehow, she has more authority than some of the judges I’ve known.

“OK.” I sigh again. “I won’t jump down his throat.”

“That’s all I ask. You could sneak one thing down his throat, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,” she chuckles, horrifying me. “Maybe you can find yourself a friend to go out as well. Be a bit silly, get your nails done. Julia and I are going next Saturday again, you could try it.”

Be silly? I give her a sad smile as I haven’t allowed myself to be that since I ran from Paris. Memories of my teenage years of my best friends and I laughing, watching TV shows and listening to music are fading. I can’t even picture some of their faces. The images I copied from my old phone are in unopened folders on my laptop. That’s a different life, one where I didn’t need to worry about so much. Where would I find a ‘friend’ now?

Despite what she said, I still worry one day someone will use my past against me again.

My neighbor gives me a pat on my shoulder and leaves me to my thoughts. I turn on my way-too-old iPod. I was hoping

some classic The Chicks would calm me down but, as the song says, I'm 'Not Ready to Make Nice'. Especially recalling how I ended up back in Florida.

But whatever I had to do then, I'll make it better now. I'll sort out the mess McAv is in. And maybe allow myself to not push Marcus away.

MARCUS

“Hey, you didn’t need to wait for me at reception. I could’ve gotten to the assembly line by myself.”

That voice again! That was one of the things that took me by surprise the other day. She’s using her real accent, none of that American one she put on in law school. No, it’s the one from that night, with hints of Romanian, maybe a bit less than I remember, maybe just less due to the passage of time.

“You forget I’m supposed to babysit. Also, you’re technically a visitor, so unless you were planning on a little breaking and entering, you need a chaperone on site.”

“Hmm, I would’ve found a way in,” she mumbles. I can see it. Her walking in with confidence, probably carrying a Hi-Viz and a clipboard, expecting nobody to intercept her. I don’t doubt she would have done just that.

I use the time to take her in, marveling at how beautiful she is. Her hair is braided into a crown over her head. And that’s exactly how she looks. A queen, clad in a black office dress

with a brown suede jacket matching the boots she had last week. Those ones I wanted to have her keep on. Just those boots.

She's dressed for war and that figure... those hips would drive a man to drink. But the sorrow in those aqua eyes puts a pause to my dick's awakening.

"Are you OK?" I intervene, snapping her out of whatever trance she was in. It occurs to me that this is how I am when I get sidetracked thinking about my shop. It's disturbing.

"Yes, all good." Her somber answer tells me the exact opposite, but she continues before I address it, "Let's go to the people down the line. I have questions after reading what you sent."

"You do?" I say, not sure why I'm taken aback. I couriered her the seats report from the investigators, so she'd be prepared. I guess she didn't disappoint.

"Lots. And then I want to start going through all the files relating to the assembly."

"All?"

"All. I'm going to need a second pair of eyes as well. Is there anyone here who can help? Maybe an intern?" Her mouth transforms into a straight line.

"That's another one of my tasks." I dash her hopes of getting away from me. "Besides making sure you won't run with the silverware." Her eye rolling is rather cute. "But you

should remember that paper trolling is not the best of my abilities.”

Her head tilts at me, confused by my self-sabotaging.

“You were not that bad in law school, minus a few mistakes, and some eyes are better than no eyes.” She hits me with an unexpected positive spin, as I was gearing up for a dig at me. I jerk my head back.

She notices my startled expression. “What?”

“Nothing. Come on, the team is waiting for us.”

I wave Anya in front of me, and I try not to let my eyes dart at her ass, but it’s proving difficult with the sway in her strut. Jeez, I need to focus. I’m at work.

McAv’s manufacturing buildings are next to the local general aviation airport, allowing Jon’s company to use the facilities and the suppliers, creating a little hub of activity. The town of Kerrington benefits from it, by having jobs and visitors to fill the hotels and spend money.

The building is a bit old, and originally it was a proper hangar. At some point, they converted it and also held the offices. But ever since they moved downtown, some of the areas have been transformed into specialized assembly lines, such as the one we are on route to see.

We get our safety overshoes on and Hi-Vis jackets, passing through the turnstile and making a left to the hall. The walls on the narrow corridor hold pictures of the original planes they

made back in the eighties and nineties, years of history and stories.

Anya pauses next to one of the frames, showing a young Jon, about ten years old, with his father. Our CEO, minus the beard or long hair, but sporting some shorts and sneakers, is awed by the crane lifting a wing, while his dad watches proudly.

“McAv has been here for almost fifty years. Us helping with this trial will keep it in business for another fifty,” she comments. “And I’ll get it done.”

I have no reply to that. She’s determined to fix whatever she broke, and I admire her for it. The way she carries herself, head high, eye on the target, it’s mesmerizing. I can’t look at anything but her silhouette and the sound of her voice saying those words. To herself, to the pictures of our company’s past. A promise. A vow.

“Come on, the teams are waiting.” I press gently on her lower back, and the brief contact makes her breath hitch. Our eyes meet for a second, and years away disappear again. I only saw her twice and both times, our connection snapped in place and cemented itself.

“Marcus,” she whispers, and I’m this close to throwing everything away and having her right there. Have the photographs fall as I thrust in her against the wall. Have her screams echo in the hallways. This between us is like melting wax. Hot, filling the cracks, gluing our broken bits, sealing us together. But I can’t. No, I will do this right.

“This way,” I say with difficulty, and I lead her down to the build hall. Luckily, the noise of the robots assembling various bits of the airplanes whisks me back to the now, and I step away from her. Between avoiding a JCB carrying a landing gear and people moving components, I’m glad for the distractions.

The seats zone supervisor awaits with his staff in the breakout area as I requested.

“Hey, Jeffery.” I shake his hand. “You remember Anya Peterson, right?”

The super is pretty young, maybe a couple of years older than me. He probably hits the gym daily by the looks of his bulky arms, with his ridiculously tight t-shirt on. But the leering grin he’s showing while giving the woman next to me a slow once over makes me do a double-take, and something dark and gloomy takes hold in me.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure,” he welcomes her, approaching as a model on the catwalk, and this close to getting his lights clocked out. “Maybe I can give you a tour of the workshop, sweetness. You can call me Jeff.”

OK, that is it.

I try to get in front of her, but her hand is on my bicep, and she shakes her head at me.

“Why, Jeff, *I can’t believe* you don’t remember me,” she purrs, but it’s chilling as she puts on the most threatening smile. “I’m astonished you’re in this position with your three

‘poor’ end-of-year reviews, and all that.” My mouth falls open slightly and I practice a bit of shameless staring at the true Anya, not the mousy girl in law school. Shit, she’s amazing!

“Umm,” he stumbles. “How do you know about that?”

“It was my job to know... Jeffery. I was Jon’s executive assistant.”

The man pales at that, as it hits him that the woman in front of him has some dirt on him. And is not afraid to throw it.

Anya keeps going, the toothy grin still on. “So, how exactly did you, of all people, become super? I thought they had standards, or they did, when I worked here.”

“Ah... Rayna retired, and I... I... was the only candidate.”

“I see...” She taps her lips with her index, and continues, “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about anything. Marcus and I will make ourselves at home. You keep on pumping that iron.”

I get dragged along by the five foot and a half blonde as we leave the confused supervisor in our wake. I’m the opposite of confused, mainly gleeful, that I let her take charge and take him down a peg or fifty.

“Well, I’d say he’s ‘suspect number one’, but he has the IQ of a box of crayons,” she comments toward me conspiratorially. “That guy can barely spell his name, let alone falsify documents, unless someone else is pulling the strings. But that does tell me we need to check the processes again. I don’t trust *Jeff* or his staff to implement them correctly.”

Some of the people around us bristle at that, and perhaps the sharp Ms. Peterson may be a tad grating on the fitters and engineers.

“Mmm, Anya, maybe we need to meet them first before we judge.” I point my head towards the crowd eyeing her angrily.

Her nose scrunches. “Fine, let’s.”

This is how we begin, asking the workers to do the fitting as normal as we watch them. Nothing seems out of place. As I imagined, Anya had a tablet ready with all the processes, and we follow the staff from beginning to end of the fabrication.

Her questions were just as precise and direct as I expected. Unfortunately for us to get anywhere with the staff, they all were “What torque are you using?”, “Is the assembly order according to checklist X or Y?” or “What is the quality standard applied for this?”. None of her queries started with “Hi, my name is Anya, what’s yours?” or, silly me, “How are you today?”.

So, I found something I can truly help with, without trying to change the way she does her own job. Walking in front of her, I interacted with them, warming them up for the ‘interrogation’.

Unexpectedly, the interactions put a spring in my step. With each conversation, I got to know them. They asked me questions about the trial. Then, as the assessment carried on, they told me about their worries about their jobs if we didn’t win. But also, they wanted to learn about me, about Anya. And even though I couldn’t answer everything, I... did something.

We actually made a lot of progress, and for the first time since I started this job, I was useful.

“What’s going on here?” A shrilling voice puts an end to my good mood.

ANYA

Heels click clacking toward us and I notice the super drifting to yell at her for not having overshoes on. But when he sees who it is, blood drains from his face and moves backward. He left his balls at home, obviously.

Whoever the new arrival is, she's dressed in a red power dress, her dark hair flowing in waves, and her shoes probably cost more than what some people make in a month.

Marcus moves to the front, tensing. "Olivia, please meet Anya. We're checking the processes with the teams." He introduces us, but he puts his body in front of me, trying to protect me. This is the second time he tried to do today and my pulse is racing. Some lower parts of mine are getting excited as well.

Today was... unexpected. I guess I surprised him with my real brutal way of doing things. But instead of trying to temper me, he played along, and let me be... me.

Trouble began when I saw him at reception, a fucking wet dream of a man waiting for me. How can someone actually rock a tan suit? With a green tie? It sounds insane and yet, on him, it worked. His muscles moved under the jacket, his thick thighs. Every cell in my body remembered that powerful frame over me. Then in the hallway, so close to me again that I almost gave in right there and then.

But this, him and I working together so well, complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses... Ms. Phan's stars in her eyes were nothing. I got an arrow through my heart. Shit.

Shaking myself, I spot another two men behind the woman, looking around with inquisitive eyes. Marcus adds, "Mr. Lexington, I wasn't aware you were visiting today. Oh, Chris, good to see you as well. Chris is Jon's new Executive assistant," he tells me.

The EA, a short guy about twenty years old, just gives us a wave, while the bald man glances between us with a grunt. We're obviously not high enough in the food chain for a more sociable greeting. "Yes, I wanted to give Jon the fresh eyes he was talking about. Bring my expertise in. So offered to visit McAv's facilities, and Ms. Nkosi was coming this way. Impressive operation," he praises, doing a quick three-sixty.

"I'm going to go have a line walk," he announces without letting either of us get another word in. With a head nod, he disappears between the stations.

Chris darts after him, as allowing a rival CEO to just wander around unsupervised is just dumb. But if anyone finds it strange having a man in a t-shirt and golf shoes on their shop floor, nobody says anything. I've never met him before, but his ex-wife was a bitch. I'm glad Jon and he are now associates, even if he acts as though he owns the place.

Before I can ask more about the links between McAv and LexAviation, the brunette stops a couple of feet from us, and purses her lips at me. "So, you're the wild card?"

What the fuck? I want to say I don't appreciate her tone, but, after a quick warning eyebrow lift from Marcus, I open with, "Maybe. Are you the Head of Legal?"

Planting my legs shoulder level, I put one hand on my hip, holding my tablet like a shield over my torso with the other.

"I am," her answer comes brusquely. Her shoes do an impatient tap as she's silent, waiting for me to get to the point. One bossy witch, got it.

"Good, then maybe you can send all the files. Marcus only had half."

"What?" the man in question asks, shocked. "I thought all the folders were on the server. I sent you all I found."

"Hmm, and what exactly do you think is missing?" the manager inquires, tilting her head, completely ignoring him.

"I've worked here a while, before," I remind her. "There are very few procedures and personnel files I haven't read. You only sent the seats assembly processes. I want to see all the

parts reports, for all zones, and all the stock receipts for everything from paper cups to windows.”

“Interesting,” Olivia comments in a chilling tone. “And why’s that?”

“Because even though we have *a* problem in this area, it doesn’t mean it’s *the* problem.” She damn well knows that herself. She was just testing us. Cunt. Women like her remind me of my own mother.

Her chin is up, but I’m done cowering and I stand strong. If I have to make it right, I won’t be mousy-Anya.

Jeff made himself sparse quite quickly, and many of his staff are also playing busy but are in fact, eavesdropping. Clearly, they don’t have enough work.

“Fine, but there will be a lot of files,” she relents. I now notice her fists unclenching and, with a push of her dark hair over her shoulder, she sighs.

“Not an issue. Between Marcus and myself, we’ll go through them,” I throw back.

Ms. Nkosi issues another ‘hmm’, and I roll my eyes as her low opinion of his job performance is a bit too obvious. Joke’s on her, I don’t actually work here. I can say whatever I want.

“Yes,” I challenge her, “have you got a problem with that?”

The man next to me winces briefly, as I basically bitch-slapped our boss, but a corner of his mouth lifts up in appreciation in the end.

“No, none at all.” Her face twists into a weird ‘who are you, girl?’ expression. “Good luck then. Let me know if you find something. If Lexington is looking for me, I’ll be in reception, dialing into a meeting. And you,” she tells me, “I’ll be keeping an eye on you.” The older woman gives us a nod and turns to the exit. Before departing, she pauses for a bit, taking in the people on the line watching the exchange, and me, glaring at me with what I read as wrath.

Tough shit, I had worse women try to drag me down, so I glower back.

The standoff seems to have affected Marcus as well, as he loosens his tie an inch. Luckily, the older woman gives a shrug and finally leaves.

As I’d rather not have this conversation in the middle of the factory, I pull on his arm and take him to the side of the hangar.

“That’s our boss, huh?” I ask rhetorically.

“Yep, she’s no ball of sunshine, that’s for sure,” he replies anyway.

“Lovely, looking forward to her breathing down our necks.”

“Tell me about it,” Marcus harrumphs, and I watch him with question marks in my eyes. “It’s fine, she’s a bit touchy when it comes to me, nothing to worry yourself about. I can ignore her. DJ and Jon got me the job. And an office and benefits. But Olivia isn’t pleased that I’m there.”

“Hmm...”

“Enough with the ‘hmm-s’. Women ‘hmm’-ing is never a good sign. It’s a ‘run and hide sign’.” He smiles at me and he’s too close again.

I giggle. It trips him up again. He stares at me in wonder, as if that pearl of laughter could sustain him all day.

I don’t know how to react, getting this direct hit of his attention, so I pretend I didn’t see him just stop breathing. I divert, but my voice has no drive behind it, as I’m reeled in by the ‘Marcus Jara tractor beam’. “Yeah, it’s similar to a woman giving you the silent treatment, but it’s somewhere between ‘disappointed’ and annoyed’.”

“What are you, Angel?” The nickname escapes him, and with that one word, the world stops turning again, like in legal aid, but on a much larger scale. The line, the robots. The workers appear to operate in slow motion. The noises of drills and power tools vanish. The smell of oil and metal disappears. It’s just a pair of brown eyes mirroring the want in mine.

“Weak,” I gasp.

My heart beats so fast as I move within an inch of him. My chest rises up and down, and my breasts almost touch his tan suit jacket. We’re in the eye of the storm, and nothing matters but this moment here. He lifts his right hand, and that’s when the miracle shatters, as the brace is there. Marcus closes my eyes, and his head drops forward.

“You’re not weak, Angel, I am. I’m... a bit lost,” he confesses.

“Why is that?”

“I...” He pauses, but I see it every time he glances to the bind. The fear of never getting himself back to where he was, and stopping it all before knowing for sure. I saw it every moment I looked in the mirror, fighting to stop hiding.

“Are you lost, or are you scared to keep going on the hard road you were on?”

“Probably the latter,” he agrees, running his fingers through his hair. “And you, Anya, how is your road ahead?”

I pause before answering. How’s my road? I glance over his shoulder, avoiding his gaze. I grasp my tablet harder. Do... do I dare?

He gently touches my chin. Ignoring the people going about their shift in the background, he draws my eyes to his, and asks again, softly. “How’s your road, Angel?”

The expectation on his face. The belief.

I tweak a stray hair back in the braid over my head, lowering the device I was clutching and... I dare. A light-hearted sensation expands in my chest as I take the first step and answer, “Lonely.”

He flinches.

“Shit, Anya, if you keep staying stuff like that, we won’t make it through the day. I’m trying to give you space.” He moves back, his hands flapping about as if there’s a swarm of bees in the factory.

“Give *me* space?” My tablet goes back up, and I cross my arms over it.

“Yeah, so I don’t freak you out. I can’t...” His voice is strained as he tries and fails miserably to explain why he’s acting this way.

“You’re freaking *me* out a bit right now.” I grimace. This is going terribly. What was I thinking? I read too much into it. He... *can’t*?

He rubs the palm of his left hand over his forehead. “I’m an idiot. I can’t believe my sisters call me the rational one. I’m messing this up.”

“Nobody’s disagreeing, Marcus,” I grit. I turn to leave, embarrassed by the rejection, but he catches my forearm. He spins me to him, facing me head on. His cologne is invading my senses and the heat of his body makes me tremble.

“OK, let’s assume the past five minutes didn’t happen, and I didn’t almost push you away when all I crave is to kiss you. Have no doubt, Anya Peterson, I’ve been resisting pulling you to me ever since you walked in this morning, a queen strutting in. There’s no question in my mind that when you took down my boss was the hottest moment of my life outside of that one night. I had to loosen my goddamn tie! We’re walking a very thin line between me being professional and you getting railed against that fuselage over there.”

“Oh...” My cheeks must be beet red, but he doesn’t stop. His hand cups my jaw, and his thumb runs lazily over my lower lip.

“But I need a bit of time. The accident changed me.” He pauses. “I lost my career, my hobbies. I have no purpose here, in a job I’m not particularly fond of, but I’ll find it. Hell, I found some even now, partnering with you today. But I’m not dragging you in my mess. But *never* doubt that I want you. You won’t ever be lonely again. Nod if you agree.”

As if there was any other gesture in my repertoire right now, my head tilts up and down slowly, and he smiles. That smile is the light at the end of my road. It’s wishes and dreams. And it’s just for me.

“Come on, Angel, we need to finish our reports before the second shift comes and we need to supervise them as well.”

Any retort I may have vanished, as I’m piecing together what just happened. But I follow Marcus Jara.

And begin to hope.

MARCUS

“Oh, I have a good idea of what you could get him for Christmas!”

“What?” Terry from Purchasing asks. She’s carrying her tray ahead of us, queuing to pay for her lunch.

“A good quality watch,” I answer without thinking twice. “Depends on your budget, but it’s a really good present for your partner.”

“That’s a good idea. Thank you, Marcus, I’ll have a look now.”

Anya muffles a part-laugh-part-scoff behind me. She has fries again, and I’m starting to wonder why she isn’t getting anything else. It’s usually either a soup or fries.

“What? What was wrong with watches? Every guy loves a watch. Or twenty.”

We’ve been working on the line in the mornings, and it’s been pretty great. I continue talking to everyone and being actually productive. OK, the team around us are a little rough

around the edges with their jokes, especially about us working at headquarters, but they are pretty cool. Most of them. That jackass supervisor is still a dick. Caught him checking Anya out this morning and I not-so-subtly placed myself in his line of sight. Not that I blame him when she has this knit dress on, molded a little too well over her body, but still.

“I was about to call you something I heard some of the people here use,” she says as the line moves toward the till. When we get to the cashier, despite her huffing at me, as she always does, I pay for both of us.

“Please don’t say they dub me... Captain America!”

She smirks, and I fear it’s even worse, as she asks, faking innocence, “What, what was wrong with that?”

I roll my eyes but then she leans behind me.

“Oh, no you didn’t!”

“Did what?” Anya sets her tray at one of the tables, pretending not to know what I mean. Today most of the staff are on training, so it’s pretty quiet in the canteen. Maybe that’s why she looks more relaxed, when we don’t have ten boisterous fitters around us.

“You did not just check out my ass.”

“What? Who? Me? Check out Captain America’s ass? Never...” The slurp from her Diet Coke is too loud to not be intentional.

“Ha, ha. I got lucky I was no longer friends with Riley, or he would’ve made my life a living hell after that *Avengers*

movie.”

“Oh no, you are no longer buds with the dude who never got over his high school hey-days?”

“Aren’t you full of irony today?” She shrugs and squeezes two sachets of mayo on her fries. “Come on, out with it... what were you going to say?” I push her.

The roll of the lips is not a good sign. “This may sound bad... but it’s... Labrador Retriever.”

“A what now? A dog?”

“Marcus... everyone’s best friend.” At least she has the good manners to look a bit embarrassed. And rather cute. There’s a slight blush over her cheeks. Despite the horrific moniker, I love this. Simply talking to one another. None of our pasts looming over us. Just two people having lunch and teasing each other. Even if it is about silly nicknames.

Really? A dog?

“That’s a million times worse! Degraded from a superhero to a canine.”

Anya chokes on a potato and coughs a few times. “OK, that does suck. Do *I* want to know what the staff call *me*?”

“Uhm.” That is a trick question. It must be. That’s how men lose their heads.

“Well?” She raises her eyebrow at me, and this is not going to go well. Not at all.

“Come on, what is it... Margaret Thatcher? Miranda Priestly?”

I play with my salad. And take a breath. Anya may not be the most popular investigator. She still doesn't do any small talk or ease people into it. But everyone appreciates her directness, and how professional she is. No bullshit, that's how one of the guys described her. A wave of pride filled me hearing that, as my girl really does kick ass.

My girl. Even if I told her I need her patience. But spending this time with her now, taking it slow, it's been the best thing we could have done. Me learning how she likes her tea. Her letting go with me, bit by bit. The other day she laughed when I had pen marks all over my face. So, I drew whiskers on the back of her clipboard, and it took her a while to figure out why everyone was holding their chuckles while being interviewed. It was petty, but she smiled. And did not erase my drawing.

“I wouldn't tell you normally, but you owe me for the dog joke.”

“Come on, let me have it. I'm a big girl. Bulletproof.”

Here goes nothing. “Are you... bulletproof, or are you... *frozen?*”

“No...” Her fried potato stops halfway to her mouth.

“Yep, *Elsa*, let it...”

“Oh no, that is more than enough!” That fry flies towards me, and I laugh as I catch it mid-flight. Karma for throwing food at my sister, probably, but at least it wasn't one with

sauce all over it. “I knew that first day when I braided my hair on top of my head was a bad idea. But she was a queen, so it could be worse. Though our staff are fucking childish assholes.”

“Yes, they love their banter. And you got off easy, *I* apparently have a wagging tail.” She snickers, and that sound alone makes me less upset at the ‘Fido’ badge. “What is it about you and fries anyway?”

“Uhm... that’s all I can usually find to eat here.” Now it’s her turn to move her food around the plate, avoiding me. “By the time we finish the checks and write the notes... well... the canteen runs out of vegetarian dishes.”

“What?” My fork hits the table a bit too loudly. “Why didn’t you say anything? We could have left the reports for after we eat. Or pre-order for you.”

“Not a big deal, I’m used to it. Please don’t make a big deal out of it, storming the caterers office or something crazy.”

I grasp the fork to the point of almost bending it. Don’t make a big deal? I want to go to the chef and ask them to always save her a portion of the day’s meatless meal. Or... Or I can just respect her wishes and not be a controlling asshole. But I will still have to do something.

I exhale and release the death grip on the utensil. But it takes me a second to notice... my fork was in my right hand. And I curled my fingers all the way in. I didn’t feel a thing.

“Does it hurt?”

I pause. My eyes wander from her to my hand. “No... it’s just...” I let the sentence linger lowering my eyelids, focusing on the sounds and smells of the space around us, my reality again getting in the way. Plates clattering, sizzling meat and one dumbass sitting across from the most fascinating girl he knows and unable to tell her it’s his fear that freezes him, not his non-existent pain.

“What is it about you and watches anyway?” She changes the subject, and I hope she can read how thankful I am.

“My dad left me his Casio from the seventies. It’s nothing fancy, nothing expensive. But it’s been in all the pictures of him and my mom at school, and it’s something that I always associate with him. When I run my fingers over the metallic clasp, it’s like seeing it on his wrist, and him with me. A watch is timeless for me, so I think it would give the same good memories to someone else.”

“That... that is beautiful, Marcus,” her voice falters, and now she glances away. She wipes her hand on a napkin and plays with her hair. “You had that watch at the masquerade, didn’t you?” Shit, she remembered.

She continues, “I... I understand. When we... left... I couldn’t take old photos or anything like that. But I did have an old Lego keychain my dad gave me. It was when I was ten or twelve, and my mother once again complained I was out with some kids in the park instead of joining her at some luncheon. And my dad... he gave me this figurine on a chain to make me smile. It wasn’t even a superhero. Some blonde

lady. The face is wiped out now, missing an arm and the legs keep falling off, I had to glue them. But I still hold it when I need to.”

Could she really be any more perfect? I can’t stop myself. I extend my left arm on the table and open my palm up. That shy smile she gives me is worth everything, as she puts her right hand in mine. My thumb gently caresses her skin, and I tell her another thing I don’t usually share.

“Lego, you say? I have to confess something.”

“Hmm?” Her eyes are stuck where my finger traces circles on her hand.

“I may have a slight Lego problem. My spare room is full of sets.” This could go terribly. Some of my girlfriends thought I was nerdy but being here with her I want to be honest.

“Sets you hopefully... assembled, right? Not just sitting in boxes?”

“That’s your concern? If I built them?”

“Uhm, yeah.” She’s back with me tilting her head as though I’m the idiot for even asking that. “I’m all for collecting, but come on... it’s Lego, it’s meant to be played with. Out with it, Marcus Jara. Are there pieces all over your place? A Millennium Falcon in the corner?”

“Not as many as I wanted. And the Falcon is in my spare room, unsure where to put it.” The grin on her is a revelation. It’s not condescending or judgmental. It’s... happy.

“That sounds awesome,” she says, and grasps my hand harder.

I tell her about some of my favorites. She asks questions, and the lunch hour is not long enough. The day is not long enough. But I plan on having all the days. And enjoy them, one at a time.

ANYA

For the past week we've been sifting through the paperwork from both the fixing supplier and McAv, as well as trying to walk in the footsteps of the investigation teams, and maybe find something they missed.

During the day we check the line, check the processes, and Marcus, more than me, for obvious reasons, makes friends with the technicians and supervisors. We have our breaks and meals with them, and without my partner pulling me to the center of the table, I would be in a corner brooding and observing everyone's behaviors.

However, with everyone's focal point on the merry and amicable man—still hot as sin, with his perfect suits and, now a bit more groomed appearance with ironed shirts—they didn't notice me slipping away to the restroom for longer than I should. When instead I was going through their lockers while they were at lunch.

What destabilized me a bit was when I finally confessed to him what I was really up to.

Instead of a ‘Captain America’ sermon on people’s private possessions, his expression turned into a devious grin.

He said, “Why do you think I was entertaining them?” Even worse, he switched to his *other*, unforgettable, dark voice, one which still haunts my ‘self-care’ sessions.

He even added, “I never imagined you meekly sitting by my side when you could go kick ass. I’ll distract them while you go do it your own way.” That made my jaw fall to the floor and my thighs clench. The truth about the delicious shiver down my back was never to see the light of day, but his unwavering confidence in me was intoxicating.

Yet despite *that*, and some lingering glances between us, we kept it all professional. Maybe too professional. Minus that one day when he held my hand and I wanted to burrow my nose in the crook of his neck.

But I was more than ‘just’ in trouble with Marcus Jara. His laughter echoes through my body. The way he presses his hand on my back heats my blood up. The way he makes sure we go to lunch early now, melts all my defenses. He didn’t exactly listen to not act, but he also didn’t push me or make a fuss. He made me feel... taken care of and it’s not something I can fully process yet.

I’m still surprised he looked so unsure when we talked about his hobby in the canteen. I don’t know what’s wrong with women these days if they don’t realize that having your guy fit bricks in his spare room is a million times better than him bar hopping, or fuck knows what.

The time we spent just working and talking to each other was more precious than I would have guessed. I was glad that in the afternoons, and usually stretching mostly into the night, we had to review files and check for inaccuracies. That was more my alley, safer than anything.

As my partner said, I ‘girl-bossed’ it, finding a few errors in the parts reports and stock misalignments. No smoking gun yet, but we’re cross-checking each other’s documents to see if either has missed anything.

But, opposite to his opinion, I was not the only one on a roll.

“I don’t get it.” I tug a strand of hair back, trying to make sense of what I’m reading.

“Which bit?” Marcus lifts his gaze to me.

“You said you are bad at this... Legal documents, etcetera.”

His answer is tentative. “Olivia always complains how I don’t have enough attention to detail.” Within five minutes with her earlier in the week, I pegged that our boss was a bitch who didn’t give Marcus a chance. She was upset that Jon hired him, and instead of helping him, she just put him down.

“Not sure what you both mean. These are pretty good. You find ninety percent of the errors I find, and you even picked up on some I missed. Here, you also spotted we’re getting a lot of spare bolts for the doors, more than the normal ten percent of stock.” I show him on my laptop. “So, what changed?”

He's silent all of a sudden. The eyes burn bright, and he toys with a button before answering. His office is not huge, but it's beautifully decorated. It's so *him* that I almost never want to leave, especially when he looks at me in that way. Echoes of that night many years ago resonate in my mind.

"I've been sleeping better lately, but mostly... it's the humming."

"Excuse me?" My brows draw together.

"You hum while you read. While you type. While you get coffee. While you count the number of boxes in the storage area. To be honest, the only time you don't hum is when you speak or chew."

I'm gobsmacked. I didn't realize I did that so often. "OK... but how is that helping you work?"

"I used to listen to audiobooks or music when I... when I sewed," he grunts, playing with a paperclip now. "It's... relaxing and helps me focus. And your bumbling is pretty on pitch. A radio would be better, but I'll take what I can find." A 'nothing to see here' shrug follows, but for me, his admission turns my world on its head.

"Audiobooks make me lose my concentration instantly," I say quickly, flustered by having to apologize.

Damn it! I should have suggested we put on Spotify or something when it's just us in the office. Or remind him how much I love music, too. How I would love to have the radio on. Fuck, now I'm the one messing it up.

“It’s OK. Your focus is more important than mine. As long as you hum, I can work better than I did before, so it’s a win-win.” He smiles softly, going back to examining the papers, and I’m driven to ease Marcus’s burden.

Shit.

Biting my lip, I dare more. I dare to do something I haven’t done in front of another person in a long time. Months. Years actually.

I sing.

It’s a Taylor Swift cover, where I slowed it down even more, making it a ballad similar to the ones on her *Folklore* album. I don’t lift my head from my paperwork, just check the reports as I go through verse by verse. I ignore the piercing gaze from the man across from me and divert my attention to the words on the page as best I can, but, at some point in the song, I give in, peeking at him.

His mouth is slightly ajar, and he’s definitely not breathing this time. His expression is of seeing snow for the first time. Like magic unfurled in front of him, and he’s about to be swept onto the wings of a mythical being.

I don’t notice that I stop singing when he takes my hand in his. “Anya... your voice... your voice is fascinating.” His touch is warm, and the pads of his fingers are coarse against my skin, but his hold is branding, as though he never wants to let me go. I look at our joined hands as a blush threatens my cheekbones. I squirm in my seat and pivot my eyes to my laptop.

“I... I prefer singing to humming. But I can stop if it’s too loud,” I mutter, an unfamiliar wave of embarrassment coming over me. I sang in front of thousands. I was on TV. But nothing was as intimate or as impactful as having Marcus Jara worship my every lyric, focusing on me.

“Stop? I never want you to stop. Your sound.... That voice... It’s astonishing. It’s... this sounds cheesy, but it’s heaven, Angel.” His voice is hoarse and needy, and, this time, I don’t avoid looking at him, as he calls me that nickname again, and my pulse quickens. “You should be on one of those twirling-chair shows, with judges and buzzers.”

“Been there, done that, but the Romanian ones aren’t as exciting as the ones here,” escapes my mouth, and the second the last word is said, I gasp and pull my hand away from him.

No. No. No.

Dashing from my seat, I almost run to the kitchen, mumbling, “I need to get some water,” without checking behind me.

I struggle for air as I get into the break area. I can’t believe I was so stupid to slip that. To him. Again. What makes this man unlock my deepest secrets every time? Telling him some non-descript family issues was one thing.

But this, not even Ms. Phan knows that bit. Nobody does.

This could unravel everything. He knows when I left Romania. He can search online what contestants were in the

shows that year. He can find my real name. My history. My father's old record.

Stupid, stupid. I wanted to take a step with him, not tumble down the stairs.

My nails sink into the back of a chair as I keep myself upright.

“Are you OK?”

I jump as his hand touches the small of my back.

“I'm fine, I just need a moment,” I bark at him, still panting.

“No.”

“No?” I turn to him, thinking he'll be frowning, upset at my outburst. He is the furthest from it. He's calm, looking at me serenely.

“No, Anya, or whatever your name actually is. You are upset, and we're going to talk about it. I'm not leaving you here to hyperventilate by yourself. This was obviously too much for you. Come here.” Marcus pulls another seat and with no control over my own limbs, I end up in his lap.

“What's going on?” I gulp for air. Our faces are at mostly the same level, and if I wanted to, I could count the bits of gold in his brown pupils. I want to, so much. But he's getting too close. He knows too much. That's why I try to move away from him, but he won't allow me.

“Shh,” he says, holding my chin to face him. “Breathe in with me.”

I comply.

“Now breathe out. Yeah, like that. Inhale... exhale... and again.” The brace on his forearm keeps me in place as we breathe together, and my blood pressure comes back from its high. My heartbeats temper, my wheezing subsides, as the mint in his breath tangles with mine, and I calm down.

“There—isn’t that better?” The amusement in his tone puts a scowl on my face. “There she is... Ms. Peterson, whose harsh gaze could cut through steel.”

I snort.

His mouth turns into a smile, and my heart palpitates from the proximity to him, from the dazzle of his expression, as he still looks at me as he did in his office, like I am something to behold.

“What are you doing?” I wheeze, biting my lower lip again.

“Nothing. What are you doing?” He smirks at me, and I realize how close we are to one another. How strong his thighs feel underneath me, how possessive his hold is around my body. How my blush floods my face.

Our lips are within a hairsbreadth of each other and the ache to experience his withering kiss again is insatiable. He’s composed, waiting for me to make up my mind, but I’m stunned.

Now that he’s allowing me in, I’m split between my blistering need for this man and all the things holding me back. My past. My present. My fear of opening this door fully,

even though he's already halfway in. I don't know if I can take the step now that he's right in front of me, after reacting so badly to him finding out *that* part of myself.

"Oh, sorry, didn't realize anyone was here," the janitor cleaves through the tension. I jump off his lap, taking a few steps away from Marcus, keeping my back to him. Pretending that would wipe the memory of my red cheeks from his mind or the proximity of the hard planes of his body from mine.

"We were just going, carry on." I wave at the man and walk back to the room with purpose, setting myself to collect my computer and avoid talking to a certain colleague.

I'm not that lucky, as the second I face the door, he's blocking it. With him there, I'm hot and cold in one. I want to run a marathon, but also, to hide under a rock. I want it all and I can't handle anything.

I said I was lonely. Why am I the one freaking out now? I thought I was ready. Maybe I am not.

"Right, are we going to talk about it properly now, or are you going to run away again?" He sounds amused.

"Run away, probably," my honest answer shocks me into covering my mouth with my hand, but it makes him chuckle. Goddamn him.

"Thought so. But you know what? You keep telling me bits of yourself. I know it's not easy for you. You want to let me in, but the reality of actually doing it is more frightening than the intent. So... I'll just wait. You need space, I'll give it to you."

No comeback comes to mind. Damn him again for knowing what is wrong better than me. He'll just wait? The grin he's flashing right now is ridiculous. How does a man just take it all in stride like this? How does he simply understand *me*?

"Uh, OK. I'm off. See you tomorrow." Moving to the exit, he gets out of the way.

I manage to take one step out the door before he shouts, "Shit!"

"Huh?" I turn as he picks up a piece of paper off the desk. "What is it?"

"The spare bolts for the doors we both found." He comes closer again, that earthy smell hitting me again. "Look, there is one which has the same diameter as the bolts for the seats."

"Fuck..." I drop my bag back on the chair as I go through the files. "It's more! Marcus... we have too much stock only for the ones with the same length and thread as the seats. We finally have something," I beam, and an unfamiliar cheerful sound makes its way from my chest. "Finally!" I cry out happily, not even noticing until it's too late that Marcus is next to me. Focusing on me again as he would on a trophy at the end of a Formula One race. Blinding me with the heat in his eyes.

"What?" I ask breathlessly.

"I think I overestimated something," he says as he stares down at me.

“What?” I repeat myself, and I can’t deny this draw to him. The exhilaration of finding the proof dries up as it turns unbelievably hot in the small room, a torridness I haven’t experienced with anyone but him.

“My patience.”

“Wh-”

Is all I can get out of my third ‘what’ before his left hand darts on the nape of my neck, while his other hand circles around my waist. And without further debate, his mouth is on me. He loosens an extraordinarily sexy low noise in his throat as my knees weaken. I part my lips to let his tongue in, moaning softly as my arms sneak around his neck.

I yield to the strong chest against me. My body’s slack, as it remembers everything about Marcus Jara. His hardness against my center. His possessive hold of my hair. The way he tastes me like I am the best dessert in the world, as his tongue twirls around mine, and kisses me with scalding want.

My fingers graze his head, and he groans. My toes curl in my boots. My breasts are heavy with need as they crush on his suit, the bulge in his pants moving against my body. Marcus licks my lips, and I shake and tremble with his slow, tantalizing strokes. His fingers dip into my ass. I wither and grab him harder, having him own me, absolutely mind-blowing.

We make out for ages, the intensity between us scorching everything in its path. All my doubts. All his composure. This is everything I’ve been fearing and craving ever since I saw

him again. His arms around me, my lips sampling his, our bodies rubbing against each other.

He's the one to stop. With his forehead leaning on mine, panting, he asks, "I didn't overestimate this... this between us, did I?"

Drained and dazed, I can only shake my head, as words don't have a place in my brain right now. The need that comes over me seems to be overwhelming. I can't move from his embrace. I don't want to leave.

"Good, I'm glad we are on the same page, Angel, I'm not going to let you walk out of my life again. I've got you now."

I open my mouth to deny it, but nothing comes out. Nothing can be argued when I'm plastered all over him, my lips swollen and red. A hum of agreement is all I have, and he smiles softly and kisses me again. This time he does so delicately, tenderly mapping my lips, my jaw, and lazily descending down my neck. I tilt my head backwards, giving him the access he lacks.

Marcus shifts his right hand up my back, now cradling my head with both his palms. But before he can move any further, some of my hair gets caught in his brace.

"Goddamn it," he growls, attempting to extricate my curls from the Velcro straps on his arm. But my strands are stubborn and between his hand at an awkward angle and the material, it's getting even worse. The more he tries, the more of my ringlets get tangled around him, and I swear he is close to dropping a loud 'fuck'.

The concentration on his face and the thought of his control snapping, makes me burst into laughter. I burrow my head against his chest as he starts laughing as well at the scene, and just holds me for a minute, as we are both losing it in the end.

“Oh my god, just take the brace off,” I tell him as I come down from my high.

“Duh, that seems sane.”

Easier said than done, with my mass of hair and his hands swimming in it, but he finally manages to get his limb out. The brace is now hanging on my shoulder.

“I’m not sure this made it much better,” Marcus stares at his bind and then at his palm for a second, hesitating closing his fist.

I try to get to it myself but without much success, as it’s too far backward. “I’m sorry to say, but you’ll still have to help me get it out. I can’t get to it properly.”

“Hmm.. well, this is not how I imagined this evening going five minutes ago. Heck, it’s not how I imagined it going twenty minutes ago,” Marcus says, moving most of my hair out of the way, starting to untangle the brace methodically. His fingers subtly probe my swirls, tenderly moving each strand away from the straps, trying not to pull on my hair too much.

He’s concentrating on me, narrowing his eyes. His brows come together, revealing that crinkle between them, and he’s as handsome as if I dreamed him up. I just kissed him. And sang. But I can’t resist him. As he gently tugs the bind off my

hair, so careful with me, I'm confused as to why I ran in the first place.

I know that is what I have been doing for over fourteen years now, running. But... Marcus Jara wants me. And I want him. The hell with it, I'm going to tell him. Maybe show him a bit. I smile internally.

I open my mouth to tell him just that, but he is back to staring at his right hand. He wiggles each of his fingers slowly, like he hasn't done it in forever, as though they are foreign to him. The wrinkle on his forehead gets more and more pronounced the more he gawks at his digits, and it hits me that he may have more baggage than me.

"Marcus..." He looks up and hides his hand in the pocket of his jacket. "You probably get asked a lot this a lot but..."

"The hand's fine," he snips at me, and I flinch, shocked by the abruptness.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Shit, sorry! I'm sorry, Anya, not sure what came over me."

"Well, that's the last time I'm going to ask you if you want a blowjob," I joke and that snaps him right up, and he looks at me speechless. I roll my eyes and grin at him.

"Relax, I wasn't going to ask about it. I suspect every man and his dog starts the conversation with 'how's the hand'."

"Hmm, that's true. They're trying to be polite," he grunts.

"Polite, but annoying."

He nods.

“How about we have a deal? I don’t ask you about the hand, and you don’t ask me about my past,” I offer.

His eyebrow goes straight up as he agrees. “That hasn’t gone as planned with us, keeping our secrets for ourselves.”

I shrug, and not pounce on the ‘us’ he casually sneaked in. Somehow, it does not grate on me at all.

“Look, Anya, I...” He’s the one squirming now, and it makes me want to go back to where we were.

Which, surprising myself, I do.

I grab the lapels of his jacket and kiss him. He’s stunned at first, but gets with the program quickly. In no time, I whimper in his arms, and he growls, pulling me near him again.

“OK, if we carry on, we’ll definitely get in trouble with HR,” he comments when we break for breath.

“Oh, no, not HR,” I mock. “You may also be the worst supervisor ever. I don’t think your tongue down my throat was part of your job description.”

“Are you complaining?” He smiles and I shake my head. “Alright, Angel, I think we have to stop here, or all our clothes will end up on the floor. And don’t give me that pout. I want to do this right this time.”

“Do this right?”

“Yep, we are going to take this nice and slow. You spook easily and if...” He glances at his hand for the millionth time

tonight, and I want to ask him about it, but we made a deal. “If you’re willing to give me a shot... I know I may not be the best catch.”

That is exactly what Ms. Phan asked me to do. Give him a chance. But it became much more than just a simple OK. That ‘OK’ may mean something I never expected I would have. Not just sex, but this connection between us, which grows. Links that are unearthed again, strings that intertwine between us.

However, I’m amazed when something on his face... uncertainty? Doubtfulness? Is he worried *he* may not be good enough... *for me*?

“Listen here, Marcus Jara.” I grab him by his shirt. “You and I, we have unfinished business, you get me?” I hope my smirk is enough to make myself clear as I press my lips against his.

“Clear as day, Anya Peterson.” He smiles back and kisses me back again. And again.

Even if we don’t move much further and our clothes stay on, it’s something. Maybe the end of something, the end of me not taking what I want. The next step in ‘us’.

MARCUS

My coffee's cold again. I glance at my watch and notice the time.

“Shit!” I swear, as I should've been at work an hour ago. My phone has three missed calls from Anya, and one from Olivia. I just did it again. Disconnected myself from life sitting in the coffee shop across the street from my old shop. And I dared ask her to wait for me yesterday, when I can't even get to the office on time, especially as we were supposed to go find those extra bolts.

Darting out the door, I apologize to the server who gives me a bored headshake as I pay and get out of there as fast as humanly possible.

I only wanted to have a cup of coffee this morning, instead of coming over for lunch as I usually do on a Friday, realizing we had our investigation to do. And I messed it all up. Again. All I have been doing lately is messing things up. I shouldn't have kissed Anya yesterday. Even though I wanted nothing

more than to spread her on that table. And listen to her belt a different sort of chorus. Maybe an encore or two.

In the office, it was all so natural. To chase her after she let slip another important part of her life. To hold her and teeter on the edge of sanity when I felt her soft curves in my lap. Kissing her was a rush of happiness and rightness I haven't experienced in so long, despite my efforts to try to get over her. Though, I'm unsure how much I actually tried to get over her as I've only been dating short blondes since graduation.

With that understanding, some darker thoughts flood my mind. My doubts and fears awaken. I told her in the factory I needed more time, but will she wait? What was I thinking?

Am I ready to get the woman of my dreams? The one who did not run away this time. Well, not out of the building, at least. She... she didn't tear into me, more kissed me back and even kissed me first.

"Marcus, where the fuck have you been?" Her raised voice, not sweet as it was yesterday evening, jolts me awake.

She jumps out of a cab and—rightly so—furiously struts towards me. Today she has a flared dress in the same pale color as her eyes, and her hair is flowing down her back in waves of light and warmth. My breath catches just at the sight of her. She is dawn. Bright sun rays over a cerulean background.

And if it was just how much I'm attracted to her, it would be one thing. It's how her song pierced through my defenses

yesterday. How her mind put two and two together. How she laughed with joy and my resistance crumbled.

“Anya, I’m so sorry. I’ve got no excuse.”

“No excuse? That will go down nicely when I tell DJ that.”

“DJ?” I ask, not expecting her to mention my sister.

“Yeah. Nobody could get a hold of you, and I called her, hoping she had a ‘find my friend’ app, and luckily, she did.” Her legs are planted wide and with that chin lifted at me, I get why she’s irritated. “So, I came to check what was wrong. As clearly, something is very wrong.” She puts her hands on her hips and damn if her being angry at me again isn’t beyond... exciting. But she deserves more than my horniness; she deserves the truth.

“It’s just that... every Friday I...” But as I try to tell her about my ritual, her expression turns from angry to alert.

“Don’t move, Marcus, keep talking,” she says, while trying to glance behind me, checking the reflection in the window of one of the shops.

“I wasn’t planning on stopping. What’s the matter? Why are you...” I put her hand in mine, but her palm is cold and she’s shaking. “Anya, are you ok? What happened in the last ten seconds?”

“The car... do you see the blue sedan at my four o’clock? Don’t be too obvious while looking!” I peer to her right, and there is indeed a blue car parked a few stores down the street.

“Yes, it’s there. Why are you worried?” Her skin is clammy, and I’m unprepared for her panic as she swallows rapidly.

“The same sedan has been following my taxi from McAv. Ms. Phan spotted a blue car across the street from my apartment building too,” she whispers, and her lower lip trembles.

“Are you sure it’s the same vehicle?” Her face tells me I’m being a condescending asshole to question her. “Sorry again, I shouldn’t be doubting you.” But following her? “Should we call the police?”

Something flashes on her face, a terror I never knew how it would look on her, and I don’t want to ever see that again. My own bile rises to the back of my throat.

“No, no police,” she mumbles, then takes a deep breath, centering herself. “We need to lose them.”

“Lose them? Are we in a cop show? Who’s chasing you, Angel?”

“Not like in a cop show.” She wants to roll her eyes at me, but she’s frozen with dread. Despite forcing herself to be fearless, the sweat on her forehead is telling me the exact opposite. “Is there anywhere to hide around here?” She avoids my last question, doing a quick survey of our surroundings.

We’re in a busy area of Kerrington, with lots of shops and restaurants, one of the reasons I opened mine here. There are people everywhere, from tourists to delivery drivers, and we

are clogging the sidewalk, having a chat in the middle of the crowd.

But it doesn't matter who's around us. Right now, all that matters is the distress Anya's in, and helping her however I can. Her feeling so threatened, so unlike the badass woman I met in school, flips the switch in me.

"I know a place," I say, planning to lead her exactly to the one place I've been avoiding for over a year.

"Wait, Marcus..." She stops me before crossing the street, biting her lower lip. "We can't go straight there; we need to distract them first." She's spiraling, instinctually grasping her hair and trying to reduce its volume, probably to make herself less visible. I have to do something to divert her, or she'll have a full-blown panic attack.

"Ok, Virginia Hall, what do you suggest?" Anya glowers, and I am happy to get punched for calling her one of the greatest spies in World War Two, if it means her being herself again.

I continue, "There's a shop on this alley behind me. We can go in there; I have the key." Without having to check, I know exactly what position it is on my keychain, its weight and the chill of the metal against my hand.

She gawks at me suspiciously, then at my shop, her eyes the size of saucers when she reads the large name on the header I installed last year along with the new glass door. That seems to refocus her, having a haven to get to. "OK, in that case, let's check out some stationery in this store there," she proposes,

pointing across the road. “Let’s see if they have a back entrance we can use to make our escape. We don’t want to lead them straight to yours.”

“Alright. I know the owner here, she’ll help.”

That is how we end up dashing over the crossing, and getting to my friend Georgette’s office supply store. As we traverse the street, I can’t *not* cast a glance at the blue car. Even though it was a swift peek, they were taking pictures of us. I make out a blond guy inside, but not a lot more because of the massive camera he’s holding. But I don’t have time to leer, and probably it’s not wise to let him know we’re onto him, anyway.

With Anya clenching my left hand, I salute my colleague as we step in, “Hey, G, how are you?”

“Oh my, if it isn’t Marcus Jara! We missed you around here, boy.” Georgette welcomes us in cheerfully, putting away the box of notebooks she was stocking the shelves with. “Are you back to open the tailors? There have been folk asking when you’ll return.”

I’m taken aback. “Really? People have been asking about me?”

“Of course. Did you think your customers would forget about you?” The warmth in her voice and the—apparently for her—rhetorical question does something to me. It hits me that I haven’t thought much about how my old clients have dealt with my absence. I just assumed... I assumed that I was sent to oblivion.

“They couldn’t just forget when the best tailor in Kerrington takes time off,” Anya agrees next to me, giving my palm a squeeze. Her eyes are searching mine, and already she is less agitated, simply by not being out in the open.

“Mmm... if you say so,” I dodge, not expecting to get these sorts of remarks today. “G, do you think you could let us out the back?” At her frown I continue, “I’ll tell you another time. We need to avoid the main road.”

My friend looks at me, then at Anya, still attached to me, and smirks knowingly at our joined hands. “No problem, Marcus, go right through. But stop by for longer someday, you and your lady. Don’t think I don’t see you in the diner every Friday. Next time, come in.”

“We’ll certainly do that. Thank you very much for your help. I’m Anya, by the way,” the blonde next to me answers diplomatically in my place, as I seemed to have gotten stuck on the fact that I’ve also been neglecting some of my friends since the accident.

“Excellent!” Georgette shakes her head. “Glad this one found himself such a beauty. But if he gives you any trouble, I’ll sort him right out.”

“Hmm,” Anya mumbles as she turns to the door, “I think I’m the one with all the trouble.”

“You are the best kind of trouble, Angel,” I lower my voice and kiss her hand, and a slight blush comes over her. Today I get those freckles again. She has less makeup on and she’s

beautiful. “Come on, we’ve got to go. Thank you, G. I’ll bring you some cookies next time.”

“You do that, Marcus.” She winks at me and waves goodbye.

Guiding Anya between the stationery isles, we make our way to the back, and we get to the alley. My shop is on a side street, making it impossible for the person watching us from where he was parked to spot us, so the plan was good.

Yet the moment I reach my old front door, I freeze with my hand on the door handle.

“Marcus, do you want to give me the key?”

I almost do it. I almost pass her the keychain. But I catch our reflection in the glass. Her, so dazzling, sitting next to me, watching me while anxiously biting that lip for the third time in ten minutes. Me, in one of my old suits, with a key in the lock, with a ‘deer in the headlights’ expression. But today it’s not about me, it’s about getting Anya safe.

I press the handle down and step into my past. My heart constricts at the sight of my suits still on display. As Anya hurries inside and shuts the door behind us, I’m still near the entrance, taking in the dark wood paneling and green velvet chaises which I picked years ago. The elegant and understated design, the soft yellow lighting on the walls, gives it a 1920s vibe, with the bar in the corner making it cozy yet high-end.

“These are outstanding.” She steps next to a tuxedo I had as a display piece. “Outstanding.”

I look as well, like it wasn't me who pieced it all together. It's in a deep navy velvet. The lapels are in a shimmery material, making anyone wearing the outfit stand out. I remember swearing while sewing the damn velvet, as it was too slippery. But I persevered, and it's one of my best projects. Without touching it, the memory of the feel of the textile against my fingers almost brings me down. A heavy, dull pain expands throughout my body.

“Hey, Marcus.” Anya nudges me. “Thank you for this. It's not easy for you to be here.” She gives the place a once over, probably checking for exits, assessing it the same way she did at the hotel that night.

I don't answer but change my focus to her. She's flushed and not from what she should be flushed from.

“It was nothing, Angel. Let's get upstairs. People can see us inside from here.”

But I don't get to lead her to the spiral staircase as she catches my arm, her blue eyes filling me with an unexpected wave of warmth.

ANYA

“Don’t say that,” I insist, as he’s shocked that I stopped him. “Based on your reaction, I doubt you’ve been in here for a while. So, you allowing me to be here is not nothing. I froze. Years of prepping, looking over my shoulder. When push came to shove, I froze. But you got me out of the street when I needed to, and in here, of all places.”

Marcus was there for me. He chose to help me even though it must have been the most difficult thing in the world, to let me in his private space.

DJ mumbled a ‘shit, he went there again’ when I called, but only when I saw the name on the door did it truly make sense of what was so unbalancing to him.

I panicked in the morning, when he didn’t turn up for work. A million thoughts steamrolled through my mind, and it shook me. Being worried about him, frantically phoning him with no answer. My mind went from ‘he ghosted me’ to ‘something happened to him’ and back and the fear almost broke me. I’m not used to caring about a man like this. My dad, I know he’s

safe. I've been used to taking care of myself. But having him disappear the day after we kissed, the day where I took a leap of faith and didn't say 'no', that... that was a lot.

When I left and saw a blue car, it didn't register as 'danger' as I was too busy focusing on the smartphone I was clutching. Catching up with him outside the diner, I was so pissed I almost threw it at his head. But then I spotted the vehicle again, and instead of checking possible exit routes or ducking into the first shop, getting a hat and change of clothes as I should have, I freaked out.

"Anya, I opened a door, didn't exactly *Mission: Impossible* it." He tries to shrug it off, but I'm not letting him. I grab his—ironed, again—shirt and give him a quick kiss.

"Thank you, Marcus Jara," I whisper, my eyes fixed on his.

"You're welcome, Anya Peterson," he replies with a smile. "Come on, let me show you my not-so-Jason-Bourne stuff."

"Is this the hidden wall of weaponry? A box of passports?" I ask as he takes my hand and leads me to the first floor.

"Yeah... you could say that," he answers wistfully as we step onto the landing.

It may not be a secret agent's lair, but I'm just as awed when I take the space in. It's his work area, with a wall full of fabrics in every color, and a large cutting table. I run my fingers over them as I wander further in. The dark floor is the same as the one downstairs, but here, with the sun up, they shine. On the other side are wooden cabinets with separators,

holding the haberdashery, and a green sofa matching the chaise downstairs.

“They were a set,” he comments when he notices where my attention went. “But the couch didn’t fit downstairs, so it ended up here. You don’t want to hear how we got it up the spiral staircase.”

“I’m sure it was fun,” I mumble, but then I see *it*.

His sewing machine, in front of the window. It sits on a modern desk, with loads of drawers on each side. I would say it’s a shrine, with the light flooding it. Spare materials lay all around it. Discarded scissors and a pin cushion left where they were last, give it an eerie feel. It reminds me of an area deserted in a hurry by its habitants, all their belongings abandoned. The rest of the space is tidied up, as though nobody is using it, but here, at his workstation, time stood still.

“I... I’ve asked the cleaner not to touch it,” Marcus says, but he doesn’t seem to blink. He sits mesmerized by his past, and a twang of pain overwhelms me, watching him.

He doesn’t need my comfort, only my silent support, so I nod and move closer to the window, giving his sacred space a wide berth. I peek by the edge to try to make out the blue car. As luck would have it, I don’t have a direct view, but I can spot a part of its bumper between the buildings.

“It’s still there,” I gasp, but a strong arm circles around me.

He murmurs in my year, “You’re safe here, Angel. They don’t know where you are.” The warmth of his body behind

me calms me, so I drop my head on his shoulder, sighing. His other arm envelops me as well, and we just sit for a minute, neither of us speaking. Which is well timed as he gives me a squeeze, pointing out the same vehicle moving, then driving off.

“See, they’re gone. I’ll make us some tea, we’ll wait a bit,” he proposes, and I nod, relieved.

But my mind still whirls, thinking about how they found me. Is it her? And why now? What changed?

Other thoughts bombard me. I need to call Ms. Phan to ask some of the local boys to keep an eye out for the car and do what we discussed before. Now that they left, and I can breathe, I go to my escape plan. I’ll go to a motel tonight, and then... I was always supposed to use our second set of fake passports and go somewhere else. Find a different job, under another name.

But now... do I want to leave? But I still haven’t figured out the problem at McAv. There are also the clients at Legal Aid and the people at the apartment complex. More importantly...

I look at the man busy filling the electric kettle. How he came back into my life, just when I could accept him. How his tall frame moves fluidly in the space, how I want to sneak my arms around him and hold him like I did earlier. How I can finally not just run from something but run to someone.

Fuck her. If it’s her, I won’t run. I’ll face her now that my dad is off the hook. What can she really do? Especially here.

“Anya? I don’t think there’s any milk here for your tea. I know how you love it the British way. Just sugar?” Marcus’s question snaps me out of it, and I take a deep breath. And another.

I won’t run. Not now, when I have a reason to stay.

Determined, I follow him to the small kitchen area in a corner, but I spot something else between the shelves.

“Sugar will do, please. And this?” I ask him, running my fingers over his classical guitar. It’s a beautiful instrument, and I hope he still plays.

“Mmm. It’s from... before.” He stares at it, and then at his brace. I want to slap myself for a second, then I remember how he managed to get my hair out from the Velcro when he had no other choice. From what I saw, his dexterity is fine. Maybe he’s just worried about using his fingers.

“I see,” I add noncommittally, approaching him while a different sort of plan springs to mind. “Before I left headquarters, I explained to Olivia we’ll work from the factory today, and that’s why you weren’t in on time this morning. Called the supervisor at the plant and told him the opposite, that we will be downtown.”

“You did that for me?”

“When we couldn’t find you, DJ pretended to have ‘misread’ a text you sent her telling her your schedule. I played along, obviously.”

“You ladies are in cahoots, huh?”

I huff at the damn word, “Yeah, pretty much. She did promise you’ll get an, direct quote, ‘ear ping’, next time she gets a hold of you, and that... Laura? will have words.”

“Lovely.” He rolls his eyes, and I can picture how he’ll never hear the end of it from his sisters.

“So, about earlier... when I found you at the diner... you want to talk about that?” The ‘no questions’ rule was dumb, again. I want him to appreciate what he has as well, even if I have to walk him through it.

“Didn’t realize how time passed me by.” The water begins to boil, so Marcus takes two cups and pours it over some tea bags. “On Fridays I stop by and...”

“Check on your store,” I fill in the sentence. “And you lost track of time, huh?”

“Pretty much. I... I zone out sometimes,” he admits with difficulty, tracing the handle of his mug as he hands me mine. “Not sure why today I spent so much time there.”

I tilt my head at him. “You may give a girl a complex, Marcus. Make out with a guy one day, have him space out in a restaurant the next.”

“Ha.” He laughs a bit. “That’s the last thing I wanted to give you yesterday, Angel,” he says in a playful tone, exactly the opening I was looking for.

“Like what?” I ask breathlessly, and his eyes flash with the same craving as mine. I put my tea back on the counter and move in front of him.

“Many things, Angel,” he answers, giving up his own beverage and pulling me to him. His lips are soft but how he uses them, bluntly and punishing, makes me give in to him again. My hands grab onto him, trying to get him closer to me, to have it all, to have him consume me as he does my thoughts. But he stops, his forehead on mine.

“I... I’m not good for you, Anya. I can barely get myself to work on time.” He separates himself from me, moving a few steps toward the middle of the room.

He hides behind his hand while I hide behind my secrets. But this draw between us is still there, gravity pulling us together despite our efforts to keep each other at arm’s length. But fuck, I’m going to try.

“No offence Marcus, but that’s bullshit. You’re not in a great place, but I know how it is to be at your lowest.”

“How do I move forward? I’m not sure how to get out of the pit I’m in,” Marcus confesses, loosening his tie.

I remember the days when I didn’t recognize myself in the mirror. When the glasses, grease and clothes dragged me under every morning. Under a mountain of pressure and responsibilities.

“A step in the right direction. A step back towards yourself, or at least that what it was for me,” I offer him my truth. And then I push him on the new path I want for us.

“Tell me,” I ask.

“Tell you... what?” He raises his eyebrow, confused.

I move nearer, almost touching him, but not quite. But he has to make the choice. Take the step. A fever radiates from him, and my heart goes a million beats a minute as I say, “Tell what you wanted to do to me yesterday.”

He’s unsure, taking me in. I hope he sees my need as well. For him to take his control back. To take mine along.

He dares.

“Well, for starters, I would’ve cleared all those papers off the table and put you up there instead.” As he speaks, his voice roughens again. A sharp ‘Oh’ escapes me, and the transformation in him is instant, as I get tugged against him. He switches to peppering my neck with kisses. “I would have taken your trousers off. Spread those legs as far as they would go. Then I would’ve kneeled in front of you and tasted you again.”

My whimper amuses him, and he grabs my ass and lifts me. My legs go around his waist instinctually. My wails increase as his tongue gains entrance to my mouth. My fingers graze his head and I pull on his hair. Our kisses are harsh—passion, need and heat as he easily carries me to the cutting table. My hands roam over his torso, pushing his jacket off.

He tries to find my zipper, but, as if he reads my mind, before the fucking brace catches again, he halts.

“Screw it!” He pulls the straps apart, throwing the bind on the other side of the room.

I giggle, commenting, “There’s one thing you will have to use that hand on, and it’s not that six-string.”

For more encouragement, I lift my dress over my head. A vein on his neck pumps, as the man’s ready to pounce on me at any moment as he takes in my teal lace set.

I begin to run my hand over my lingerie, but he stops me, “Oh, Angel, you forget. I’m in charge here.”

“Did I forget, or were you the one needing reminding?” I taunt him and this time I may have gone too far. That one headshake he gives me puts me in my place.

The expression on Marcus’s face is one of pure delight when he spots that my bra opens in the front. He places my hands on the table behind me, and with a smirk I can only call ‘hunger’, pops the latch open, freeing my boobs.

“I missed these,” he comments as he pushes my bra straps back. His palms cup my breasts and his thumbs run over my nipples, teasing them, hardening them with every circle.

My head rolls backwards as I push my chest towards him more, asking for more without words, just with moans and whimpers.

“You’re enjoying this, huh?” He pinches them now and the shot of pain goes through my body like lightning, and I let out a needy cry.

“Yes, *mai tare, mai mult!*” I plead with him for him to do it harder, more. He switches between torment and pleasure, squeezing and massaging my nipples until they are so sensitive

and stiff that even a breath on them would send me over the edge.

When I thought I'd come like this, with my soaked panties still on and him dressed, he stops. I glower at him, but he just smiles and licks his lips.

"I know I'm doing something right when the Romanian breaks out," he says and hooks his thumbs in my remaining underwear, pulling them off. "Now, what am I going to do with these?" Marcus asks, playing with my lingerie. "I'd gag you with them." I gasp and somehow get even wetter. "But as that native language of yours drives me crazy, I guess I'll just have to keep them." Then he pockets them.

He senses my indignation but ignores it. "Now, now, you stay there like a good girl," he says casually, "and open those legs." His tone changes in that second, the command in it forcing me to respond immediately, showing him my damp core. The ease with which I tumbled back into following his direction should frighten me. But instead, the relinquishing of authority excites me most. It's all tumbling, falling into him, and there's no stopping me from embracing it.

"Ffffff..." he almost leaks the four-letter word when he finds how soaked I am. "So help me!" he realigns himself. "You're a vision, all fanned out for me. A feast." His fists curl and uncurl as he admires me laid out on his cutting table. Seeing his jaw tick and his restraint evaporating, my own arousal makes me tremble.

My shiver causes him to chuckle, but he puts me out of his misery. He plants his left hand on the table for support and starts running his right thumb over my mouth. Lazily, he drives his hand lower and lower, down my neck, ignoring my already aching breasts, down my abdomen and closer to the apex of my legs. When he reaches my mound, it's all he can see. He laser focuses on me, and the sight alone is intoxicating. His fingers run over my slit slowly, as though he wants to remember every bit of swollen flesh, every fold in my pussy.

But when he gets to my entrance, the hesitation stops. Noticing how wet I am, he chuckles, then adds a finger, pumping. Then two, making my eyes roll. Marcus starts driving into me rhythmically, with each stroke sending waves of pleasure through my body. When his thumb flicks over my clit I buck and cry, "Fuck!"

"Shh, Angel, wrong language." He takes his fingers out and gives my pussy a sharp tap. The jolt of the sting only makes me hotter. "The next words out of your mouth better be in Romanian," he warns, with mischief in his tone. His face is close to mine, but he doesn't kiss me, just rests his forehead against mine. He stares me down, controlling me with the drive in his eyes.

"*Bine, Marcus, îți spun tot ce vrei,*" I pant as I let him know I'll tell him whatever he wants me to.

He freezes and demands, "Say that again."

And he thrusts his two fingers back into my pussy and uses his thumb to press on my clit. I moan loudly but no words come out, as his movements are so intense, so calculated, I can't think properly. He's playing a symphony, sending notes of pleasure throughout my whole body. He strums on me like an instrument, and I've never been happier to be conducted this way.

"Say it again, Angel. Say my name in your accent. Say it while I make you come all over my hand," he orders me again and adds a third finger, owning me fully.

That does it, and I yell his name as I explode in a mind-numbing orgasm I can't even comprehend. Flashes of rapture inundate me, colors and sounds absent, as I collapse on the table, my limbs shivering.

But I don't get a chance to rest, as he moves between my legs. He uses his left hand to grasp the back of my head and pulls me to his mouth, giving me a sloppy kiss.

"That was beautiful. I could watch you falling apart all day. Do you want to know how sweet you taste? How in seven years I've been driving myself mad by the memory of you?"

His pupils are blown out with lust as he brings his fingers to my lip, and I open and taste myself. His breath hitches as my tongue cleans his digits while my eyes are on him. Only him, always, and he knows it. He can't resist not kissing me again, and his hands move to my head, angling me.

"Shit, Anya, I really want to be inside you, but I'm an idiot and don't have a condom. I wasn't exactly planning this,

here,” he tells me, giving his workshop a quick wave-about.

I could stop him there, but I want him just as much.

Pressing my palm on his face, I whisper, “I have an IUD. And I... I never...” My voice isn’t as strong as my need for this man. I’ve never, ever thought of being with anyone else without protection before. Never. But... it’s him.

“Me neither, never not used a condom.” He shocks me, as I thought he had some long-term relationships before, and I gasp. He holds my face in his hands, and I do the same, as he says, “It never felt right. Never, Angel. But, here, now... it’s you.” With the last two words, he becomes more than my body’s keeper. He holds the rest of me as well.

Marcus kisses me deeply again, both of us grasping at each other, not having enough, as we both give in.

He picks me up, but this time we head toward the couch. Setting me down a foot in front of it, he commands, “Turn around, hands on the top.”

Obediently, I comply. My knees are on the sofa, my hands where he told me. I sit naked, slightly bent, my hair cascading down my back. He is behind me, and I hear the shuffle of clothes coming off, but I don’t look back. I trust him, simple as that. I trust him to sit where I can’t see him. I trust him to gaze over my body as he does, as I almost sense his perusal of my skin.

He leaves me there, in silence, for too long, and then the slightest of touches over my back jolts me. A graze of his

fingers along my spine to the cleft of my ass, a longing, slow movement, carrying the years of want between us.

He sweeps up and down over my back, arranging my hair over my shoulder, giving him a better view of my body. His other hand joins the gesture, and now they both trace shapes, like he's painting or marking me.

"Angel, I miss those wings," he reminds me, and I realize what he has been drawing. "I don't want to hurry this. No rushing, just want to memorize you in this space. I want to marvel forever at your body on display here, lit by sunlight, you in contrast against the dark walls. Yet, the more I try to refrain, the less I can. I'm the weak one."

"Marcus," I whisper his name again, my urge matching his. I tremor, wanting him to take me, to make me his. To be the first man who has all of me.

"When I hear my name from your mouth, so needy and raw, I can't resist," he says like a forgone conclusion. An ancient law inscribed on a stone tablet.

The years of separation have built this for us, the craving, the constant hunger for each other. We collide. When his hands grab my sides, I'm euphoric. When his bare cock nudges my entrance, I try to push myself towards him, but he controls my hips.

His fingers dig deeper, and he sighs. He's trying to pace himself, to give himself this moment. I can't help myself and twist my head to him.

He's a spectacle watching my ass and what I can guess is his dick millimetrically away from my pussy. Every muscle on him is taut, a bow ready to snap. The concentration in his expression only tells me how much he wants me. How much he's holding back from just filling me in one. I can't stand it. I want him. And I'm tired of fighting myself and him for it.

So, I say it again, in my accent, wantonly, "*Marcus.*"

His head snaps up to me and the fire in his eyes takes my breath away.

"You'll scream my name next, Angel."

Any doubts of that are erased the second he pushes all his length in, and he hisses. My gasp is so loud, that I am surprised the neighbors are unaware what just happened. How Marcus Jara gave in, and I became his. How he is better than I remember when he starts his rough strokes, with every one possessing me. How, between his fingers on my skin to his searing cock hitting places inside me nobody since managed to excite, how I am finally... complete.

The pace picks up, and I can only take what he gives me, as he is merciless. My knees sink more in the foam of the settee, as he gives it to me with years of frustration, with months of need, with days of simmering yearning.

"*Te simt atât de adânc, da, așa,*" I tell him how deep I feel him, how he needs to keep going, but that triggers him again. An actual groan makes its way out of his throat, as he pulls on a handful of my hair and I push myself backward, setting my spine flush to his chest.

His other arm comes over my collarbone, gluing me against him. As if there would be anywhere to go as he keeps on moving his hips, and I continue to be plundered, this time by short thrusts in this angle.

I'm ready to explode already, but he has other plans, as he lets my curls loose again, moving his right hand to my nipples. They are still sensitive from earlier, and when he pinches my right nub gently, my back arches against him, but I'm stuck by his forearm keeping me in position. That same hand now moves from my collarbone to my throat, holding me possessively, pressing just enough so I don't forget who I belong to.

"Angel, you're mine from now on, there's no running from me," he adds in my ear, sounding like a feral animal, growling my nickname, and unraveling me the instant he pinches my nipple the second time.

A debilitating orgasm breaks me. A million sensations over my skin. An implosion of pleasure in my pussy, spreading through me, building me back up as I cry his name repeatedly, mindlessly.

With a last snap of his hips, he stills. As his forehead falls on my shoulder and his grasp around me tightens, he swells inside me, panting, the cold sweat on his skin mingling with my own. I don't need confirmation that it was the same for him—mind altering, incandescent bliss.

An uncertainty-ending silence follows. Marcus holds me still. Neither of us wants to break the connection, the singular

moment of balance. In the end we have to, and as he pulls out, I can feel his cum trickling down my thigh.

“Damn, that’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, my release dripping out of you,” he rumbles, and I don’t disagree, even though his fingers clench as if he wants to put his cum back in my pussy. I may even let him do that next time.

Huh. There will be a next time. I want him for all my next times.

But for now, he shows me a small restroom off the side, where we clean up. Putting my dress back on, I notice he already has his clothes on when I exit.

Somehow, a shyness sweeps over me, as he stares at me again. I attempt to tug my curls in the bun I used to have, but all I succeed is to get Marcus’s sneaky smile.

“What?” I ask him.

“Nothing, I have a thing about blondes,” he responds, and a bucket of ice gets thrown over me.

He’s got a thing for blondes? In general? Was this the whole thing, from seven years ago until now, because of my hair color?

An uncontrollable anger rises in me. Anger and disappointment in him. Disappointment in myself for allowing myself to want someone for the first time in forever. Only to have them choose me because of some stupid type.

I try to move away from him, but he must have read something on my face and he catches my arm.

“Let me rephrase that, Angel. It’s not blondes I can’t resist. It’s *you*. The thing I have about blonde hair? It’s all about *your* blonde hair. I can’t say that I’ve been a monk in the past seven years. All I was looking for in the girls I dated was *you*. But none of them matched up. I’ve tried to recreate the magic of that night, but all I found were echoes of you. They never came close to what you do to me, Anya Peterson. It’s you, and it’s always been you.”

“Uh...” I’m speechless again. “You...”

“Yes, me.” Marcus chuckles. “I was the dumbass who ever thought that only going for short blondes would rebuild anything from that connection we found that night.”

I make myself blink as I don’t remember the last time I did so. Or the last time I breathed.

His eyes shine with an emotion I want to name, but I’m afraid, still. He takes my silence as permission and kisses me. Gently this time. As though I’m fragile, and I need to be touched with the utmost delicacy. That I am precious. My palms press on his chest, and his arms capture me.

But I push him back or else we’ll end up naked again.

“I need to call someone at home to make sure the car isn’t there,” I tell him, and he frowns, as the problems in my life catch up with us.

“Hmm, you do that for your peace of mind, but I have an idea who it was.”

“You do?” I ask, surprised.

He smiles, but it's not a happy smile. "I have a strong hunch we can go back to headquarters. Also, Jon and DJ go to the hangar every Friday afternoon to rebuild one of his personal planes he keeps in there... so they'll figure out I wasn't at the factory like you told Olivia."

"He still does that?" As my former boss, I was pretty switched on to his movements. I wince, reminding myself that the reason I knew his calendar so well was so that I could sabotage it. He probably isn't that excited that I'm there. But as I've been avoiding him since I got back in the company, I wouldn't know.

"Yep, now they go together," Marcus continues. "Hey, where did your mind just go? You pursed your lips and your face turned sour."

"It's nothing." I look down. "More memories about the times I was at McAv."

"Ah, when you were Mata Hari-ing," he jokes.

I roll my eyes. "Very funny, Marcus. But I did shitty things that not proud of."

"I know, Angel, I know." I'm aware that I should explain. Well aware. He stares at me without any expectation. He simply lets me be. And that's far worse than if he would have prodded me to spill the truth. His confidence in me is unwavering. And pierces me straight through the heart. I should tell him the whole story. I want to. I really do. Him, I would give my secrets to, as he would keep them safe. Would keep me safe. But I open my mouth, and nothing comes out.

“It’s OK, Anya.” He presses his lips against mine briefly again. “You can tell me when you are ready. But for now, come on. I’ll call an Uber and we can return to the office.

But before I do that, I sneak my hand into his jacket and steal my panties back. Going to McAv commando... nope.

“Hey! Those are mine. I won them fair and square.” He tries to grab them back, but I pivot with a giggle.

“What you did back there was not fair at all, Marcus Jara!”

He raises his eyebrow at me, but I smirk and continue, “Maybe you can win them back another time.”

“Well, Anya Peterson, there’s no ‘maybe’ needed. The next time, don’t even bother putting on any.”

I try to mock slap his arm, but he only laughs, and takes my hand in his, leading me back downstairs.

I don’t let go.

MARCUS

I got her. I actually have her. Her warm skin touches mine, and she hasn't yanked her hand back yet. And it's more than sex. Which, of course, was magnificent. How she lets me lead, how she signs away control... nothing has ever made me feel that powerful. But it's more. It's how in tune we are with each other, even when we try to push one another away. When I touch her, and she responds. When she can see through me like nobody else can. Every time she gives me her trust, my insecurities vanish, little by little. With every wistful look from her, I become more myself.

What an absolute moron I was to ever imply that I want her because she's blonde! I hope I saved that one, but again... what a moron!

I hold her hand in the taxi and she doesn't object. She's quiet, though, probably still worrying about the car. She may be in bigger shit than I thought if she was actively checking for people tracking her. I always suspected she was running from her abusive mother, although she isn't ready to admit it.

Now... maybe it's that, maybe it's more. But I'm sure the man in the blue sedan was there for a different reason.

As we walk into McAv, she does separate from me. I understand, we shouldn't be fraternizing when I'm supposed to be supervising her. Yet I ache to touch her again. The smooth skin on her back. The creamy taste of her shoulder. I miss her small hand in mine already.

Primal instincts surfaced when I held her throat. When my seed was running down her skin, it drove me wild. I was that close to taking her again, wanting to see white against those pink folds. 'Mine, mine, mine,' the beast within me screamed. This woman doesn't realize what she has awakened. Maybe me neither, but I discover more of myself with her every time.

"Where are we going?" she asks as we step into the elevator, and I realign myself to what we are supposed to be doing. Putting someone in their place and giving my girl some peace of mind.

"To the person responsible for today." If she notices the edge in my tone, she doesn't comment. But she does sense the tension in my body, how I'm preparing to tear someone a new one. She gives me a once over, and, as we always do, easily reads what we are walking into.

In this case, we are going in for a fight. So, she squares her shoulders as well, and sits by my side.

"Paul, I can't believe you lost her!" Olivia's furious voice confirms my suspicions, and I don't even bother knocking, just push straight through her halfway open door. Unlike mine, her

office is modern and bare, with a see-through plastic desk with colorful flowers in a vase as an accessory on the other side of her sleek Mac.

“Hi Olivia, can we talk, please?” Maintaining my composure is going to be even more difficult, as, sitting across from her, is McAv’s contracted PI, Paul Morgan. His short blond hair and shocked expression give him away, proving my theory.

His jaw falls as he notices who’s with me. My boss looks at us, then at him, and shakes her head.

“Come in, Marcus, Anya,” she offers. I just cross my arms and stare them down.

“Umm,” the private investigator mumbles, rearranging his tie, “the cat’s out of the bag.”

“What’s going on?” Anya asks, her brows coming together.

“I may have overstepped.” Olivia at least has a contrite grimace on her face, and I’m glad her desk is less of a barrier than she would’ve preferred, as we can see her squirming.

“*May* have?” I raise my eyebrow at her.

“Fine,” she admits, and pulls on her red and black jacket, trying to reset herself. “I have overstepped by asking our private investigator to follow her around.”

“What the fuck?” My blonde steps in front of me, and if she wants to slap my boss, I’m going to let her. “That was you?” She glares at Paul.

“Yes, sorry, just doing my job.” He shuffles in the chair, avoiding her gaze.

“You... you....” Anya has to bite her lip and curl her fists to keep herself from launching herself at either of the other people in the room.

“You scared the shit out of us, Olivia,” I intervene. “How would you feel if you had someone stalking you?”

The PI gets up and excuses himself. “I’m going to let you all deal with this, I have a call to make,” he says, and goes on the corridor.

My manager, arranging her pens on her desk, finally answers me with a wince, “Worried and frightened.” She lifts her eyes on us, this time a sincerity blasting through, and not her usual cattiness. “I apologize again. This was a bit much. I only wanted to finalize the investigation into Anya. There’s nothing about her in the system before about fourteen years ago. I was concerned, so I asked Paul to track her a bit, to make sure she’s legit.”

“Investigation into me? Really? I knew you didn’t trust me when I had a babysitter, but this...” The woman next to me was beyond irate, and I put my hand on her shoulder for support.

“When you emailed me about the findings, I called him, and he was available today. I told him you were here, so he waited outside.”

“But why? Why now, when we’re close to finding what’s wrong with the fixings?” I ask, as Anya is still five seconds from decking both of them.

“Oh, I can understand how that might look strange to you,” Olivia responds, leaning back in her chair. “It’s the opposite, in fact. It’s because I was impressed with Anya last time, when we met in the factory. And now, how she put it all together.”

“You had me followed because I did a good job? So, when you said ‘I’ll be keeping an eye on you’, in a creepy voice you meant...” Her unbelieving tone matches my confusion. That was not at all the vibe we got from her on the assembly line.

“Yes, Anya. I read your reports before, the ones you sent to Jon. Took notice how you handled yourself in the inspections, and now how you spotted the connection. I meant ‘I’ll be watching your progress with great interest’. I probably should have phrased it better,” she mumbles.

“Definitely should have phrased it better...” Anya’s light blue eyes search mine for any idea where my boss’s train of thought is going, but I’m not sure either, so I shrug.

“I want to offer you a permanent job!” Olivia drops, raising her hands in a very, for her, unnatural ‘ta-dah’ gesture.

“What?” both of us exclaim.

“Yes, Jeong-ho from our legal team quit last week and I was supposed to look over some resumes, but after having met you... there wasn’t much point. You are exactly what I am looking for. There’s a great future for you here, you remind me

so much of me when I was your age! I wanted to make sure you weren't hiding some deal-breaking secret, but I realize how I went around it the wrong way and over did it. Please don't think I am such a bitch-boss all the time."

"Could have fooled me," I mutter.

"Oh, that." Olivia finally decides to explain her behavior towards me. "You have to admit, Marcus, getting an employee forced onto you is not the best approach to have a good working relationship. Especially when that staff member plays backgammon with the CEO over lunch on Sundays, and you can't complain without risking your own job."

It's my turn to say, "Oh."

"Yeah, it also didn't help that... not sure how to express this, Marcus... but perhaps the law is not your calling."

Her diplomatic way of putting the fact that I suck at my job is not what I expected. But I see how getting stuck with a dud who got their own office and a cushy job by being related to the big boss's girlfriend isn't the way to get an easy ride at work.

"Umm, you're right on that front. Sorry about that. My sister thought she was helping me by finding me something to do, but it wasn't fair to you for Jon to throw me at you."

"Marcus..." This time it's Anya who interrupts. "Before you put yourself down, you are the one who found the overstock on the door fixings. The factory staff love you. You may have gotten the job through DJ, but you have your skills."

“Thank you,” I say, squeezing her hand, “but Olivia is right. It’s a temporary thing until I can sort out...” And then I freeze, as I look down at our joined hands.

I didn’t put my brace on earlier. After I...

After I used it like normal to... I peer up at the blonde as she puts on a smirk, figuring out exactly where my mind went. And what I was doing with my fingers an hour ago.

We dive into a silent conversation.

“Doing what Marcus?” that smirk says. *“Some ‘precision’ work?”*

I volley back with a raised eyebrow. *“It wasn’t that detailed.”*

“Wasn’t it?” A corner of her mouth lifts even more.

“Well, Anya, what do you say?” my boss breaks into the wordless exchange.

“I... I have to think about it.”

“Good answer. Go through all the pros and cons, and let me know. Don’t worry, the salary will be pretty good,” Olivia adds. “As the supervisory position Marcus had may have gone a tad sideways,” she continues, pointing at our joined hands, “I’ll consider any monitoring done and dusted.”

“Thanks.” Anya nods, “It’s good not to have to look over my shoulder all the time.”

I tug on my blonde’s hand gently. “Come on, let’s go find those door bolts and finish it.”

“Yeah, let’s. I’m fairly sure the extra stock ended up in the seats zone and that’s why we had those issues,” she says, as we move to exit the office.

“I’m relieved it wasn’t your mother. Can’t believe I’m happy my manager hiring a PI would be good news, instead of it being someone from Romania.”

“Marcus...” Her face turns ashen, her lower lip trembling.

“Anya?”

“You... you just...” She yanks her hand back and rushes out of the room. “I have to think. I need a moment.” She almost runs into Paul, who was still holding his phone, lingering by the entrance.

Olivia casts me a questioning look, mouthing ‘Romania?’ and it hits me... I gave away Anya’s secret.

ANYA

Tears flow down my face again, as I shiver and a cold grows in me, a chill I haven't felt in months.

I run to the first bus leaving McAv, not even looking where it goes. Taking a seat in the back, I try to rein myself in, but the image keeps repeating in my brain. Marcus accidentally dropping my past in front of his boss and her PI. Years of secrecy... gone. Again.

The bus must go on for a while, but the passage of time escapes me, remembering the last time someone found the truth in Washington, and how they used the information against me. How I ended up the villain in someone's story. When it finally stops at its end of the line, I realize it's not far from my apartment, so I walk back, my decision made.

Never again. These secrets... they're too much. They are the reason I've been living under a rock for too long. I step closer to my building and look up at the green paint peeling off the door and the 1970s brick exterior. I wonder again, what was I doing with my life? How did I get here? Settling in what

most people would call a dump. And how do I get out of the never-ending cycle of hiding and protecting myself and my father?

Enough. I am stopping this. I'm coming clean and if that bitch finds me... she finds me. I won't let her steal any more days from me. Not anymore.

Climbing the stairs slowly, I hope Ms. Phan isn't home, so I can take a shower and cry myself to sleep in peace. But I don't make it inside the door as it's blocked by a large man sitting on the dirty floor, leaning against the wall, his long legs taking up most of the corridor.

"Marcus, what are you doing here?" I sigh.

He wakes, startled, and jumps to his feet.

"Anya, you're OK! I thought something happened to you. You wouldn't pick up your phone. Nobody knew where you were," he explains with his hands waving, then squeezes me in a desperate hug. "Your neighbor tried to make me come in to eat, but I wanted to be here when you got home."

"Yeah, I didn't check it." Didn't even think about it, it was still a miracle I had left with my cell phone. "I need to get inside, please. I need a shower."

It takes him a moment to figure out he's blocking the entrance, and he steps aside, allowing me to open the lock. He almost muffles his gasp at the size of my studio flat, but he can't suppress all of it.

I give him a ‘Don’t you dare judge me’ look, but he surprises me by saying something completely unrelated, “Go on. I’ll wait for you Angel. I want to apologize properly for earlier.”

Nodding, I get some clothes to change into afterwards and enter my minuscule bathroom. Hot water is what I needed. With every minute under the steam, cleaning away today’s events, my muscles relax, but nothing changes my resolve. I can’t keep doing what I have been doing for fourteen years. I need to break the cycle and move on with my life.

I had already taken a step in that direction, and he’s probably sitting on my bed. There aren’t many options for him to sit on, anyway.

Now I need to run, not walk.

I come out feeling a million times better and let my hair loose from the bun I had it in for the shower. This time Marcus does not stop his gasp, witnessing my curls falling over my shoulders.

“Shit, Anya, shit.” He gets up, taking me in. I’m in my leggings and loose top. No makeup, just my rosy face from the steam, freckles showing, but the way he looks at me... for him, I’m the most fascinating thing in the world. It makes me pause. “Angel, you’re beautiful. I love seeing you like this, just you.” He takes my hand in his, lifting it to his lips. “I’m so sorry for revealing your secret. I don’t know how I’m ever going to make it up to you. But you own me, Angel. I am yours, no matter what. As broken as I am, you have me.”

No matter what? I should make a joke. It should be cheesy. But... But he stares at me, nothing about him mocking. His hair is ruffled, still too long. His eyes are almost black as he watches me with pure drive and not an ounce of hesitancy.

“Do you want to know why I’m hiding?” I ask instead, and I go over the line I refused to cross until now. A thick red line. The wall between my past and my future. Between my past and Marcus Jara.

“I won’t force you, but I’ll be here for you with whatever you need. I’m not letting you run away again. I’ve said it a few times already, but I’ll repeat it a million times until it finally lands.”

There’s just one thing to reply to that. “OK.”

“OK... to what?” he asks, while a smile is making its way to the surface.

“OK to the whole ‘you groveling’ bit. I’m partial to orange flavored chocolates.” I lighten the mood. “I know you didn’t mean to do it, and to be fair, it’s time for me to come clean about what happened.”

He chuckles. “About that groveling, happy to pay my penance. I’ve been wrecking my brain for years, trying to make sense why you tasted of oranges... but also chocolate, that night at the masquerade. Though now that you mention it, it seems pretty obvious. And for the rest... ready whenever.”

“I can’t believe you remembered *that!*”

Marcus puts both my hands on his shoulders and circles his arms around my waist, pulling me to him. “Have you forgotten anything about that night, Angel? Or, like me, do you recall every detail? Even the song that was playing.”

“It was ‘Let it go’ from James Bay.” That admission is about more than just the song or the band. It’s acceptance that we were both changed so much by one night. And it meant the same for both of us. Meant everything.

His smile is anything but coy, and he kisses me. There’s an urgency, a desperation to make sure I’m his. I part mine without any argument, as I gave up trying to fight him. The only resistance is his jacket, as I dig my nails in the fabric to hold myself upward. It’s an adrenaline rush spiraling throughout my body. My tongue twirls around his, craving him more and more. One of his hands travels up and grasps my hair. The atmosphere in my small room is volcanic, just steam between us.

But I stop him before ending up naked again. There are things he needs to know.

“I want to show you why it’s all happening. Do you want to come with me?” I whisper, letting him in fully. I can’t name the feeling that makes me do it, but it’s in me, it’s branded in my heart.

“Anya,” he responds, his thumb running over my lower lip. “You asked me that seven years ago. I didn’t say ‘no’ then, and today is no different. You lead, I follow, Anya Peterson.”

So, I take his right hand, and as he did with mine earlier, I press my lips against it. “It goes both ways, Marcus Jara.” His breath catches at that, but he just nods in return, and together, we go to his car, to lay my past down at his feet.

MARCUS

I drive for miles out of Kerrington. Anya is in the passenger seat, staring out the window, but I don't mind the silence. I put a country music radio station on, and the grin on her face is everything. I'm glad she is not into death metal, as that may have needed some adjustment from my side.

But for now, we are the beginning of *us*. It's exhilarating, finally getting this chance to find out the million little details about each other.

"Do you like pickles?" I blurt. I'm a total idiot.

"Pickles?" She purses her lips at me, agreeing it was a dumb question. "Of all the questions, is this the one you have?"

"Apparently. Not my best day, honestly."

"There were some good moments," she comments, and my dick remembers them perfectly, and would be interested in a repeat, especially after seeing her ass in those leggings.

"There were," I confirm with a smile. "But we probably should get to know each other while dressed as well. You

know, the way regular people do it.”

“Oh no, the horror!” she jokes for a second, but then I catch her checking her hands as she twiddles with the edge of her top. “That will be... an adjustment,” she confesses, putting her head on the headrest. “I have no clue how to do that.”

Her vulnerability shines through and troubles me. This prickly woman, who can name every precedent in the book and can stare down burly fitters and hard-ass bosses, is worried about us. Of all things. Does she not get it?

“Well, we can take it one day at a time. We can do cliché date questions or really silly ones. Lamest you got, for example, ‘what’s your favorite movie?’.”

She’s pleased with that by that glint in her eyes and cute sneer.

“That one is easy with you. I’m sure it’s a Bond movie,” she picks correctly, and I shrug. “For me it’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Sometimes *Schindler’s List*. Basically, anything with a John Williams soundtrack. The man is a genius.” Her eyes shine when she speaks about music. Her whole body buzzes with passion, hands in the air and feet tapping as she hums the intro to *Star Wars*.

“All about the notes, huh?” I chuckle, but I’m enthralled. I could listen to her all day. Maybe I could check if that guitar still works, if I could play alongside her. Or visit the doctor again about my hand, do another check-up.

“Of course. I mean, imagine Vader entering on a Disney tune. It wouldn’t work.” She huffs. “Anyway, I’ll do a foolish query instead... when does the Christmas tree come down?”

I laugh out loud. “That’s the best you got? I’d say sometime after the New Year... you?”

“OK, I have to disclose something. For fuck’s sake, keep your eyes on the road...” She snips at me as I have to stop glancing to my right and focus on the traffic. “We had a big Christmas thing growing up. Like... the whole house done up in lights, tree up all through January.”

“That sounds amazing! And you still do that in Florida?” We’re definitely doing the tree together next month.

“Uh, yeah, but you saw my place, I have the tiniest, cutest plastic one, so it’s not a hardship to leave it on my desk for longer.” She is absolutely adorable, how she demonstrates how small her tree is. That little nose twitch is back, and I’m done for.

“What?” she asks as I was muted, watching her get animated over a holiday.

“Nothing,” I manage to add. “You haven’t answered my ‘pickle’ question. Or you can tell me your favorite food so I can take you on a proper date.”

It’s her turn to laugh, a mesmerizing giggle. “Pickles... Men! Yes, I enjoy them, but I haven’t met a cheese I didn’t looove. Good luck planning a date with that. You? Guilty pleasure?”

“It’s red onion chutney for me. It’s a British thing.” I’m amazed at this relaxed vibe between us. It’s her, me, pickles, cheese, and chutney.

“Hmm,” she mumbles, but it’s a good ‘hmm’. “I’ve had that. With cheese.”

I laugh again. This girl! How easy and perfect it all fits. And the date idea? Having a platter of fruits and dairy, spread out in front of my couch, on my soft rug, drinking wine, listening to music. Maybe with her singing. Naked.

“Do you cook? My *mamá* sure will love you if you know your way around a kitchen.” I can imagine her focused on a cookbook, following it line by line. She doesn’t strike me as someone who does free flow. Not that her kitchenette in that apartment was a ‘chef’s dream’.

“Your... mother?” She looks horrified and starts fiddling with the AC controls. OK, bringing up meeting my family is a bit fast for her. Not for me. I’m ready for much, much more.

“Don’t worry, she’s pretty chill. To be fair, you could have a hump and no hair, and she’d still be happy.”

“That seems unlikely.” She narrows her eyes at me, but it’s my mom. She’ll be ecstatic that I’ve found her.

“My sister Laura, however, she’s a tougher nut to crack. She’s a bit... overprotective. Probably we should give her a wide berth, or she may bite your head off. Some of my exes were... a bit afraid of her.”

“Wonderful,” she comments ironically, and I’m about to let her know I’m not putting her in front of the Dragon, as her husband actually calls her, anytime soon, when the GPS informs me that we’ve arrived.

The sign on the gate reads ‘Beachside Assisted living facility’. The good mood evaporates.

ANYA

My palms are sweaty, and I keep tucking my hair behind my ear as we walk in. Marcus's hand is on my lower back, guiding me, supporting me as I talk to the receptionist.

We both write our names in the registry, and I begin the pilgrimage I do once every few weeks. The green corridors bring me mostly sadness, the cheery color doing nothing to alleviate my mood.

“Angel, do you really want me here?” Marcus asks, squeezing my hand.

“Yes,” I answer slowly, under his concerned expression. “The Band-Aid has to come off sometimes.”

Following through, I step into my father's room with the man I never thought I'd get a second chance with in tow. There are four beds, and he's in the last one, next to the window. It may not be the fanciest place, but it's clean and the nurses and doctors are kind, understanding my situation and keeping him safe.

“Is this your father? He looks a lot like you. You have the same nose.”

“Yes, he does,” I confirm, especially as I stopped dying his hair years ago. Now his own color is back, blonde matching my own if it wasn’t for the strands of white throughout. All I want is for those gray eyes to open again, but my hopes are dashed every time I return.

I know what he sees. An old man lying on a bed, monitors next to him. Three other people are here, all stuck in similar circumstances in this barren room. I tried to make his area less blank, by buying pictures and books. Bringing flowers whenever I visit or sending some when I can’t. But it’s still a hospital room. Boring white walls and plain sheets.

“What happened?” Marcus asks, but I can’t tell the story here.

“Let me just check on him, then we can go outside. I’ll come back and read to him a bit, afterwards.”

He adds nothing as I hold his hand for a minute, then just stays a step behind me and leaves me to do my thing. As always, I give my *tati* a once over the best I can, but nothing is amiss. The staff here take care of him well. They wash him, change him, make sure he doesn’t get any bed sores and even get a barber in regularly. There are even volunteers who come to play classical music from time to time.

But still no change.

With my shoulders sagging, as they always do when I come to visit, we walk back out to the little park between buildings and sit on a bench.

I dive straight in. “He had a stroke, and he’s been this way since.”

“I’m sorry, Angel.” He takes my hand in support, with his fingers running circles on my skin.

“It... it was the morning after the masquerade. I walked back in the house and... the kettle was whistling and he... he was on the floor in my kitchen.”

“Shit. So, when I saw you at graduation...” His brow furrows.

“I was coming from the hospital, and I can’t remember when the last time was that I slept. I’m the one who needs to apologize for telling you off. I had a horrible week.”

“You already said sorry back then, but now that you told me the whole story, ‘horrible’ may be an understatement.” Marcus’s tone is soothing, and his expression is sympathetic, being here for me. With each second, I grow more and more certain that I’m ready to fill in him on everything. “There’s been no progress?”

“No, the doctors say it sometimes happens. But this is why I can’t afford a better apartment. Most of my money goes into paying for this.” I wave my other hand around the buildings surrounding us. Even though it’s not the cheapest place, it’s safe and professional.

“This looks pretty good. I’m amazed you could afford this, even with an EA salary.”

“Insurance covers some of it. And the rest... well... I’ve been selling some of our jewelry and some of my wardrobe items.” I wince at that last revelation, as I’m still embarrassed having to sell my clothes.

“Ah, yeah, that dress you had. And those shoes. Those were all designer labels.” He remembers. Of course, he does.

“Yes, they were. The dress paid for a month or so here, in fact.”

“Oh, I’ll miss that one.” He smiles. “But where did you have the jewelry? And how much of it did you have to pay for so many years of care?”

My hand is in my hair again, trying to rearrange it. I’m glad that at least we can sit outside and not be cooped up with my father.

“It’s not so much about the quantity, it was more the quality. See these earrings?”

I show him my diamond studs. They are not very big, yet...

“Oh, how many carats are those?” he asks, trying to price them.

“Too many. They are Cartier. I lose a lot selling them under the table, but they will pay for next year’s bill.”

“Wow!”

“They... they are the last...” I admit in defeat. “I sold the watches, the necklaces... rings... Small things, easy to carry but valuable.”

Marcus narrows his eyes at me. “You worried about transportability because...”

“Because we had to get out in a hurry. Let me tell you from the beginning. From a trip to Paris that went terribly wrong. But first, do you know one of the more unexpected resources in Romania?”

“Hmm?”

“Oil.”

ANYA*

FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

The ballroom is decorated to the nines, here at this beautiful Parisian palace used for the event. String quartet, Crystal flutes and hors d'oeuvres, everything you could ever want from the evening. My custom-made dress is unfortunately itchy, my skin getting red under the collar, despite my best attempts to loosen it a bit.

My back is exposed, and I'm grateful my parents didn't catch me before we left, or I would have gotten a talking to about being proper for these parties. But this time, I had the limo for myself and indulged in a glass of bubbly on the way.

My father finds me first, shaking his head at me.

"Really, princess? This is what you chose? Your mother will have a fit. You didn't even straighten your hair. You know she always complains." He knows I hate the yoke my mother has on my life. Who to see, where to go. I escaped my bodyguards a few times already, and she tells me off every time. If she had it her way, I'd spend my days either learning corporate takeovers or how to seduce men for my benefit. She hates how

my hair matches my dad's. How everyone compliments me on it.

When I went to the talent show, she was appalled and convinced my father that it would damage our image, so I had to quit after the first round. But not before going semi-viral on the internet with my audition. But she still didn't find out it was my dad, Bogdan, who drove me there, without our guards knowing.

"She'll be along shortly, she's talking to Robert Filimon over there." He points to the couple in the corner, having an intense conversation.

One of them, with her sandy brown hair in a fancy updo, exudes respect wherever she goes. Her presence has been known to make people shiver in fear, and with good reason. Andreea Petrescu has been the CEO of PetrOil for years now, the main oil extraction company in Romania.

For a woman who grew up in a village in Moldova with an outside toilet, to where she is now, is subject to many articles and even a documentary or two back home. Paid for by herself, of course, always controlling the narrative. The 'Iron Lady' of industry. Steel and fire and strength. But for me, a cold and harsh woman who hasn't given me a hug in years. Who only looks at me calculating how I could benefit her, while trying to instill the same cold blood in me.

"Your mom has been telling me all about the business merger they're planning."

I hold my glass of champagne I probably shouldn't be drinking at seventeen, but it's good to have a bit of a shield from the judgemental looks I'm getting from my mother as she notices what I'm wearing. That head shake is a clear indication I will be in trouble later, but the second I saw the dress, I was in love. Itches and all.

“Yeah, combining his financial business with PetrOil, they'll make billions together. It's the biggest merger in Romania, maybe one of the biggest in East Europe. And...” he hesitates, and I'm unsure what he's leading to.

“This is where you two were hiding.” Her voice is jarring, pretending we were not out in the open for her to find us when she finished with her rounds around the room.

I turn towards her, but it's not her disappointed look which makes me shiver. It's the man next to her who leers at me. I stare at him with his muddy brown hair, perfectly styled and his fitted tuxedo. With his perfectly veneered teeth and perfectly trim body, a feeling of dread begins to overwhelm me. His gaze sweeps slowly over my body, stopping briefly at my boobs, his grin widening. He doesn't spend too much time on my face, but nods like he assessed me at a cattle auction and found me suitable.

“And this...” I must have missed my dad making the introductions, “is Mr. Robert Filimon, CEO of Transact Financial Services.”

“Very nice,” he comments, giving me another once over. My father stiffens and I lean into him.

“Yes, my daughter is in that phase of her life where she’s a bit rebellious,” my mom adds, referring to my dress and curls but appearing oblivious to the slimy guy’s glances. I never thought she’d be right until Mr. Filimon’s creepy vibes. “Bogdan, how about you go get us some fresh drinks?” she commands my father, who wants to say ‘no’. But he never does, not out in the open. He never challenges her. Reluctantly, giving me a ‘call me if you get into trouble’ look, he leaves us to it.

To my dismay, as she sits by his side, my mom does not catch the guy licking his lips as he measures me again. Or measures if my A cup is enough.

“Now, now, Andreea,” the man comments, “that dress definitely fits her well. Yes, very well.” His disturbing, cold eyes tell me I must get out of this conversation pretty fast. “How old is she?” he asks.

But my mouth can’t keep shut. “*She* is sitting right here. I’m seventeen, *Uncle Robert*.” Instead of bringing him down to reality, it makes him chuckle. A slithering, snake-like chuckle.

“Seventeen, huh? Interesting. Andreea, come with me to have a smoke. I have an even more interesting business proposal for you.”

That does not sound good at all, but I can’t say anything here. I try to find my dad, but he’s in a corner with his friends.

“OK, let’s go discuss. Meet me on the balcony.” My mother sends him away at least, and I exhale in relief.

“Why did you have to sound so rude? And why are you dressed as a prostitute?” Her harsh questions make me put my glass down and circle my arms around my middle.

“What? Did you not see how he was looking at me like he wanted to undress me right here?”

“You’re being ridiculous,” she scoffs, rolling her eyes. “He’s a man. If there’s a woman he is attracted to, he will look. And you weren’t hiding much, were you?”

Is she blaming me for his behavior?

“If he was interested in you, what would be the harm?” she continues casually. “Sure, he’s a few years older than you, but he’s still a good-looking guy. His fortune almost matches our own. You’d do well to not be so picky.”

“Picky? He’s almost as old as you and Dad! Mom, why are you even mentioning this? I want to go to law school, not marry a sugar daddy.”

She winces. It’s still a sore subject she has been trying to suppress, how she married my dad. He was the heir to PetrOil. But she was a cutthroat business genius, climbing the corporate ladder much faster than a woman would in that environment back then. Would she have become CEO without marrying him? Possibly. But she made it a certainty. I often wondered if she got with him for his name. I always hoped it wasn’t just that, as he loved her with all his heart.

“Hmm, you may want to think about that. An opportunity like that doesn’t come along every day. If you must know,

princess, I heard that he's looking for a wife to make himself look better in the eyes of the press. To get ahead in life, you need to make sacrifices and bet on the best horse."

It hit me like a truck, what he wanted to talk to my mom about. My eyes dart to where he is waiting for her, and he's staring at me. And the woman who gave birth to me, who should be protecting me at all costs... she... she looks at me... then at Filimon, pursing her lips. Shit, is she really considering this?

I leave her without a second thought and chase my father down.

The wait is excruciating. I pace in the living area of our apartment, playing with my braid while my parents are in the study, shouting at each other. Or more exactly, my normally quiet father was shouting, while I could only overhear short one sentence responses from her. My dad, who spends his days playing music and gardening, is yelling now.

He was livid when I told him. Say whatever you want about him, how he's soft, and my mom steamrolls him all the time. That he lives a lavish life and loves not having to work for a living, giving up all his stocks in the company to her. All of those statements are true, but he never, not once, refused to my side. He was the one to drive me to my audition. The one to convince my mother for me to get a tutor to prep for the law school entrance exam.

The door bangs against the wall and I jump.

“You get her ready!” she orders with a growl, and, without even looking at me, she abandons us and goes gods knows where for the night.

“Dad?” I stutter when he steps out of the office.

He’s white as a sheet, his hands in his pockets. But when he spots me, he resets, squaring his shoulders, and comes and gives me a hug.

“We’re going shopping tomorrow,” he whispers in my ear.

“I’m confused, Daddy. What did she say?”

He backs away from the embrace, but keeps my hands in his, as he confirms my worst fears. “It’s the merger. Robert is pausing signing the papers until he can... marry you.”

“What the hell? I’m just seventeen! He must be over forty! And she just agreed?”

“Andreea... she... she...” He can’t finish the sentence, but I don’t need more proof. My mother has never cared about me. I was just there, a prop. All my life I lived with her uninterested presence. The only times she ever acknowledged my existence was when she wanted me at an event or when I fucked something up.

But this... this was never where I thought I’d end up.

“Technically, the legal age to get married is eighteen, but there’s a clause about ‘extenuating circumstances’, and they want to get us to sign that we’re OK with it.”

“But I’m NOT OK!” I cry out. Tears are flowing and I wipe them the best I can. My dad cradles my face, shushing me.

“I know, princess. I know.”

“Fuck!” I exclaim, but he only glowers at my swearing and takes a deep breath.

With even more resolve, he adds, putting his hands in his pockets, “That’s why tomorrow we’re hitting Champs Elysée. Your mom wants for me to help you pick your wedding trousseau.”

“Dad... what the actual fuck?”

He doesn’t react this time but lays out the plan. “In order to get new things for you, she gave me free reign to buy anything. Anything. Which we will do. We will most certainly target several jewelry stores. You’ll go try out a lot of outfits, while I’ll duck out through the back and go pay for some other things we’ll need. Things the bodyguards don’t need to be aware of.”

I eye him, baffled. “What other things?”

“Passports.”

MARCUS

“Wow. Just wow. So, your father got you out of France?” I’m shocked, hearing her recount her past.

“He did. Without him... I don’t even want to imagine. We were lucky we were there. Getting out of Romania wouldn’t have been so easy.”

“But why didn’t you go to the authorities? Your mother couldn’t have forced you to marry that guy?”

“You probably misunderstand how things work back home. When I say oil, I mean government involvement, friends in high places, in parliament, police, etcetera. PetrOil is the only oil company in Romania that matters. And she does have friends everywhere, including Paris. Whatever my mom says, goes. It got even worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“After we spent millions on jewelry, accessories and clothes, my dad talked to someone to make us fake passports

and bought some drugs for our bodyguards. We served them tea and walked right out the front entrance of the hotel we were staying.”

“That must have gone well with your ‘Maleficent’ mother. And you flew to Florida?”

“No, we flew to Dublin with our regular passports, then exited the airport, and got right back in on our fake ones. Then we got to New York, then... we chose the least obvious place to go to... Kerrington, Florida.”

“That must have been quite a trip.”

“It was... long. Then we heard from our old maid, who emailed my dad about what my mom did in revenge.” She looks into the distance, the memories of those days painted all over her.

A tear falls and I catch it before her. I cup her face, making her look at me and ask, “Angel, what did she do?”

“She... she got the police to issue an arrest warrant for my father for kidnapping a minor and theft. Afterwards, she convinced some people from Interpol to issue an international alert as well.”

“OK, but what did you think was going to happen?”

“She never wanted to air our laundry in public. We never expected her to be so angry to tell the world we were gone. But she did, and that meant we had to hide.”

“Ah, the disguise makes sense now.”

“Yes, especially as my talent show video was extremely popular. It was the first one in the country and everyone watched it. My dad dyed his hair... I... couldn't. So, we compromised on the ‘mousy librarian’.”

“I see. Why do I feel that what you did last year, with the spying and everything, is related?”

“Because you're not an idiot.” She rolls her eyes, and she still has her roaring inside her. “I was clerking for a federal judge in DC when Senator Simmons came in for a meeting. He knew my mother and recognized me.”

“Jon hired you as an EA when you were one step from a supreme court judge clerk job?”

“Umm, that may have dropped off my CV. The former VP, who, as you know, was the mastermind of the whole thing, arranged my interview and my resume so it matched what he was trying to find. They blackmailed me with threatening to tell the authorities about me and my dad. With him sick, I couldn't take the chance of my mother sending his people after him, putting him who knows where, just to punish me in some way.”

“She would do that?”

“She'd do worse... Unless she wants something from you, or you have something on her, she's a ruthless bitch. She'd probably put him in a Romanian state facility, where the conditions are... not like here.” Her tone is final, and with every story about that witch, I am more and more certain that my assumptions were correct.

She carries on, “I worry a lot about what she would do to anyone else who helps me.” As her eyes find me, it hits home. My Angel, not just thinking about herself, but by the fear in them, me. How do I convince her I’ll be OK? That I have the backing of my family and friends. She didn’t have so many people to help her. Until now. Now I’ll face anyone who wants to harm her.

Anya gets up, pacing in front of the bench, looking up toward her parent’s room.

“I couldn’t let her win. Not after we spent so many years here. I had to do it, I had to.”

“I’ve said it before, and I will repeat myself,” I add, getting up and again realigning her. “There is no doubt in my mind who you are, and that you’re not some Disney villain. Your mother, however, may give them a run for their money. Your past does not scare me. It’s the opposite. I’m here, and not going anywhere, Anya... Petrescu?”

She tilts her head, processing. Yes, Angel, just read my face, *‘I’m all in’*.

Then she does something unexpected. My knees almost buckle, as she says, “It’s Anita. Anita Petrescu.”

“Anita?” the dumbass in me asks, yet it’s all so obvious. Anya. Nita. Anita. “I like that. I like that a lot.” The blush over her cheeks, spreading amongst her freckles, is the most wondrous thing I ever saw. It’s the confirmation of her finally being fully open. Of accepting me and being herself.

I kiss her. I kiss her in the middle of the park, where nurses push patients in wheelchairs. I kissed her after she told me her secret, and even though I may have messed up in the past, she still let go. I kiss her as she holds on to me as a lifeline, and I will be just that. And more.

“Alright, Angel, let’s go to your *papá* again, and then I can drive you home. But beware...” I warn, and she purses her lips at me.

“Beware?”

“Yep, you’re with me now. No more buses to work. I’ll pick you up. I’ve been worried as hell about you ever since you told me that.”

“A bit demanding, are we?”

“You have... *some* idea.”

She harrumphs. “*That’s* one thing, Marcus Jara. But I’ll take the fucking bus whenever I want. You’re not in charge of me.”

“We’ll see, Anita Petrescu, we’ll see.”

ANITA

I'm in a relationship.

The last words I'd picture coming out of my mouth. Not with fourteen years of random strangers and only a few fleeting, stumbled dates under my belt when I was a teenager.

But here I am, trying. It's a learning curve. It's hard to accept help. Even him dragging me to lunch today was difficult. I'm not used to someone making sure I eat right. I could get something in the vending machine. But not with Marcus Jara. No, we have to go to the cafeteria and have a proper lunch.

Compromising is an adjustment. First Monday going back to work, I headed to the bus stop, but didn't make it more than a few yards out the building, as Marcus's Toyota was waiting for me.

I had to put my foot down when he wanted to come with me to my martial arts class after work. He was so afraid that I would run off that he wanted to always be there for me. He

almost growled on Friday after we got back to town, when I told him I had things to do over the weekend for Legal Aid instead of going on an ‘official date’.

I was relieved. Last Friday was extreme. From not finding him, to having sex with him again, to throwing up my past all over him. I needed the separation, the space. And there were clients who needed my time more than him.

Yet there was no denying the smile that exploded when I saw his car there. When he raised that eyebrow at me as I pretended to be upset that he was there. Unbalanced, maybe. But the needle was leaning towards happy. Deliriously happy and scared as fuck.

“So, if the door fixings somehow ended up in the seats area, wouldn’t they notice it’s a different box? I mean, they’re all labeled,” Marcus shows me as we take in the seat assembly line again, trying to make sense of what we found last week.

“Hmm.” I have a look at the containers with screws and nuts, all of them, as he said, with clear markings on what size they are and where they go. “Only if someone put them in the wrong box.”

“By mistake?” He’s as unconvinced as I am. “They have to scan the code before they pick up a set for the seat to make sure they chose the right one.”

“It would be a pretty big mistake to refill the box with the wrong one.” I sigh, as it’s obvious what we need to do. And as the recipient of the solution last time, I’m best placed to suggest it.

I take him with me off the factory floor, to the hallway. Checking that there isn't anybody checking in on us, I propose, "We need to organize a sting."

"A sting? Like in a cop show?" He smirks at me, repeating that question from last week, but something in his posture tells me he is more amused by my idea than anything. His eyes twinkle and, with a properly matching black suit and tie, he looks a million times hotter than he should be. So sexy that I have to mentally slap myself to not imagine him naked, thrusting into me. My fingers graze over my neck absentmindedly, but my skin remembers his hold on me from last week.

I cough. "If you want to call it that. We can set it up when the fixings are running low, so whoever refills them does their job. We catch it all on a camera, and we get to the bottom of this. We obviously need to leave the stock to run its course. If suddenly they disappear, then whoever did it may figure it out. It may be a couple of weeks or more, by the amount of fixings and how many seats get assembled every shift."

"Why do I feel this is going to put a smile on a certain relative of mine's face?" he asks rhetorically. There is one person who would love to set up some secret cameras.

"I'll go," I volunteer, knowing I have to face her again someday, not just avoid her and Jon like the plague, as I've been doing in the past week.

"Do you want me to go with you?"

“No, Marcus, I’m not a kid. I can have a conversation with DJ,” I snip, shaking my head.

His hands go up trying to pacify me, and it pleases me that his brace is missing. I didn’t see it all day, so I hope he chose not to put it on, not that he forgot it in the shop and didn’t have the guts to go get it.

“OK, but I’m driving you back to the office. I... I have an appointment as well, today.”

“Oh, you finally decided to get a haircut?” I wink at him.

He rolls his eyes at me but also stops his hand from going straight to his head. “Mmm, that may be next. But no, I’m going to my doctor. My orthopaedist.”

I’m the one speechless this time.

“Yeah, I think I want him to check out my hand, before...”

“Before you have any more... *exercise*?” I ask suggestively.

“Maybe. Or maybe I try something a bit less... *strenuous*.”

“Ha ha. Seriously now, I’m happy for you, Marcus, just as happy as I was when you did that thing with those fingers last week...”

“Yeah?” His arms sneak around me, and I’m sinking into him. “How happy?”

“Merry. Contented.”

“Hmm,” he comments, running his lips over my jaw, “I would have preferred ‘excited’, ‘ecstatic’, maybe even ‘delighted’. But ideally... ‘wet’.”

My pulse is already rising, and I'd love nothing else than for him to pin me against the wall, but I force myself to bat him away.

“Unlike someone,” I say, giving him a pointed look. “Some of us can keep it in their pants at work. Right, you go check your finger reach, and you can demonstrate later.” The delighted grin on him confirms that he'll do just that. “I'll go get DJ all cheery.”

After a bit more convincing, Marcus went to his appointment, and I was left to deal with Dahlia Jara. He did ask again if I needed him to go with me, but facing my past mistakes needs to be a solo job. My sweaty palms may disagree, but as I step into her office, I remind myself that it might not be so bad. She was quite sympathetic the last time I talked to her on the phone.

Her office, also known as McAv's old IT department, now home to her company, J-Tech Av, is a dingy basement nobody wanted to work in before her. But apparently the lack of windows and smelly old sofas are right up her alley. Even more bizarre, there are quite a few people in, and they are all... playing a computer game together.

“Oh, just die! DIE DIE DIE!” An elder man, approaching seventy, with long white hair in a ponytail, smacks his keyboard on his desk.

“What did I say? You need to approach the demon wearing the cloak of invisibility, not just face him head on,” DJ advises, taking her headphones off. “Oh, Anya, what’s up? Do you want to play with us? We’re taking over the Dark Castle next. That is, if our Level forty-five Magician here,” she says, pointing to the guy who mumbles to himself and leaves to get something from the vending machine, “can get this artifact sometime this century.”

“Umm,” I try finding an appropriate answer instead of ‘wtf are you talking about?’, “maybe next time. You got a minute? We need your help.”

“We?” She lifts her eyebrow in a familiar way.

“Marcus and I.”

“Oh,” she coos and chuckles to herself, “that didn’t take long. I knew the boy was done for the second he ran after you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“At the graduation, when he ignored us like dead weight and made a dash for you. Even though that didn’t end well, and I didn’t put two and two together until now, he had the same expression last week when he told me he saw you again. Glad he got ‘some’, we were beginning to worry.” She giggles, getting up from her more-gaming-than-office chair.

I shuffle my feet and stare at nothing in particular. OK, perhaps DJ will be easier to talk to than I thought. Easier, but not less humiliating, but because of different reasons.

“Come on, Villanelle, what are you and my brother planning? Please tell me we’re doing some secret shit!” she exclaims clapping her hands.

Not to disappoint her, especially after that nickname, I deadpan, “We’re doing some secret shit.”

That makes her laugh. “Oh, you got some sarcasm going. Good for you, my sister Laura is going to love you,” she begins, then stops abruptly, biting her lower lip. “Or, not. She’s a bit defensive when it’s about Marcus. Probably best we leave Laura to get used to the idea before we throw you in the Dragon’s den. Yeah,” she carries on, mostly to herself, “maybe let’s wait till she has her baby before we introduce you. Maybe those nurturing hormones will kick in. Right now she’s a bit... on edge.” That last condescending phrase is followed by a sly smirk, as though she was letting me in on some inside joke.

As the second person telling me that I need to stay clear of the older sister, that doesn’t fill me with confidence. But no way am I letting Marcus ‘show pony’ me to his family just yet. One is bad enough, especially as she’s now trying to explain her video game to me.

“And then, you use the level five Flaming sword with the level ten Armor to get through the challenge. That’s pretty much it. If you want you can join us later. Technically, we shouldn’t spend Monday afternoons on this, but a game extension just came out. Jonas isn’t always in the office in person, so might as well take advantage. The boss is pretty chill.”

By 'boss' she means herself, but I have to avoid shaking my head at her antics and realign her to the plan. "So, about this secret shit... how do you feel about planting some cameras?"

"Cameras?" The look of adoration on her is ridiculous.

"Yeah, in the factory."

"Oh, I was just going over there. Jon and I are trialing a software update in a couple of hours. We're using the latest jet model, and we'll assess how the autopilot works with my 'Zephyr' code. Just him and me, you know?" She winks at me, and I'm beginning to think the software is not the only thing they'll be testing. Probably another check-in into the 'mile high' club.

"Come on, my brother's girlfriend, tell me where you want them, and I'll get them installed tonight when everyone goes home."

I nod, glad she didn't completely scare the shit out of me by calling me something else and walk her through the plan. She's beyond eager. And surprisingly nice to me, as she makes me a cup of coffee and gives me a cookie.

But then she calls me 'future sister-in-law', and I choke on it.

I'm still stunned when I go back upstairs. DJ was acting as though Marcus and I had been together for months and she was my bestie. She kept going on and on about Sunday lunch,

how ‘I’ll sooo get corralled into meal prep,’ how ‘I better learn how to play backgammon’. Worse... she was fine with it. Not fine... pleased that I was with her brother. And did not appear to give a fuck about my past as a spy.

I had to put my hair in a braid to stop myself from fiddling with it. If I was uneasy before talking to her, I was panicking now. I was worried about my past, but she already mapped out my future!

What did I get myself into? I don’t know how to do this. The whole family relationship. I need to put the brakes on. Dating Marcus, OK. But the whole Jara clan? With their inside jokes and games. Nope, too much too soon. I can see my name on a Christmas stocking next month. People assuming I have a favorite mug and giving me that one. Birthdays!

People! Too many people. DJ talking all the time. My boss’s boss in the same room, checking out her ass as she specifically mentioned. And fuck knows about the rest of them. So many names. Laura, Nate... who the hell is Uncle Antonio?

Marcus finds me in the middle of a freakout in one of the conference rooms, pacing on the carpet, trying to breathe but not having much success.

“Anita? What’s the matter?” He caresses my face, the gentleness soothing. But then his concerned tone shifts to a growl. “It was DJ, wasn’t it? Was she bitchy? Did she upset you? I’ll fucking murder her. Right now, where the fuck is she? She’s not going to mess with my fucking girlfriend. I shouldn’t have let you go alone. Fuck, Angel, I’ll sort this.”

He gives me a peck on my forehead and turns to go find his sister and apparently ‘murder’ her.

That unfreezes me, and I grab his arm. “You... you said ‘fuck’.”

“I suppose I did,” he says, flustered. “But it’s... you. I’ll fucking burn this town if they hurt you.” He runs his thumbs over my lips now and kisses me softly. “Tell me, what did she do?”

“It... it wasn’t what you think,” I respond, embarrassed. “It was the opposite. She was welcoming. She fed me and explained her video game in detail.”

“OK, and that’s bad?” He cocks his eyebrow. “I agree her talking computers makes us all leave the room fast—well, not Jon to whom she can read a printer user manual to and he’d listen to her, enthralled.”

“Umm... it was stuff like that. About all these family members I’m supposed to get to know, their quirks and weird crap. We’ve only been dating for four days, Marcus! I’m not used to all this.”

“Alright, alright,” he pacifies me, kissing me again. “I’ll stop steamrolling. No more random family members popping up, for now. Deal?”

“Deal.” I nod. “I’m not used to this big gathering type of thing. I’ve been living by myself for so long, with a nosy Vietnamese neighbor across the way.”

“It’s OK,” he teases. “I’m sure we’ll find a seat for her at the table, and at least we won’t try to set her up with my Uncle Antonio.”

“AAARGH. This shit is what I’m talking about!” I scream-groan while putting my head in my hands.

Marcus laughs and gets me in a bear hug until I squeak. “That won’t happen, Angel. *Tío* Antonio is gay.” I mock slap him across the shoulder. “But I get your point,” he relents. “We’ll go easy. Come on, we’re doing dinner and... telling you what my doctor said.”

“Sounds good, I can do easy. But you need to let me know right now what he told you. Not waiting till we eat.” That’s when it occurs to me. “You had a haircut!”

“I have. My lady specifically requested it.”

“Your lady?” I smile as my fears float away with his cheeky smirk. “You are a bit whipped, huh?”

“A bit? Angel, you have no idea.”

This time, his hands grasp my braid, and he pulls me in. My lips open and I revel in his tongue greedy against mine. His other hand is on my lower back, but with every deepening of the kiss, it slides lower towards my ass. I moan uncontrollably when his thigh goes between mine. I grab his tie and bring him in even closer, and he grunts in agreement. With a short move, he lets my hair loose. My dress is in danger of becoming discarded as well when his phone rings.

“Shit!” he growls, stopping his exploration of my behind.

“Fuck!” I match his tone. “I’m going to go with ‘work is not the place to be doing this’.”

“Yeah, we keep getting interrupted. Let me check who the hell calls instead of texting.”

“Heathens,” I concur, and rearrange my clothes.

“Nate? What’s up?” Marcus asks, and I think it’s his brother-in-law. “Go to your house? Now? Yeah, yeah, I understand Laura can’t go downstairs. Why is your delivery coming when nobody else is in then? Ugh, fine, you get Javi from school. I’ll drive straight over.”

He puts his device away, and with a sheepish grin he offers, “You know how I just said no more of my family? Well... umm, how about we do the opposite and go visit my other sister? You can wait in the car if you want.”

I huff. But he looks so cute with his new haircut and begging eyes, so I nod.

Even though I’m sure I will need a different strategy with this relative—maybe some armor and a shield—I tell him, “I’m not a dog, Marcus. Hiding in the trunk is probably not the best first impression. I’ll tread carefully, but there better be something in it for me afterwards.”

“Oh, Angel,” his voice rumbles, “most certainly.”

Imagining how he’s going to make it up to me, I prepare myself mentally to face the most challenging sibling. But after surviving DJ without having to play an RPG, maybe I can rise to the challenge with the fire breathing one.

Or at least live to fight another day.

LAURA

Beached whale.

I'm a beached whale, stuck in this bed for months, and now I'm the size of one as well. Six more weeks. Six, until my scheduled C-section. Picked a date two weeks before Christmas so we have time with baby Win before the holidays.

But fuck if it's not six weeks too long, especially as I'm growing by the hour. Nate keeps reassuring me I'm not a sea creature but a Dragon, but I don't remember being this big when I was pregnant with Javi. Nor did I crave salty foods every minute of every hour. Or been so tired. Fuck, I'm tired all the time!

And cranky. But with that particular 'attribute', it may be my memories that have faded, as my mom tells me I was also a 'ball of sunshine' years ago.

"If you want to wait downstairs, I'll be right back." It appears my forgetful husband asked my brother to receive whatever he ordered this time. Javi's soccer match has been on

the fridge calendar for months, but my messy idiot obviously put the shopping list over it.

“I’m already here, might as well,” a woman’s accented voice follows, and I wonder if this is the new girlfriend DJ mentioned. OK, gossiped about. I’m not looking forward to meeting another ‘doormat’ woman my brother thought would fit right in. Or more likely, blend in the background. Yep, I’ll forget her name by the time she leaves.

“Hey, Lau, *podemos entrar?*” He knocks on the door frame.

“Oh!” My shriek is justified, as the man walking in my bedroom is not the ghost I saw a few weeks ago. He looks healthy, with fresh clothes. His brace is gone as well. “Finally, you found a barber, kid!” I’ve been worried about him, but he never stayed long, nor did he want to talk to me or DJ. I wish I could’ve been more present, but I’ve been stuck here.

“Jeez, not you, too!” He glances towards the curly haired hottie next to him, and she gives him an ‘I told you so’ look. “Laura, this is Anita, my girlfriend.”

She’s anxious, not knowing what to do with her hands, as she adds a soft, “Nice to meet you.” Her striking eyes give my room a three-sixty, but I’m not surprised by her appreciative head nod. I spent weeks toning down my passion for red by adding masculine tones, specifically, a navy Nate loves. The two nuances work well, our deep blue walls and my burgundy bed giving a classy boudoir vibe.

But back to the short blonde, she avoids looking straight at me. Great, just as I thought. My predictable brother brought

home another scared, mousy girl. Just great. At least I can spend a bit of time entertaining myself by grilling her. A bit.

“So, Anita, how long have you been seeing my dumbass brother?”

“All of four days,” she answers flatly, finally focusing on me, as my sibling rolls his eyes at me.

“Do we really need to do the third degree, sis?” he asks, and they have some unspoken conversation. If I’m reading his eyebrow lift and her lip movement, he’s checking in on his lady, and she lets him know she’s fine. Weird.

Marcus continues, “By the way, you’re welcome for us driving all the way here to receive... I don’t even know what, but it filled half the hallway.”

“Oh, what the fuck? What did Nathan order now? He’s been... nesting. Last week we got a full playground for the yard. Even though the baby won’t use it for a long time and Javi will have grown out of it in a couple of years.” My son shook his head when he saw it and went back to his Xbox.

Anita takes in the scene, slightly amused.

“I don’t know,” my brother continues, “but we’re here now. Do you need anything else? A personality transplant? Ignore her, Angel, she’s not usually this bitter. Maybe ten percent less.”

My eyes wander to the newcomer. She doesn’t seem at all at ease being here. OK, being in a fat, pregnant woman’s red on blue bedroom may indeed be a bit strange, but she’s too quiet.

“Oh, come on, who scared the poor girl? It was DJ wasn’t it?” I boil. “The bitch said something about my hormones, didn’t she?”

The girl smirks, and there’s more in those blue eyes as she replies for both of them, “The answer to that is... snitches get stitches.”

I raise my chin, giving her a second look over. Maybe she isn’t just some date. Her posture just changed. It’s as if she flipped a switch and her true personality came online. She’s staring me down. OK, this one has some spine. Let’s see what we got.

“So, Anita, something tells me you are not just some blonde,” I challenge.

“Laura, shut the fuck up right now!” Marcus’s warning stuns me.

It’s a verbal lashing slap I never expected. Was that my sweet kid brother? My kid bro who made mud cakes and played pirates? Who hasn’t said a four-letter word in years? I’m not sure how to respond to him growling at me.

“Angel...” He looks at her again, but she takes a deep breath, and she mumbles a ‘fuck this’. She shakes herself and blazes me with a withering look.

“No,” the girl says with finality. “I am THE blonde. And you, Dragon, are you always such a shrew or is it just on days ending with ‘y’?”

I smile. Now we're talking! I shift in the bed, propping my pillows up.

“Oh, Ms. Anita, let's start this again. I don't get along with women, usually.”

“Hmm,” she ponders, giving me a once over this time. “Neither do I.”

It's the ‘O.K. Corral’ saloon at midday in an old Western. Neither of us adds anything, we just critically check each other out. Her with her halo of blond hair and piercing icy eyes. Me with my mess of brown and red hair and a belly the size of Texas. The baby gives me a kick, and I'll take it as a signal to give it a try.

“Backstreet Boys or N-Sync?” I ask some of the important questions.

“Neither. Unlike you, I wasn't born at the Dawn of Man. One Direction, Grandma. And it's team Jacob v. team Edward.”

“That's Dragon-mom to you, goldilocks.”

“I prefer Villanelle. She's got better fashion style.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Marcus intervenes, our conversation completely going over his head. Men.

I laugh, ignoring him, continuing my riveting back and forth with his girl. “You gonna own that, huh? Cool, I can respect that.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Ladies, again, can someone explain what is happening...”
He tries again, this time touching her hand.

“It’s OK,” Anita explains, giving his a squeeze. “We’re bonding.”

“Yeah, you actually brought home someone *I* can get along with,” I spell it out for him.

“Low bar for me,” Anita murmurs. “Two words: side quests.”

“Oh, fuck, lil D got a new video game again!” Immediately, I can picture my sister’s brown eyes filling with excitement about some loot box.

“Extra fuck!” she agrees.

“She swears also! Great. Kid, do you mind getting us some drinks? Juice for me and for you, V?”

“V?” my brother is even more confused, but Anita only chuckles. She’s got a nickname. She’s in.

“Gin and tonic.” With that answer, she’s my new favorite person, who loves my preferred drink. When I’ll be able to. Six more weeks. And a bit more if I end up breastfeeding. Fuck.

“OK,” he gives up trying to make sense of the epic meeting he’s witnessing. “I may need one for myself, but unfortunately, I’m driving. You good here for a bit, Angel?” he checks with her, moving a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“Yeah, I think I am. Surprisingly.” The way she looks at him, how that simple gesture he did lit up her whole face, makes me pause even more. This girl really is not ‘some blonde’.

“Nobody is more surprised than me,” he mutters as he goes downstairs.

I pat the side of the bed for her to take a seat, but she hesitates. Lucky for her, the cleaner changed the sheets this morning. But I can understand why sitting on someone’s bed would be creepy.

So, I break the ice even more, by saying what we are both thinking. “Is it a bit weird how normally men go for women who remind them of their mother, but Marcus went for one who is most like his sister?”

“OK, that was cringe,” she winces. “Let’s never talk about this ever. I mean *ever*,” she punctuates, and I fully agree. “Real Housewives or a soap opera?” her question is music to my ears.

“*La Usurpadora* is on in ten minutes. Unless you were still in diapers when that was popular.” Let’s see how she is on telenovelas.

“For real? That one with Paola Bracho? Shit, it used to be super popular back home, even though it was on re-runs by the time I was old enough.” Anita glows at my idea and I could hug her. Hug? Me? Urgh, where did that come from?

“I bet you watched that, spy-girl, telenovelas have awesome villains. Come on hop on.” I pat the bed again; this time she just loses her shoes and joins me.

As we both watch an episode, commenting along the way, Marcus is even more confused. But he brings us our drinks, playing on his phone while Paola ‘slays’ in the episode. But throughout the hour, she’s constantly peeking at him, and he keeps doting on her, asking her if she needs anything, if she’s cold or warm. This boy! My lil brother, finally finding someone.

My eyes tear up a bit when they make googly eyes at each other, but I blame it on the hormones. Definitely the hormones.

OK, Villanelle stays.

MARCUS

“**B**AM!” Anita’s purse crashes into my entryway side table, where I may have thrown it after yanking it from her. Another ‘bam’, albeit muffled, follows, as I back her into the wall. My left hand is on her ass, my mouth on hers. I’m unbridled. I kiss her, I nip her lip, her fingers are in my short hair. She moans, making my dick painfully hard, throbbing.

Giselle meows somewhere at our feet, but there’s no way I’ll stop to mind the cat right now.

I’m intoxicated by her. Her perfume is everywhere, her soft curls tangled in my hand. The softness of her body is driving me insane.

“Marcus,” she whimpers my name, and I need her skin on mine now.

“Angel, you need to be naked, and I need to get inside you.”

“What’s gotten into you?” she pants through each word, but I don’t respond as I kiss her again and start on her zipper.

That damn zipper has been tempting me since the morning. My eyes were tracking it all day, how it went long over her entire back, how the silver shined, begging me to unwrap her. And that dress. The dark blue against her light hair was perfect, and those little booties she had on, showing off her legs. Legs I really needed squeezing the life out of me as I pound into her.

My buttons are open and her nails graze over my abdomen. I grunt, as the scratches send a ‘GO, GO, GO’ signal straight to my balls.

“Nice cat,” she says, but doesn’t look at the feline.

All remaining reason evaporates as she grasps my cock over my pants. I jerk her dress off. My underwear drops with my trousers. Somehow, I toss my shoes. Her bra color and fabric are irrelevant—the hell with it! Her thong has too much material in my way. I should have ripped it as promised, but she wiggles out of it herself, giving me a scowl.

It doesn’t matter. All the clothes end up in the middle of my hallway, and we make out like crazy, as I pull us to my bedroom.

Yet somewhere in the frenzy, I stop us both. I see her, simply watch her naked and staring at me. Her lips are parted. Her freckles are swimming in a reddish flush I love so much. Her eyes are filled with want, and her body... I can’t even describe the curve of her waist, her slender legs, and perky breasts.

I crave it all and I may slap myself for stopping. But I have to take a mental photo of this moment, of having Anita Petrescu in my apartment for the first time, a modern painting behind her framing her, a background to a real-world work of art. She's sitting in the middle of the swirls of blue and green on the canvas, and she was made to be the centerpiece.

"Marcus?" Her head tilts, confused as to why I halted.

"Oh, Angel." I don't have more words, but cradle her face and sample her, my mouth exploring, sliding over hers, ravishing all she wants to give. Her hands brace against my chest, but with each movement, she surrenders to me even more.

My dick is pressing against her belly, twinging, eager to get in her heat, but I want to make clear what triggered me.

"When you said '*the* blonde', that was the hottest shit I ever heard." My breath is irregular, my skin hot all over. Her eyes narrow, as I continue, "But you were partially wrong."

"How so?" she asks quietly.

"You are not just 'the' blonde." I pause, enjoying her breasts crushed against my chest. "You are *my* blonde."

I capture her 'ooh' in another blazing kiss.

Anita finds herself propelled into my bed. Part of me wants to have another break, to admire her shape against my dark sheets. To cherish the image of her hair spread all over my pillow. But the animal in me is unleashed.

“Angel, the rules are back in place,” I warn. She purses her lips at me for a second, but her smirk is the acceptance I was looking for. She knows what rules. She yearns for them. Heaves for them. “Now, show me what’s mine. I want to see.”

I fist my shaft as she does what she’s told immediately and splits her legs. And there it is... the promised land. Pink and swollen. Wet for me, calling me, drawing in me as it would an asteroid on a collision course.

“Hells bells!”

“*Și eu ar trebui să zic același lucru.*” The Romanian not only flips my ‘ON’ switch but presses the nuclear button within me.

I grab her ankles and pull her to the edge of the bed, parting the legs in a ‘V’. Lining myself with her entrance, I glance over at her. She’s gorgeous, all on display for me, letting me take charge, giving me all her power. Allowing me to do with her as I please, and I will honor her trust.

“Pinch those nipples, Angel,” I order. “Get them hard for me.”

“Oh, Marcus.” Her panting is driving me crazy. Her fingers move over her tips, tweaking them, stiffening them.

“Harder,” I ask again, running the tip of my dick over her slit. Anita complies, arching her back with another sexy moan and a raspy, “*Da!*” That moaning snips the chord in me, and I thrust into her in one.

“Shit! You’re so perfect for me, Angel!” I never imagined how much different it would be skin on skin. It’s world changing, feeling her channel clutching me so tightly.

With each stroke, I chant, “Perfect, perfect, perfect.”

With each glide, I pray this never ends.

With each clasp of her inner muscles around my girth, I thank the gods I got her back.

With each whimper of pleasure from her, I go deeper and deeper.

With each image of those rosy plump nipples she’s still squeezing, I sacrifice a bit more of my sanity.

“Angel, tell me what you want. Tell me!” I command.

“*Marcus!*” That accent alone is unraveling me. “*Doamne! Te rog, mai mult, mai tare! Aşa!*”

And hell, if I don’t go harder with every word in that seductive voice. Opening her limbs to the maximum, I drill myself into her to the limit, stretching her, making her mold over me. I more than own her, I claim her and piston myself in as far as I can go. The grasp of her is torture, but I force myself to hold my release, as all that matters is to see this beautiful, incredible woman fall apart for me.

Her breaths become shorter and shorter. I know she’s close. She’s mine and I can read every tremor on her lower lip, the lift of her chin as her head tilts back.

I hook one of her legs around me and start massaging her clit with my thumb as I thrust, still holding her other leg at an angle.

The sweet cries come shortly after, as my dick is squeezed sublimely by her sheath. The surge of her orgasm scorches through my barriers. I burrow in her and as the shiver goes through my body, I come as well. Through layers of explosions, making me spasm uncontrollably, I burn. I burn through my worries and through hers, and together, we claim each other.

“Fuck,” she says breathlessly. I’m still holding on to her leg, partially using it to stay upright.

“Yeah, fuck,” I agree.

“I think I’m a bad influence. I’m tempting you on the dark path of four-letter words.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, you can tempt me any day of the week. Come on, let’s get cleaned up.”

Walking us to my ensuite, I have a slight ‘checking out her ass’ moment, but she catches me, and mock slaps me.

“Focus, Marcus Jara,” she reminds me, and I can’t disagree.

“Oh, I am definitely focusing, Anita Petrescu. But not on what you think I should.”

“In that case, you can focus on this door in your face!” she replies with a grin and does exactly that, leaving me to go use the other bathroom. Ha!

I get a t-shirt and sweatpants for me, but also lay down a top for her. Something about the thought of having her prance around in just my old Nirvana t-shirt awakens a possessive side I solely get with her. A need to have her have my things on her, to have her skin touch them, have her scent mark them.

“Really? Gray sweatpants?” she scoffs at me and I’m not exactly sure what the deal is with the color of my bottoms. “And I only get a shirt?”

“What can I say? I’m a bit selfish,” I confess with a smile.

“Very cute, but I’m getting my underwear on,” she decides and trolls for them through the pile of clothes, then arranges the rest of the garments on the edge of the sofa. “Thank you for the unsolicited opportunity to put my bare pussy on your furniture, but I think I’ll pass.”

“Jeez.” I almost drop the mugs. “I can see how you and Laura got along.”

“Yes, both you and DJ were all ‘OMG DRAGON BEWARE!’” Whoever this Anita is that is coming out of her shell, she does adorable claw fingers and scrunches her nose. She also summarizes my sibling to the T, “But she just likes to play with her food.”

“That’s a pretty good analogy,” I grunt. That face-off was something else. I’m still in shock that not only did they end up being civil, but they also arranged another ‘telenovela date’ for next week.

Hmm, somehow my sister got a date set with my girlfriend before me.

“You know, Angel,” I add, placing her mug in front of her on the kitchen island. “I’m thinking we skipped a few steps here.”

“You think? Where did you realize that? Was it when I met most of your family, when I haven’t even been in your apartment?” She grins over her cup with her elbows on my counter.

“More how you ditched me for dinner today to eat chips with Laura while watching some sort of mistaken identity twins show. How did you guess that one, by the way?”

“You could’ve had chips as well. Not my fault you can’t stand salt and vinegar. And it wasn’t mistaken, it was an intentional swap,” she corrects, and being ridiculously cute sitting there being all smug, makes me go over to her side. “It was pretty obvious she has a lot of time to watch daytime TV. It was blind luck I watched a lot of telenovelas when I was younger. It was a ‘thing’ back then.”

My hand runs down her back, gently lifting the t-shirt, fondling her ass again, her explanations somewhere in the background.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asks without turning to look at me.

“Nothing, you’re imagining things.” Then I snap her thong against her side. I definitely should have ripped that earlier.

“Hey!” She turns furiously. “Oh, you’re in the mood for practical jokes. Fine by me!” She does the same to the elastic on my joggers, but runs away with a squeal when I try to catch her.

This is a playful Anita. I know ‘hiding Anya’, ‘sexy Nita’ and the kickass overall woman. But this giggling one I am chasing around the sofa is something else. I’m prowling for her, as she pretends to run, but still twirls to mock me as I come for her. And I like ‘playful Anita’ a lot.

“Oh, Angel, I’m discovering new things about you.” She attempts to get past me, but I lounge for her and catch her, bringing her against me, now squealing as I lift her a bit. “And I want to know more, all of it.” I kiss the side of her head and she eeks.

She calms down as I put us both on my couch and pulls her legs under her. “Well, yeah, we literally only had five conversations outside work.”

“That’s true. Ask anything,” I volunteer.

“You could tell me why you don’t swear... well, usually,” Anita challenges me with her question.

“You know, nobody actually asked me why. They just took it as fact. As ‘nice Marcus’, Captain America, etcetera.”

“Nobody asked you in thirty-one years?” The ‘unconvinced’ painted on her face might as well be a flashy billboard.

“I was supposed to be the sane one. The well-balanced one with the logical questions. You’re not taking that mantle from

me!” I joke.

“Oh, you’ll have to fight me for it, and I play to win.”

With that eyebrow wiggle and the tip of the tongue running over her teeth, she’s winning more parts of me than she realizes.

“You must have some suspicions, ‘oh ye balanced one’,”—her eyes roll as I call her that—“having met my sisters. It’s as simple as that. They are both strong personalities and somehow, even though I was the youngest, I ended up being the peacekeeper. Laura used to have fun by casually mentioning all the ‘banging’—direct quote—she gets. DJ isn’t much better, but she’s less abrasive. To get seen, I picked this. It’s the opposite of the ‘acting out’ method. They were loud. I was quiet, to get attention.”

“Simple as that?”

“Yep. It’s similar to being a middle child with those two, but standing out was a bit different for me. It didn’t help how they baby me, and my mother let them, usually.”

“Aww, so sad, but now you’re a big boy.” She gives me a sultry look.

“I’ll show you something big in a moment.” I wink, but then she asks the best question in the world.

“How about instead you show me... your Lego collection?”

ANITA

The water droplets slide down my back, and Marcus's fingers trace them, from my shoulder blades to my ass. He runs circles around my lower back, then his hands sneak to my core, playing with my clit with one hand, and with the other, thrusting two fingers in my pussy, pumping. My head falls against his chest, and in the steamy shower, I pant under his torture. My nails claw in his forearms as he doesn't let me touch him more. As he peppers my shoulder with kisses, I am forced to push my ass toward his hard cock.

“Angel, I thought it was my turn to make you come. If you keep grinding on my dick, I won't be able to stop myself,” he warns, nipping at my ear, but not stopping playing with my cunt.

So, I do it again, this time giving it a little twerk, and “*Nu. Arată-mi ce vrei.*”

That triggers a deep chuckle in him, and he says, “If you ask so nicely...”

I get turned around with a ferocity I can't react to in time. My wrists get captured on top of my head, and I sit there, at his mercy, as he looks me over with darkened eyes.

The steam around us does not stop his penetrating gaze from giving me a chill. The only point of contact is his hand. The thumb from his left hand runs over my lips, and I suck on it.

“Good girl.” The praise makes me whimper, and his smirk is devilish. “Now, Angel, will you also be a good girl, and come all over me? I want to fill you up and see my cum down your legs again.”

I can't answer as his finger is still in my mouth, but my loud moan is all the permission he needs. Marcus removes his hand from my lips and moves it to my leg. He lifts it, opening me up for him. As always, before diving in, he gives me a blazing stare, as though he still can't believe I'm there. His eyes sear over my skin, checking if I'm real. He does this now every time, making sure I'm not a mirage, that I returned to him.

At first, I was confused, but then I saw it for what it was.

A present. A gift given to me, to have this man wonder if I'm his. A gift he gives me every time, as he's more than I ever deserved. Now I take advantage of these moments of silence, with the shower still running in the background, the slippery tiles at my back, to take in every muscle on his well-defined torso. The dark hair on his chest trailing downwards. His stiff cock, ready to possess me into oblivion. But mostly,

with his hand still holding mine prisoner, the expression of awe on him, one I must be matching.

It's probably only a few seconds when he processes it, and then there is no hesitation. The second he flexes himself within me, stretching me, I'm found. I belong to Marcus Jara with every masterful stroke, hitting places in me nobody else ever has. I'm all his, as he plunges into me deeply, spearing me with his length.

The velvety touch of his bare cock burrowing in me is unforgettable. I've never been happier to have gotten that IUD, now that I can feel him with no barrier.

He kisses me as well, his tongue and dick matching their conquest, and with every passing movement, I lose the battle. Or I win the battle more, as, with my orgasm barreling through me on one of his long slides, I cry against his lips. My pussy contracts around him and he grunts now with each sloppy thrust. The convulsions of my pussy around his cock wring his own release from him, as he erupts with the sexist man-growl, lasting forever.

We're both shaking, despite the hot water behind us. He releases my hands and pulls us both under the spray, commenting straight in my ear, "I knew there was a reason I was happy to have a walk-in shower."

"It's not just a walk-in shower Marcus, it's almost as big as my studio."

"Your studio is too small, Angel."

Rolling my eyes, I soap myself down, but his hands keep getting in the way, roaming all over my wet skin. I poke him with a ‘Stop it,’ but he just grins at me. Eventually we manage to shower without anymore ‘incidents’, and he goes to get dressed while I spend another half an hour drying my hair.

How that diffuser ended up in Marcus’s bathroom was not a mystery. He asked DJ why she thought I always refused to shower at his place.

To her credit, she told him to fuck off and talk to me directly.

Mortified, I had to admit that I was a bit vain, and I didn’t want to mess up my curls. He laughed, agreed on that front, and bought me the world’s fanciest hair dryer and diffuser. I don’t have the heart to tell him that my ten dollar one at home does a better job. But I do enjoy the benefits of being here, despite my protests sometimes.

Objections like ‘I need to return to my flat to change my clothes’ and ‘No, Marcus, I’m perfectly capable of finding my own way back to the office from the factory’, are a daily conversation for us, so I can’t say my transition into coupledness has been easy. Both arguments end with him driving me wherever I needed to go. And usually with him taking me back to his apartment, with Ms. Phan pushing me out the door whenever I drag my feet. That woman!

Whenever I muffle a complaint, I get ‘steady’ Marcus there, not even flinching at my bouts of panic. I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The mornings shouldn't start with amazing sex and breakfast in his beautiful apartment. Too bad that Giselle isn't my biggest fan, and keeps sitting on my jackets, leaving white hair everywhere as she stares at me judgmentally.

I try though, not just by giving the cat expensive organic treats she looks at with disgust.

I commandeered his kitchen and have been experimenting with some traditional recipes. Marcus has been assisting, adding some of the spices from his mom's. I may grate my teeth whenever he goes off script, but I let him. Some days, some of our fusion Cuban-Romanian dishes are edible. Some days... they're weird. The one last night... we ordered pizza.

There are even stranger things happening in my life.

I have... a girl friend now. I mean a friend who is a girl. Well, Dragon mostly, but from not seeing anyone outside work for days, I got to... phone calls and texts about daytime TV. She does use a lot of emojis, but nobody's perfect.

The other day I... texted her first! I didn't realize until the end of our back and forth when I got a reply from her.

Laura: V, and as a medal for your first voluntary communication, here's a meme of a half-naked policeman. Don't rat me to Nate that I tried to use my vibe today to this. Especially as I couldn't get a proper angle with the *baby* in the way.

Suffice to say that telling her husband was not high on my priority list, but every day that passes, it all becomes real. Me

being me again. And entangling so much in this man that he's tattooed on my skin, in my heart. And my dumb heart is wide open and all his. It's a life I never expected, to feel this way about him. But I do.

It's not only me who's been getting a new lease on life.

The other day, I sang, and Marcus played his guitar. While rusty, he was pretty good. His smile at the end, the relief on his face and the joy of finding music again, was like sunrise over the ocean. Mesmerizing and hopeful. He still hasn't tried the sewing machine, but I'm there for him when he wants to.

His apartment is bright and airy, completely opposite to the sultry tailors and his office. He says it's intentional. He enjoys switching his brain from clothes design in an atmospheric workshop, to his white and contemporary flat. I wanted to make a comment on the duality of his personality, which I take advantage of as well, but I didn't need to. He knew what my look meant. And I got another demo of *that* side of him, the one which matches my needs so perfectly.

Simply stepping through his front door lowers my own stress levels by a million. There's modern art all over. Well, on most walls, except the one wall where his road bike was mounted on. Laura and I have a sneaky plan for that one, but we'll keep it as a Christmas present. It involves watches. Maybe Danish bricks.

Everything is carefully curated by either Marcus or his interior designer sister, and it shows. The light sofa overlooking a park is where we spend most of our evenings,

talking, watching movies or simply making out for hours. There's a record player in the corner, and tons of old CDs and vinyl to go through. I may have bought a couple of records as well, and as I had nothing to play them at my studio, I left them here. He got a bit excited, and I reaped the benefits of his delight at me bringing stuff over. He's trying to positively reinforce every time I bring anything over. A brush. My slippers. I won't admit it, but it works.

"Anita, I have a surprise for you," he announces as I walk into the open-plan kitchen.

The white kitchen is full of random spices and pots and pans which never make their way properly into the cupboards, and it's driving me crazy. I always have to put things away in my tiny galley, but Marcus often leaves them out to mess with me. For a moment or two, until I shove them inside the shelves. He chuckles at me, letting me do it, as I do it even though I don't officially live there. Nor am I planning on it, as three weeks is way too soon, or so I tell myself. But every day I am less and less convinced.

"What? Did you book that hotel?" We're going to Miami for the weekend. How did I get from hiding, to organizing a getaway? I'm still 'fake it till we make' it.

"Of course, that wasn't even a question," he puffs as he pours my coffee for me while he has his cereal. "I also booked a restaurant for Saturday night. It's Romanian."

"There's a Romanian restaurant in Miami?"

“Yep,” he confirms. “There’s a secret I want to reveal, but I didn’t want to weird you out. It’s a pretty big one. I’ve been hiding it for a few years, in fact.”

“Secret?” I narrow my eyes. I doubt it’s something bad as it’s... him. “And what does this dinner have to do with it?”

“You’ll see,” he adds, all mysteriously.

“Alright, looking forward to it.” I nod and down my beverage, putting the cup in the dishwasher.

“That’s it? You’ll just wait?” He sounds unconvinced, probably expecting me to poke now.

“Yes, I suspect you’ll be squirming until then, so that should be fun.” I pat his shoulder as he laughs, but he knows I’m right.

In the end, he finishes his breakfast, and we get in the elevator to go to work.

Work has also been great. I’ve been shadowing Olivia, learning from her, and between that and volunteering at Legal Aid over weekends, I’m becoming a better lawyer every day. Maybe the attorney I was always supposed to be, when I wasn’t ducking behind research and clerking. Do I want to stay in corporate law? I’m not sure, but I’ll give it a go. My boss at the charity there wasn’t that upset when I told her I wasn’t coming back full time either, as she already had a few applications that would accept a lower salary than me.

Marcus also made progress at McAv, as our manager realized that paperwork is not his strong suit and moved him

onto a more people-centric role. He's now helping with the legalities of HR complaints, especially now that he knows half the staff in the factory.

Even better, the cameras show that the fixings are due to be restocked, so we'll figure out pretty fast how they got switched during assembly.

The sun is up as we exit the building, as we're heading to Marcus's car parked to the side. November or not, the weather has been treating us kindly this year and I'm thrilled to go to Miami in a few days. Jeez, I am actually excited.

Still awed at how my life changed, I reach for the car's door handle when a large hand grabs my left wrist.

Without thinking, I elbow them in the head with my right, and step on their foot, twisting around, pushing back. I'm lifting my knee when a loud thump came behind me. A 'Get the fuck off!' from Marcus stops me. And then I saw who was trying to get me.

"Ionuț?"

The massive bald man in a dark suit touches the spot where my elbow hit his jaw, but he simply chuckles, as I know damn well it would take a train to hurt the old MMA fighter.

"Anita, ar fi bine să-i spui gagiului tău să nu se mai lupte."
I look backwards, and two bodyguards with a similar build and years of experience are holding my boyfriend against the car. He tries to push away, mouthing "Are you ok?" at me.

With a chilling dread, I tell him, “Marcus, stop fighting. They’re my mother’s men.”

ANITA*

“Princess.” That one word in Romanian already grates me to no end. Her precise, cutting voice.

We get escorted to the room, obviously in the penthouse of the best hotel in town.

Marcus holds my hand in the limo, where we sat across from Ionuț and Petru, the other guard. We don't speak, but I give him 'I'm OK' looks when I can, and he squeezes my hand in return. A vein is pulsing in his neck, watching the two others in the car, and I'm worried he's going to do something stupid.

I mask my concern, hoping nothing bad will come out of us getting dragged to this place. She won't want to just talk, but I won't let her drag me down again. I'm no longer a kid, and she doesn't have leverage. My father's in the facility under another fake name, so she won't find him as easily. Even if she does, she can't get the authorities involved again. And Marcus... he has people in his life who won't allow what happened to me to reoccur.

The men are just as I remember them, only slightly older. Petru now has a scar running over his eye, and Ionuț's baldness is pretty unsettling, as the last time I saw him, sleeping off the drugs we gave him, he had spiky hair. They frown at me, like they haven't known me for twenty years at least.

The second we get in the car, they check our phones so we don't record the conversations or call anyone. They shut mine down as Marcus's was already off, but they let us hold on to them. If I had been by myself, I would have tried to get away to call someone. But I can't leave Marcus there with them. I was worried before, but he's been reassuring me he'd be safe in case she ever finds me.

All we can do is follow them in. The room is expertly decorated in browns and reds and as expensive as they come, with beautiful, elegant furniture in stained oak and velvets. A breeze from the Atlantic is gently moving the curtains through the open balcony door, yet the air in the chamber is sucked into a vortex by the woman sitting in a chair in the back, an empress on her throne.

"Why are we here?" I ask, seething. I can't give in to my fear. She can't defeat me. Not now.

"Is that any way to talk to your dear mommy? Especially when you bring a boy over." Her hair is almost white now, in a bun at the nape of her neck, but her eyes are still ice. By the clasp of Marcus's hand, his bristling matches mine, even though he doesn't understand what is being said.

“I’ll talk to you however the hell I want. Is this what you do now? Snatch people off the street?”

“If the situation commands it,” she huffs, as if kidnapping is a regular occurrence. Maybe it is now for her. “Did you check their phones?” she asks the bodyguards.

“Yes, boss,” Ionuț confirms.

“Good, good. There’s no need for prying eyes.” The smug bitch nods. “It was interesting finding you. We went to your apartment, but the old Asian woman there was better at keeping your secrets than some of the Secu agents I know. Luckily, we found your boyfriend’s address.”

I have no response to that but to internally smile that Ms. Phan is one badass lady if she’s better than the Romanian Secret Service, or Secu. She also knows exactly what to do if my mom shows up.

“Now, princess, you’ve been a busy girl. Working with judges and senators, now investigating sabotages.”

“So? How did you find me?” I resist trying to touch my hair. I can’t give her the satisfaction of revealing how she gets to me.

“Your latest foray into saving this aviation company did not go unnoticed. You may have been too good at your job. Someone has been looking into you a bit too close to home.”

“What do you mean?” I glance at Marcus, but he just stays still. I’m glad he doesn’t understand what she’s babbling. It’s

better not to have us both worried about what that means for Jon's firm and me.

“Even after what... fourteen, fifteen years... the Romanian police know to alert me if someone inquires about a blonde girl between twenty-five and thirty-five. Irrelevant what blonde. When my people reached out and I saw the pictures, I knew my patience paid off.”

“Photos? Of me?” A nauseating sensation sweeps over me, uniting the dots.

My mother confirms, “That PI was easily located. He wove an interesting story.” She tugs at the edge of his sleeves, arranging her green office dress. “How you are close to discovering who's responsible for that whole debacle.”

That and the fact that she used the word ‘sabotage’ earlier makes me realize something. “And I suppose you know who it was?” I don't say ‘and would love to rub it in our face’ out loud.

“Of course, I do,” she harrumphs, offended by the implication that she would be in the dark about anything. “It only took a little bribe and the turncoat private investigator ratted on his employer, no different from how it would have gone down back home. Soft Americans, you need someone like me to show you how it's done!”

“Fuck, Paul Morgan was part of the plot...” I remark, and Marcus twists his head when he picks up the name of the McAv contractor.

“Language, Anita,” my mom says through her teeth, and I roll my eyes at her as she carries on with the explanation. “Not originally, but he got hired when the lawsuit began, as the mastermind wanted to keep an eye on things. Your presence worried them and he asked the man to check into you, and somehow, he learned you are Romanian. It didn’t take long after that.”

I’m happy my boyfriend doesn’t hear how his slip got us here, facing the person who gave me life. I’m past being upset, and even though this will probably end badly, I’m actually relieved we can hash it out.

“OK, so who was it?” My money was on Olivia, but she has been great with me lately.

“Come on, daughter, you can figure it out yourself. Who had a vested interest in having an aviation company or a supplier sue each other? Ready to sweep in, buying for almost nothing, whichever falls first, between the bad press and the legal expenses?”

There’s only one option, and I whisper it, “Ramsay Lexington.”

Marcus jolts, hearing the name of the man we thought was Jon’s friend, or at least a cordial business associate.

My mom continues casually, as she loves spelling it all out, “I’ve known him for years. He’s a ruthless jackass. He didn’t get to be a billionaire by playing nice with his rivals. Your McMaster was naïve to accept any help from Lexington. He

probably used his goodwill to figure out how McAv works and get his people in key positions to disrupt them.”

“Then the fixings supplier...”

“They’re innocent, but the owner of LexAviation wants to bankrupt them without spending a penny himself. When either the aviation company or the bolts manufacturer go under, he’ll profit. Of course, you spent too much time here in the West, you can’t see the way the real world does business!”

“Shit.” How to get out of here? Not just because the woman across from us definitely doesn’t have any good intentions regarding us, but also to tell DJ and Jon.

“Oh well, who cares about Florida drama?” She sighs. “Good plan hiding here. I would’ve never imagined you’d hide in plain sight with just a fake name. But enough is enough, it’s time to come back home. I’ll find your traitor father soon, wherever he may be burrowing. Although Filimon is married now, I’m sure there are some other associates who wouldn’t mind you on their arm. You cost me a great joint venture. At least someone better than a washed-out tailor. I taught you better than... this.” Her manicured fingers point at Marcus, and my nostrils flare.

I take a step forward, and I can sense the bodyguards behind me tense, shuffling their feet. Marcus’s hold keeps me from lounging at the bitch in the chair.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Stop insulting my boyfriend! And are you still on that idiotic plan? I’m not

marrying anyone, Mom, and no way in hell am I going back to Romania!”

“Cute outburst, princess, but irrelevant. There’s nobody who can prevent me from just driving you to our private jet and flying us out of the US within an hour. Did you think I flew commercial? You wouldn’t want anything to happen to your man here, would you? He doesn’t get a word I’m saying, but it would be a shame if he got hurt. You’re coming with me.”

“The fuck I am.” I take a step backwards, but the two men crowd the door.

Fuck! She’s right, we can’t do anything. Even if my boyfriend were to raise hell, the second we’re in Romania he’ll never see me again. I completely miscalculated, drowned in optimism. None of my plans assumed we needed to do something so fast, nor that she would resort to actual violence. I should have screamed in the street, I should’ve realized my mother would have never let me go, and that she didn’t want to clear the air and move on. I stare at Marcus in panic.

He can’t get hurt, not because of me. I can’t. I glance back at her and all she shows is a horrible smile. She’s winning, and I need to think of some sort of a stopgap, so we can get out of there, to gain some time.

“It’s all OK, *Angel*.” My man pulls me to his side. “Mrs. Petrescu, I think it’s you who needs to reconsider your threats. Anita’s staying here with me, and you can go wherever you want, as long as it’s far, far away.”

It takes me a second for the words to register.

The words Marcus said in perfect Romanian.

MARCUS

“*T*otul e OK , Angel. Domna Petrescu, cred că dumneavoastră trebuie să vă gânditi din nou la amenințările aceastea. Anita va rămâne aici, si dumneavoastră puteți merge unde vreți, câtă vreme este foarte, foarte departe.”

I may have been a bit rusty, but four years of lessons, including an internship of one of the biggest fashion houses in the capital, Bucharest, really did pay off. More than just to impress a girl, how it all started. The more I studied, the more I enjoyed it, and the six months abroad were pretty great. I took in the culture. Had fun downtown with terraces and theaters. I was shocked by the imposing communist architecture popping up between the turn-of-the century buildings still left standing.

“The plan was to come clean on Saturday, over some of that *salata de vinete* you love, and I can’t stand,” I confess to my stunned girlfriend. She’s still tucked in my side and looks up at me as though she’s never properly seen me before. “I went to

classes after we finished law school. After... you left,” I say, giving her a squeeze as her expression turns sad, “I couldn’t find you anywhere. I always hoped I’d meet you again, and then I’d do everything to get you back.”

“Charming,” her mom interrupts in a strong accent. “But why did you switch to English now?”

“Well, it’s because the people listening need to know what’s going on as well.” I smile and take out my phone, which still appears shut down. “DJ, Jon, did you get the whole thing?”

“Yep, all recorded. And I’ve had a translation program roughly going in parallel, so we pretty much got the gist.” My sister’s voice blasts through the room. “Should we send the police over?”

“No, that won’t be necessary, will it, Mrs. Petrescu?”

“What the hell?” she asks, throwing her words at us. “How did this happen?” She points at Ionuț and Petru.

“It’s not their fault,” I explain, releasing Anita, as I turn off the app DJ installed, revealing the video of the people on the other side of the line. “I’m surprised your research on me didn’t show that my sibling, Dahlia Jara, is a programmer. When your daughter walked back into my life, I was worried about her past coming back. As a precaution, I asked my sister to put a ‘nine one one’-type application on my device, but instead of calling the authorities, it dials her and starts streaming to one of her secure servers. I pressed the icon when we got in the limo with your men.”

“So, on the other side...” She gets up and starts pacing. I don’t hold back a smirk, knowing I rattled her, one of the most powerful CEOs in the oil industry. Yes, I googled her after Anita’s story. What I read cemented my desire to protect my woman, even from her own parent if necessary.

“It’s me, Mrs. Petrescu, Jon McMaster, the apparently naïve CEO of McAv. But as innocent as I may appear, don’t forget this is my town, and this is not the Eastern block. One word from me and your plane will be grounded. Good luck getting out of Florida otherwise. The port master and the chief of police are friends of mine. Thanks for the tip about Ramsay. I can take it from here, but we already were close to finding him ourselves.”

“Oh yeah, *Hermanito*,” DJ adds, “we caught that shift supervisor switching the fixings this morning. The security team are holding him until the police can arrive. So, we don’t need this recording, which technically isn’t admissible in court, to get Lexington, but at least we can tell the officers what questions to ask. Do you need me to stay on the line? Mrs Petrescu, make no mistake, if anything happens to my brother or his girlfriend, you won’t walk away. We have another billionaire on speed dial. And I have been known to shove my Manolo’s in crazy bitches’ asses.”

The expression on my girl’s mom’s face is worth every penny and I can’t hide my smug grin.

“No, we’re good now. Thanks, lil D.” I close the call. “Angel, are we good to go?”

“Not yet, I need to finish this, Marcus,” Anita says, turning to me briefly. There’s unwavering determination in her eyes as she takes a gulp of air. I get it. She needs to end this herself. And she has to do it now, to shut this door to her past once and for all. It has to be her who puts the lock in, who twists the key in and then throws it away. I nod.

“We can’t keep doing this, mom.”

“What do you mean?” the lady asks.

I gaze over at her, and she has a ‘Vilanelle’ grin on. She has something up her sleeve.

“Well, *Mami*, you turned in *Tati* for something he had to do to protect me. So, when I found myself in a position to become... you... a villain, someone who did despicable things to good people, I made the best out of it.”

“What do you mean?” The PetrOil CEO stills, as her daughter gets close to her, standing toe to toe.

“Do you remember a Senator Simmons? He’s a bit of a dick.”

“Yes, I do know him.”

“He’s not your biggest fan, either. He blackmailed me. But as I learned from the best, or should I say the *worst*,” Anita points at her mother, “I didn’t let him control me fully, and I got more out of it. He got my dad out of that warrant. But more importantly, he got me the evidence that you buried of all your dealings with Robert Filimon. And I mean *all of them*.”

The bribes, the extortions. The less-than-legal financial paperwork.”

The older woman’s lip curls aggressively, and she plays with her rings, staring away from us for a second, then fixing her light blue eyes on us.

“What do you want?”

“Not a lot, all things considering. You’ll be paying his medical bills from now on.” To her credit, the older woman, who looks so much like Anita that it’s scary, winces. “Oh, you didn’t know he was sick?” my girlfriend presses on. “Well, he is, not that you care. Better yet, you can grant him a divorce and a large settlement.”

“Hmm, fine,” she growls, running her fingers over her outfit. “And for you, princess, a billion or two? Your inheritance?”

“Nope, I’m good, I don’t need your money; you need to be gone. You were a horrible mother. You tried to sell me for fucks sake! But I’m stronger than I was. I won’t let you bully me or Marcus. In this life I want, you’re not part of it. For years I cowered and feared you. But not anymore. This is my town, and you aren’t welcome. If you ever return here, we’ll release everything. What would your business associates do when hearing of the way you stole from your own government? And from some of them?”

“And how exactly are you planning on releasing this info, if you’re stuck here with me. McMaster can posture all he wants, but if I want to get out of here with you, I will.”

Anita turns to me and winks, before saying, “That should teach you not to discount short old ladies. I suspect Ionuț’s car barely left the carpark before Ms. Phan contacted her friend, Julia Li, the owner of the *Observer* newspaper. They met at Asian American Heritage Month Bingo a while back and have been friends ever since. She has a copy of my flash drive with all the information, so if she doesn’t hear from me soon, the media will get all of it. So have a good life *Mami*, goodbye! Never come near me again.”

My girl doesn’t wait for a reply, just grabs my hand and heads towards the door. I give her mother one last glance and shrug at her angry expression. She’s beaten and knows it. She can fume all he wants. My girl got her, and I’ve never been prouder.

“Move!” she commands the two bodyguards. It’s pretty funny, a five-foot something tiny blonde, in another blue dress and her favorite high-heeled boots, giving them orders. They look at each other and decide against fighting her and let us leave.

When we get around the corner, Anita peeks to check that they are not following us, and asks, her bright eyes in awe, “So, you learned my language, huh?”

I pause. After this meeting, I don’t want to wait until the weekend to tell her how I feel. “Of course, I did, Angel. Don’t you know I fell in love with you in one night? I spent years trying to be good enough for you. I’m not perfect, and hell, I make dumb mistakes, but I love you. I don’t give a shit if you

think that it's too soon for me to say it. For me, it's about seven years too late."

"I see." She tilts her chin up and purses her lips. I know her tells by now, and it's not the 'you're dead' move. My mouth morphs into a smile. We sit for a few seconds, just reading each other as we do so well. I don't need to hear the words; they are written all over her face.

As a firework going off, her face explodes into a magical grin, and she jumps in my arms, kissing me like crazy. Our tongues tangle, our lips hungry for the other. Our bodies are desperate for one another as I hold her up with one hand. Her legs wrap around my middle, and I move the hair off her face with my right hand.

"I love you too. I should have never left that morning. All I wanted that morning was to jump in your arms, and I won't stop doing that now. Let's go home, Marcus Jara," she heaves.

"Întotdeauna, Anita Petrescu."

Always.

EPILOGUE – MARCUS

SIX MONTHS LATER

I run my fingers down her shoulder, then down her arm. Goosebumps follow my touch.

“I have a surprise for you,” I say, and lower the zipper on her turquoise dress, then push the garment on the floor. Every time she gives me all her trust, wearing nothing but a lacy bralette and a matching black thong, I want to fall at her feet and thank all the gods that I got her back.

Her eyes find mine, but I stop her question, silencing her with a soft kiss. Then another. And another. And I lose control and crush my mouth against hers. My hand finds the latch and without overthinking it, I pop it open, getting rid of the fabric.

She mewls and stopping myself when her nipples slide against my chest is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.

“Close your eyes, and relax your arms,” I ask her, my voice deepening with every word. Watching her submit to me, this

warrior, this queen of mine... nothing turns me on this much. I stare at her. Her eyes flutter, struggling to obey.

“Shit!” I grunt.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Angel. You’re the hottest thing ever.” I press my lips on her jaw, then behind her ear, then on her collarbone. “I may have to reassess my plans. I had the perfect present for you, but now... I don’t think I can control myself.”

“Then don’t.”

“Nope, I have to be strong for a few more minutes.”

I leave her to go to my luggage and pick up the parcel I’ve been hiding. She waits for me, eyelids still lowered, her rosy nipples giving me some heart palpitations, especially watching her simply... be there for me.

I come near her, and she doesn’t even flinch when I kiss her shoulder first. Then I guide her arms in the sleeves of the garment I brought over and pull the piece up.

“Do you recognize it?” I ask, breathlessly. It fits her as well as I thought it would. I don’t need to take her measurements. I know every inch of her body. I love every curve and every edge.

Her fingers run over the black fabric, and her breath hitches as the softness of the wool and the buttons are the same. Her eyes pop open, confirming her suspicions.

“Marcus...”

“I lied, Anita. I kept it almost untouched for a long time. Your Channel smell disappeared after a while, but it always reminded me of you. I only had it cleaned when I moved to the apartment, but even then, I never wore it again. So, now, with your new job, I saw it fitting to tailor it... to you.”

Her hands do another tour, but it's perfect, from the hem to the lapels. I did change the lining to a light blue one, to match her, but otherwise it's the same as before, only adjusted. Next week, she's starting to work directly under Olivia, so it's a pretty big promotion. Ms. Nkosi informed Jon she's thinking of adopting and putting Anita in charge of Legal while she's on leave. Our CEO should not have told me that, but maybe I'm embracing a bit of nepotism.

“You... you... sewed this?” Her eyes narrow at me, and I smile sheepishly, rubbing my palm over the back of my neck.

“Umm, I may have started a few weeks back, after the physio specialist gave me the thumbs up.”

“I knew she said you could do anything now, but why didn't you tell me you went to the shop?” I get an angry poke to the side. I should count my blessings after seeing her punch at her belt grading the previous month.

“Sorry, Anita, I wanted it to be a surprise. I have been thinking about reopening it, but I wanted to do this first. For you.” Her eyes narrowing would be pretty cute, especially combined with her flushed cheeks, but now she's a bit pissed. “But the actual surprise is in the pocket. I hope you'll accept.”

I bite my lower lip this time, as my girl slides her hand in the right pocket and gasps.

“It’s a key,” she states the obvious as she opens her palm.

“It is. It’s for my apartment. Well, ours, if you agree to move in with me.” Maybe she’ll get comfortable in my place, and she won’t leave. Ever.

“Phew.” She exhales.

“Phew?” My eyebrow goes all the way up, as that wasn’t the feedback I was expecting.

“I was worried it wa... Never mind.”

“Like I was going to propose when you’re half naked, sitting in a cabin in the Everglades!” Her eyes almost pop out of her head. OK, I shouldn’t tease, but sometimes it’s too easy. Though I can get how she could assume that.

We’re on another weekend trip, as we have been going away every few weeks. Away from my prying family, away from her stressful job and charity work. But it’s not special enough. I’d require a bit more prep—not airplane writing in the sky, but not far off. Is there a ring hidden somewhere in my apartment? No, of course not. It’s at my mother’s. Anita loves to clean and put things away, and I didn’t want her to stumble on my nana’s engagement ring she let me have. Also, I got told in no uncertain terms I need to wait my turn, as *someone else* is due a proposal this Christmas, when we all head off to Nate’s Aspen house.

I'll take things one step at a time with my Angel, not rush her. Though waiting six months to ask her to officially live with me was difficult for me, as she's basically there every night, but she doesn't want to admit it.

"Hmm, I don't know how to respond to *that* one," she mumbles, twitching her nose. "But to your first question... hmm..."

"Two 'hmm-s' in one line, doing great, Angel."

"Oh, stop it!" She slaps my side. "Fine, I'll move in with you," she concedes, rolling her eyes at me.

"The enthusiasm is killing me!" I laugh, but I don't do it for long, as I get turned around and pushed on the bed so fast, I don't have time to react.

"What am I going to do with you, Marcus Jara?" She climbs in my lap and puts her arms around my neck, kissing me. My hands go on her waist as I kiss her back. With a roll of her hips, I'm hard again, and she moans sweetly with every movement. That scrap of lace rolling over my boxers is infuriating; I want it all gone.

"This is pretty on point, Anita Petrescu," I answer, and what I get back is a headshake and her small hand sneaking in, freeing my dick. She tries to move her underwear out of the way, but I'm having none of that, as hot as it is. I snap them off her and she growls, but I bend over and pushing the jacket to the sides, I nip on one of her breasts, and it quiets her right up.

Another moan turns into a wail, as my tongue circles around the stiffening bud, and her grinding restarts, this time skin on skin. She's growing wet again, or she was already when I made her close her eyes. It's irrelevant, as she's coating me with her arousal and I'm going out of my mind.

"Angel," I groan as she lifts her hips at the perfect angle, and I enter her. We both pause, looking into each other's eyes, just the sensation of completeness between us. The heat of our connection flares, as my fingers sink in her soft curves, spurring her to move.

She doesn't need my command, but I give it anyway. "Hands on my knees, let me see you ride me."

Her nails graze my skin but the view's worth it, as I can marvel at all of her. Head tilted back, tits pointing upwards. And her pussy... her pussy glides over my dick, and it's tight and wet and I am hot all over as she moves. Every touch, every stroke, it's maddening. I tease her clit as she keeps going. Pants and whimpers and sweat, it's all becoming too much, and I drag her back to me. I kiss her hard as I start thrusting upwards, hurrying us both.

"Now. I need you to come now. *Acum*," I order, and I grab her hair, guiding her up and down between my other hand on her bottom and my words.

"*Marcus, da, da, da,*" Anita chants in Romanian, and I lose it. I flip us both, her ass in the air, and I don't give her any time as I plunge back into her channel. I own her and give it all I can. Harsh, rough thrusts, possessing her, ramming my

length all the way in every time. My fingers brand her sides. The needy sounds she makes are unforgettable, as her fingers curl around the sheets, pushing backwards as I drive forward. She loves it. She loves it when I take her like this, unleashing on her.

“*Acum, Îngeraș!*” I repeat, and my Angel does what she’s told. My dick is clasped by her constricting pussy. She cries out and I can’t hold it anymore. I want to come all over her ass, to mark her, but not now. Now I have to know I am not just all over her skin, but deep inside, coating her in me. I surrender to the burst of pleasure pulsing through my body. It’s almost unbearable, but I never want to stop. The tension disappears. I explode. The pressure and the craving all met and multiplied a million times.

I fall next to her when I manage to pull out. But she doesn’t move, still in the same position, limp in a lax child’s pose.

“Angel?”

A grunt tells me she’s still there. Then a pat on my side, as she finally tumbles on the sheets as well.

“Alright. You can ask me to move in again every day if you’re going to fuck me like that,” she smirks.

“Ha, ha, so noted.”

“I’m glad you didn’t think of asking *the other thing*.” She makes a face while speaking the words, as though talking marriage is saying Voldemort’s name. “I know for a fact we’re going to witness a proposal over Christmas.”

“Ah, you heard that too? I’m sure it’s going to be great, even though it probably should have happened a while back.”

“Yeah, they asked me to sing after they heard me at karaoke last month. I may do it. That plan with the ‘accidental’ snowmobile malfunction is going to be fun. Laura laughed for ten minutes when she found out. She woke the baby.”

“That would be awesome, you should sing, Angel. But that’s not the plan as far as I’m aware!” I’m confused and she purses her lips at me. We both realize we may be speaking of different people. “Anita, should we both confirm who we *think* is proposing?”

She nods, and we both speak at the same time.

“DJ!”

“Jon!”

The end

*

Dear reader, I hope you enjoyed Marcus and Anita’s story, thank you in advance for leaving a review.

Yes, I wrapped up the sabotage pretty fast, but as nobody reads this for the aviation company’s problems, suspect you preferred me sneaking in another ‘bang her’ scene instead.

(Fixings? Who gives a f?)

Also... There will be a Christmas novella with this proposal with all six POVs probably next year, but I have another

duology in a different land to write first (aka the Influenced series, out Autumn 2023) and maybe something totally different (those on my newsletter know what I'm talking about).

For news on my future books (yeah, loads) and monthly author ramblings, please join my newsletter.

*

Kerrington Series

Handling the CEO

Gambling with the Player

Dealing with the Lawyer

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And to beta readers, Karen, Kelsey, Abigail and Kaycee, to my editor, Susan and proofreader Halima.

For more, please visit my website mirelaholtauthor.com and sign-up to my newsletter or follow me on my various social media sites.

TikTok: @mirelaholtauthor – my main one where I pretend I'm cool but only get 250 views

Facebook: mirelaholtauthor – spiderwebs and nothingness – how does one grow on this one, ffs?

Instagram: mirelaholtauthor – weird one. whatever

Luv ya,

M.