

THE FORBIDDEN TEMPTATIONS SERIES

SOFIA T
SUMMERS

Halloween
Hottie



A DAD'S BEST FRIEND
SECRET TWINS ROMANCE

HALLOWEEN HOTTIE

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND, SECRET TWINS
ROMANCE

SOFIA T SUMMERS

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Forbidden Promises

Maid Without Honour | The Wedding Witness | Honeymoon Hoax

DESCRIPTION

My Halloween treat?

A one night stand with a HOT Dracula lookalike.

Turns out it was more of a trick than a treat.

My mystery man was my father's best friend...

And now the secret daddy to five-year-old twins! Yikes!

Six years later, my blast from the past decides to come looking
for his daughters.

*Jeremy Steele... you tricked me once. But I won't let you trick
me twice.*

PROLOGUE

Melissa

I trudge up the hill, hoping against hope that I will find a place to rest for the night.

It had rained not too long ago, judging from the smell of wet earth and the gentle mist uncurling over the valley ahead of me. It almost covered the small, picturesque town I crossed six miles ago, and there is something in my heart that is soothed by the sight.

It feels like home. Not my home, but someone's. A place that is loved and cared for and remembered fondly, a place where a child would be happy to grow up.

My throat constricts. *Oh, Mom. Oh, Dad.*

I feel much older than my seventeen years, and I'm sure I look it as well. Being homeless for months does that to a person. I'm ragged and filthy and so, so tired. Every step I take feels like an unbearable effort.

I wish I could be with my dad, more than anything. If only he could see me now.

Oh, Dad. Just because I can't live with you doesn't mean I can't miss you.

The house looms suddenly through the mist, large and bleak and imposing on a jutting cliff top. I stop in my tracks and stare.

Is it real? I haven't eaten for a couple of days, and I could be hallucinating.

Because what kind of person would build a house on a cliff? Only a madman, or someone with a lot of money and a death wish, perhaps.

I don't know much about architecture, but the house looks old. Very old, to the point it might be a ruin. A part of my scary-movie-loving soul shivers in delight.

The practical side of my brain reminds me that I don't have a safe place to sleep tonight, and if I can find a dry corner in this admittedly moldy looking house, I can make it to the morning without getting attacked by a random drug addict or something.

Hopefully. I've been out on my own for too long to take anything for granted anymore.

I go up toward the house, my calves aching with every step on the muddy incline. The place looks deserted and overgrown. I can see the remains of a broad gravel drive and a broken-down pair of iron gates, but everything else is covered with weeds and ivy.

The ground levels up after a while. Just as I pass the ruined gates, hanging on their hinges, a dark cloud passes over the sun. It feels like a bad omen.

It means that there's going to be rain, says the practical voice who lives in a corner of my brain. It's almost sundown, so get ahold of yourself, Melly.

I glance at the front door. There's something that looks surprisingly solid, given that it guards this place. This is not a house so much as the skeleton of an abandoned mansion. There'll probably be a broken window around the back.

"Looking for something?" says a voice at my elbow.

I jump and nearly fall to the muddy ground. "Holy shit!"

"Language, young lady," says the owner of the voice primly. I back away at once.

“I didn’t mean to trespass,” I say, holding my hands up in the universal symbol for *look, no weapons*. “I didn’t know there was anyone here.”

“Oh,” he says, looking disappointed. “I thought maybe you heard about the tour.”

“The tour?”

I watch him shuffle in embarrassment with a sudden pang of pity. He is a short, old man with wispy hair, dressed in a woolly cardigan with frayed patches and a fussy air about him. He looks lonely.

Oh, shit. I think I’ve seen this plot trope before.

Undiscovered paranormal activity is all well and good, but I sort of wish I hadn’t climbed up the hill now. I can still deal with a dwarfish recluse, as long as he is human, but this had better not be a spirit haunting the grounds. That would really fuck up my night.

“I advertised a tour,” he says, staring angrily at his feet. I notice he’s wearing Crocs and socks, and my pity for him intensifies. “It’s on leaflets all over town.”

I brace myself. “When did the tour happen?” *And if he says March 1953, this is where I run.*

“It’s today,” he says gloomily. *“Come see the spooks and ghouls in Blaine’s House of Horrors.* I used a scary font, too. But nobody came.”

Oh, that makes so much more sense now. No wonder the house looks so desolate, though I have a feeling it isn’t entirely deliberate.

I send up a silent prayer to God above. The man’s not a ghost, he’s just eccentric. Though that’s not always a good sign.

And I still need a place to sleep for tonight, which means I have to either trudge back downhill to find an empty bus stop, or I get to find a bush which isn’t too damp. Oh, joy.

My shoulders sag. “Okay. I’m sorry nobody showed. I’ll get out of your way now.”

“It’s only five dollars for kids,” he says with a kind of desperate hopefulness. “You look like a kid. I could make a reduction either way. Four dollars for a whole horror tour, how does that sound?”

The truth is, I’m sorely tempted. I’ve never been inside one of these places before. My dad’s a strict Christian who doesn’t care for spooky spirit stuff, and Mom was always too busy to take me anywhere, so this was always on my bucket list.

And if I could get indoors and out of the cold for a while, that’d be worth something. It’s shaping up to be the kind of night where you feel like the air could shatter your bones, and then you’ll wake up in pieces.

“Two dollars,” I say halfheartedly, knowing that I can’t afford it. I only have seven bucks left from panhandling down on the beach at Seahollow, and I don’t know if I can even make it back tomorrow. I’m saving up the money for a big sandwich at a gas station if I can find one.

“Done!” says the old man. “I’m Gordon Blaine, by the way. I own this place. Ahem. Welcome to the spookiest House of Horrors you’ve ever seen!”

He sounds happy now, which is nice. I tramp behind him to the front door.

“Just a moment,” he says cheerfully, pulling at the brass doorknocker. A hollow sepulchral note rings through the house, then the door creaks open. There’s nobody inside.

“Nice!” I say, impressed. “Levers and a Dixon rope?”

“I don’t know who Dixon is.” He shrugs. “I just knocked a few things together. I’m the only spook operator here. It’s a lonely business sometimes.”

No kidding. The vast hall yawned empty, revealing lurking shadows in the dark.

There are real velvet hangings on the high wooden walls, moth-eaten with age. I’m sure the cobwebs aren’t fake either, but I can’t tell about the crossed swords above the

mantelpiece. They look rusty enough to be real and long enough to be totally impractical.

“This is the Great Hall,” says Mr. Blaine in low, thrilling tones. “Abandoned for many years, since a young bride threw herself to her death from the rafters.”

“Awesome.” I nod. “Why was she on the rafters?”

“She crawled out from the upper gallery,” says Mr. Blaine, “to spy on her unfaithful husband. Look!” And he points up dramatically.

And sure enough, there she is. A pale face peers down from the rafters. The rest of her is basically a bundle of white linen, but the effect is actually really good. Especially the mad, staring red eyes.

“She still waits for her husband to return to her,” intones Mr. Blaine in my ear. “At midnight, she walks through the house, wailing. Just before dawn, she falls to her—excuse me, is that your stomach growling?”

“Oops. Yeah, sorry,” I say quickly. “But I’m listening, I promise.”

Gordon Blaine gives me a narrow glance. It’s as if he’s only just noticed that I’m a real person.

“You’re very thin,” he says disapprovingly. “Are you on a diet of some kind? How long is it since you’ve last eaten?”

I’ve actually always been on the pudgy side, but my cheekbones do look leaner lately, so I suppose starvation is good for my self-esteem. The trouble is that I can’t possibly tell this nice old man I’m broke and homeless because I know from previous and very bitter experience that he would kick me off his property, like, *so* fast.

“Oh, I’m fine!” I say brightly. “My tummy just does that sometimes. It’s probably because I’m still growing, or at least that’s what my mom always says. Tell me more about the dead bride.”

“Where *is* your mother?” he asks, tipping his head to one side. “Does she know you came out here alone?”

“Sure.” I pin a bright smile to my face. “She doesn’t mind.”

Gordon Blaine lets his gaze travel from my face to the rest of me. I try not to wince under his searching scrutiny. I know what I look like nowadays, but I don’t like seeing it in other people’s eyes.

“Hmm,” he says. I don’t think I’ve convinced him, somehow. “Do you want something to eat?”

“No,” I say just as my stomach growls again. He gives me a funny little scowl.

“Come with me,” he says abruptly, turning on his heel. I follow him automatically, trying not to think of all the dumb girls in horror movies who should definitely not have gone anywhere with the weird man.

But Mr. Blaine only leads the way into a small room with a stove at the back of the house. I’m guessing it used to be a butler’s pantry at one point, because houses this size tend to come with huge kitchens. There’s hot cocoa steaming gently from a saucepan on the stove and an empty plate on the table next to a can of Spam. Dinner for one.

“It’s not much,” says Mr. Blaine without looking around. “But it’s warm, and there’s enough food for two people. Sit down.”

I take a seat at the rickety wooden table surrounded by four plastic chairs. He’s right when he says it’s not much, but it looks like a king’s castle to me. I haven’t eaten indoors in over five months, give or take a few days.

He’s busy putting sliced bread in a toaster. He only has cheap margarine, but I devour the contents of my plate without hesitation.

“I’ll pay you,” I say through a mouthful of food. “I don’t have much, but I can pay for the bread.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he says brusquely, piling grilled Spam and cheese toast on my plate. “I’ll get you some of the hot chocolate.”

He doesn't talk while we eat, and I'm glad. I'm in seventh heaven, and I keep worrying that I'll wake up. I dream about food too much as it is.

It's not until I'm sipping on my cocoa that he speaks again.

"Do you have somewhere to stay for the night?"

I keep my eyes on the chipped mug brimming with milk and chocolate foam. "Not really. I thought maybe the bus stop."

"I thought as much." Mr. Blaine stares out the window. "Do you want a job?"

I put the mug down carefully. Best not to spill anything, given how my hands just started shaking.

"I don't have references," I say baldly. "I don't even have any ID. I left everything behind."

He doesn't ask where *behind* is. He just nods.

"I can pay you a hundred dollars a week," he says, becoming brisk all of a sudden. "I know it's not much, but you can live here rent-free, you don't have to pay for food or utilities, and internet is included."

"What's the job?" I croak. *Please don't let him be a creep*, I pray. Or a serial killer or something like that.

"I need help with the house," he says. "I can run the tours by myself, but just keeping things clean in a place this size is getting beyond me. Do you know how to use a vacuum cleaner?"

"I do," I say, nodding frantically. "I can also dust, mop, and mow the lawn, and I can do small repairs as long as it's not electrical."

"Done," he says, stretching out his hand. "Welcome to Blaine's House of Horrors. You can sleep in the torture dungeon tonight."

"I can do *what?!?*"

Jeremy

“**C**all for you, Mr. Steele.”

I flash my assistant an irritated glance. Can she not see I’m with a client right now?

Although, to be fair, it’s not the client I’m looking at. A beautiful portrait by Isabel Morales has just arrived, and I want to gloat about that fact, if only to myself, without interruptions.

Sunlight filters in through the heavy drapes that protect my gallery from the searing Louisiana sunshine and turns Jessica’s untidy red hair into a flaming halo. She hovers like an anxious angel, shooting me a worried glance.

“You’ll want to take it,” she whispers. “It’s Brian Caldwell, Mr. Steele.”

Oh. Well, that’s different, then.

I give the client a professionally discreet smile and nod. “Do excuse me. I’ll leave you to soak in the colors for a while.”

Then I’m striding down the length of the broad display space, anxious to get to my office. Jessica clumps after me, diligent and capable in her brown suede shoes, and closes the door to give me privacy.

I take a deep breath before I pick up the phone. This might get ugly.

“Brian?”

“Jeremy! Finally. I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

“No, not at all,” I hasten to reassure the older man. Brian is my best friend, my oldest partner in crime, so to speak, since we were both young boys in Springfield, Ohio. Every time I speak to him, wherever I am in the world, his country twang pulls me back and reminds me where I come from.

And if he sounds like he’s frantic to get away from Springfield lately, well, he’s got every excuse for it.

“Any news?” I ask him gently. There is silence from the other end of the line.

I close my eyes. *How long can a man endure fear like Brian has and still stay sane?*

“No,” Brian finally admits in a shaky voice. “No, we haven’t heard anything. The police think she’s probably left the state, if she’s still even . . .”

He can’t bring himself to say the word, but I know what he means. It’s been more than five months since Brian’s teenage daughter ran away from home, and they say the first twenty-four hours are the most crucial in a missing persons case.

“How’s Talissa doing?” I remember to ask. I don’t like the woman, but she is Brian’s wife and the mother of the missing girl. Privately, I blame her for not keeping a better watch on the kid while Brian was away at work, but I will never, ever say that aloud.

“Oh, Tally’s coping,” says Brian, and I know that tone of voice too. His wife is as brittle and cruel as he is softhearted and kind. Most people who know them have no idea how two such different people ended up together. I think I’m one of five people alive who know the whole story and the only one willing to admit there might be faults on both sides.

“She’s been active online,” Brian says quickly, too quickly. He’ll often defend Talissa to other people, and it’s a bad sign that he feels the need to do it to me. “On search and rescue volunteer pages and everything. There have been a lot of

strangers who have been through the same thing. They're all hanging out on the same Facebook pages. It's comforting for her."

And who's going to comfort you, Brian? Once again, for the hundredth time since all this happened, I wish I didn't have to feel so goddamn guilty about leaving Springfield.

My old friend isn't really a communicative person, being the type of strong man who was raised to believe in silent prayer during tough times. No online groups nor prayer meetings for him. He's probably never even considered therapy in his life.

And now his child has disappeared, and I doubt he has anyone to talk to, apart from me.

"She might still come back on her own," I say, more optimistically than I have any right to.

There is another stretch of silence from Brian's end of the line. I try to recall when I last saw his kid.

Melissa Caldwell didn't run away from home by accident. She left a note asking her parents to forgive her and not to look for her. I have seen the note, and I had seen the look on her father's face when I went to meet him five months ago.

He looked old. He looked ashamed.

Her mother had put out pictures of the child all over the house. Talissa always liked a kind of upper-crust glamor aesthetic, but without any true feeling. Everything in the Caldwell house has always been beige and gold and polished to within an inch of its life. The newly printed pictures of their missing daughter sat incongruously in a place most people would call a showplace instead of a home.

No wonder Brian was away from home so much. And no wonder his daughter couldn't stick it out either.

I infuse my voice with an entirely false note of enthusiasm. "She could return. Miracles do happen, Brian. You have to have faith."

“I’m trying,” he says dispiritedly, “but it’s hard. It’s so hard. I’m just so tired, Jeremy. I can’t sleep at night, you know. I keep lying awake until the early hours, thinking about all the worst things that could have happened to her.” There is a short pause. “I keep wondering why she left without talking to me first. I don’t know where it all went so wrong.”

And there’s the nub of it. It’s Brian, a strong man and a strict father, and frankly, the last person an unhappy kid would go to for help if she happens to be in any kind of trouble.

Though I still feel a spurt of anger rising sourly in my throat against the kid. *Doesn’t she know what she’s doing to her dad, or does she just not care?*

Not for the first time, I congratulate myself on having successfully avoided the twin pitfalls of marriage and kids. From what I’ve seen in my nearly four decades on this earth, none of that is really worth the stress and the pain.

But I’m trying to be a good friend here, even if I can’t bring myself to go back to Ohio to be physically close to the Caldwell household. The whole town of Springfield holds bleak and joyless memories for me. Brian could’ve gotten out, as well, if he hadn’t let a spoiled little rich girl trap him into an early marriage with the threat of terminating her pregnancy.

Talissa Caldwell, who used to be Talissa Edmondson, is the kind of person who has always had everything handed to her on a plate. Her parents spoiled her rotten, gave in to her every whim, and taught her that every other person she ever met in her life was supposed to treat her like a little princess as well.

So when she got pregnant and went crying to her father, one of the wealthiest men in Ohio with who knows how many senators and police commissioners living in his back pocket, Brian was told to make an honest woman out of her. He would have done it anyway, for the child’s sake. The man didn’t have it in him to lose the baby.

And now, nearly twenty years later, he has had to face the fact that perhaps his sacrifice was for nothing. The child is lost anyway.

My hand clenches on my restored walnut captain's desk. "Is there anything I can do? You'd tell me if there's anything you need, right, Brian?"

This is code for *tell me if you need money*, but I don't know if he understands me. I have offered to get them private investigators before, but Talissa's parents already hired a firm. I don't know how Brian is managing at his job at the steel plant, where he is a senior supervisor, but I know it goes against the grain for him to beg anyone for help.

His own parents died when he was young, just a few years before he and I went into the real estate brokerage business together. The man is used to looking after himself. He'd had to make some tough calls about his career, his whole future, once he found out he was going to be a dad.

And right now, he's helpless. I can't stand to see him this way. He was always the dependable one, older and tougher and more practical than me.

I've never heard him sound so ashamed of himself. I don't know why he thinks his daughter's leaving home must be his fault, but I suspect he thinks it's some kind of punishment from God. His parents were devout Episcopalians, so it was just how he was raised.

Someone told me his daughter stopped going to church when she was twelve. I don't know how that happened either. I know Brian won't tell me anything, but I know him well enough to read between the lines occasionally.

He wasn't there for the kid. He wasn't at home enough. He didn't do enough. That's why she slipped out of the house behind his back. He'll never forgive himself.

The sunshine outside dims, changeable and moody as always in the summer. The cheerful, busy sounds of the New Orleans French Quarter fade into a meaningless buzz. I want to grieve for my friend, but I want to keep his sense of hope alive as well. He's halfway across the country, and his sadness lives in this room with me.

“There’s nothing,” he says at last. “I just wanted to hear a friendly voice. I’m getting sick of people telling me to pray. It’s not helping.”

“I know.” Such an easy thing for other people to say, so difficult to hear for a self-acknowledged sinner, I would imagine.

“If she were already dead, I would know,” he says fiercely. “She’s my child, my flesh and blood. I should be able to sense it. I *know* I’d know. If she were already gone, I know I would have felt her passing.”

“I understand,” I say, helpless fear for him spreading through my body. This is a man teetering on the edge of a breakdown. I have a fairly good idea what it will do to him if the police do find a body.

There are a thousand other things that could happen to an innocent, sheltered young girl alone on the streets as well. Those are among the things he can’t ever say. Those are the thousand nightmares that make him afraid to go to sleep.

“I’ll be traveling for a couple of weeks or so, next month,” I say after another of those hopeless pauses. “But after that, I could drop in at the old place for a while. If you think it might help.”

“What good would it do?” replies Brian, his voice heavy with defeat. “If she’s alive, she’ll come back on her own, Jeremy. She’s not a bad kid, you know. She just got lost somewhere along the way.”

I sit on the edge of my desk for a long while after I hang up with Brian, thinking about that.

It’s been so long since I last saw Brian and his family, so long since I deserted my old hometown and all our familiar haunts, that I can’t even remember what the girl looks like anymore on my own. I’ve seen the pictures they gave the police for her missing persons report, but her social media pages haven’t been active for a long time.

Resentment wells up again in a thick tide. What kind of girl is this, really, to put her poor father through all the pain

he's enduring?

If you're alive out there, Melissa Caldwell, I think fiercely, you'd better get your ass home as fast as you can.

Because God help you if I find you first. I'm nowhere near as forgiving as your father, I can promise that much.

Melissa

A few months later

Despite my initial fears, it doesn't take me too long to settle in at Gordon Blaine's House of Horrors. Gordon himself might be old and eccentric and cranky, but I can forgive anything if a man is as truly kind as he is.

And he is a good employer, I know that much. Most people would chase a homeless teen off the premises instead of offering them bed, board, and a job. Gordon treats me with scrupulous fairness and behaves as though I have a perfect right to be on his property.

The best thing about him is that he doesn't want to ask questions about my background. He asked if I wanted help getting any paperwork filled out exactly one time, but I only had to shake my head once to get him to drop the entire subject.

So he's not nosy, but he sure loves to talk. He'll talk about anything and everything as we move together through the big, gloomy house, cleaning up the clutter and cobwebs of years of neglect. I don't feel up to much conversation myself, so I'm very happy to just listen to Gordon.

He knows all about American horror, from the great authors to the history of horror houses during the Great

Depression, to the most recent and exciting developments in the world of Hollywood's many horror movie franchises.

"In *my* day," he'll say happily, "you couldn't make a movie about undead nuns without raising all kinds of hell and fury from the churches, Catholic or not! Look at how far we've come. I love the *Conjuring* series, don't you?"

I'm more of a Stephen King girl, clowns in the gutters and zombies from the pet cemetery and all, so I have to confess I've never actually seen any of the *Conjuring* movies. Gordon stares at me in amazement, his wispy gray eyebrows nearly flying off his face.

"You haven't?" He seems genuinely appalled. "Young lady, you don't know what you've missed out on. What the hell have you been doing with your life?"

I don't have the courage to tell him that much of my love of the horror genre comes from well-thumbed books from the local library back in Springfield.

Neither of my parents ever had time for my interests, and my dad would never allow creepy movies smacking of witchcraft or any form of the occult in the house. He never knew I was reading Stephen King and Clive Barker and Lovecraft behind his back.

And as for celebrating Halloween, forget about it, it being a commercialized Satanic event involving spoiling kids with candy and all.

So I'm very happy to curl up with a bowl of buttered popcorn and the statutory cup of cocoa while Gordon hunts through his collection of pirated DVDs for his favorite movies. In this era of streaming, he still swears by the old ways, which involves paying a teenager in nearby Seahollow to burn him copies of all the latest releases involving gore, psychological horror, body horror, and slasher killers. What a traditionalist, that man.

We watch the creepy adventures of a very vintage couple who are part exorcists, part bell bottom jeans models, I guess. I enjoy the jump scares thoroughly, and Gordon tells me the

history of the house the one in the movie is based on in real life, which is even creepier. The special effects are wild.

Later, as I'm nodding off with my head against the back of the antique fake leather, Gordon says something that sticks with me for the rest of my life.

"Spirits are just people who got lost on their way to somewhere else," he intones slowly, pebbled old eyes glazing over as he glances at me sleepily. "You can't be angry at someone for getting lost, can you? They're not the enemy."

And if that doesn't sum up his attitude toward my mooching around this huge old house, I don't know what does.

It might look like a shambling ruin from the outside, but I do love this house. It is not only the refuge I need, but also the first place I have ever felt truly at home.

Something about the jigsaw clutter of corridors and empty, abandoned rooms just appeals to me. I can picture a large family living in this house once and how the kids must have loved running up and down, exploring hidden corners and coming upon lost treasures from the past. There are all kinds of oddities here, from wooden ships in bottles to tall old grandfather clocks. It was already a ruin when Gordon bought it, but someone loved this place once.

The dungeons are really the old wine cellars, sprawling and cold. They are well-built, however, dating back to when this used to be flood country. Time was when small towns could get cut off when the roads went underwater, and practically every house had to keep stone cellars full of pickled meats and vegetables in glass jars that could last through a tough winter.

There are old wooden barrels in the cellars that once held salted game, and the butler's pantry contains a selection of huge, rusted knives that show how you could carve and store whole venison at home.

The long, low room that used to originally be the old kitchen lies abandoned, clumps of dried herbs still swinging from the wooden rafters. It gives on to a small stone courtyard

at the back of the house. Gordon says that there used to be an expansive kitchen range here once, capable of producing enough to feed a small army, but since he never needed it, he sold it and put the money into repairs and special effects for the house.

His love for the place shines through everything he does. In his mind, his House of Horrors is a huge, creaking old machine, a compendium of moving parts whose wheels grind together to produce a singularly horrifying effect that will inspire exciting chills and thrills in all the paying customers.

To me, it is paradise. Summer comes and goes, and I learn the ropes of the place. I operate the levers that open the creaky old front doors while Gordon stands in the entrance in a moth-eaten old top hat, doing his best impersonation of an undead zombie butler. He pulls horrific faces while I drop the bundle of sheets from the high beam in the great hall—the undead bride who still haunts the house.

Then I scamper around to the hidden door at one side of the upper gallery and go downstairs to switch on the sound machine that creates distant screams of terror from the Dungeons of Horrific Torture, I turn on the ghostly lights meant to be the will-o'-the-wisp leading unwary travelers astray on the crumbled old gravel driveway, and finally, I stand behind the painted sarcophagus which bestows terrible plagues and curses upon whosoever touches it. Gordon tells me happily that he got it cheap from a field archaeologist who swore it was the real thing from ancient Egypt, homeland of the mummy trope, but the hieroglyphs are definitely stenciled on cheap cardboard, and the interior smells like curdled yogurt.

I say nothing. I'm just happy to be here, having the time of my life.

My favorite part of the day is when the customers go home. We don't get many, though there's a boom during the summer tourist season. Gordon doesn't know how to advertise online to save his life, and the way he offers discounts is frankly self-sabotage, but I can see it makes him happy whenever small children pour out of their parents' cars and go

away happy and full to the brim with the grisly stories he tells them.

Most of the magic here is in his enthusiastic narration, and if the parents smile tiredly and the older teens roll their eyes, so what? He makes some people believe, and that is enough.

After they're gone, he makes a small meal for us in his cramped little kitchen while I count our takings and put them in his old tin box for cash. The house swallows up everything he makes, but Gordon airily brushes it off, telling me not to worry. It's months before I discover that he bought early shares in Apple at some point and has successfully resisted all offers to sell ever since. It reassures me because I was starting to worry about how he was going to survive in his old age. I'm very attached to him by now.

After dinner and washing up, we watch old horror movies. Gordon generally falls asleep halfway through, and I let him snore through the second half while I get through all the vintage stuff in his DVD collection. Slasher movies are not my favorite, but I can see the appeal of a serial killer with a chainsaw haunting the premises, and I resolve to have a word with him about setting up an obstacle course or maybe a more modern basement prison. I'm sure it would be a real money spinner if we got it right.

Eventually, I wake him up and send him off to bed in his room on the first floor. I wash up our cocoa mugs and turn all the lights off and check that all the doors are locked before I trudge upstairs to my attic room.

There are nights when I sit on the side of my narrow bed, breathing slowly as I count my blessings.

Roof over my head. Food on the table. A steady job and a room of my own. No more choking fear at the back of my throat, though it still creeps up on me sometimes.

Before I left my parents' house, I never really knew what fear was. I knew all about feeling trapped and lonely and miserable, but I did not have to fend for myself on the streets until I slammed out of the house after that final argument.

I have learned to take care of myself the hard way. All the long, difficult nights when I slept in bus stations or curled up in cardboard boxes outside shops, I have thought about going back.

The most difficult thing to face has always been that my mother might not welcome me back and that my father might not have even noticed I was ever gone.

Gordon would notice if I were gone. He needs me to keep this behemoth of a horror house running, to do chores and help with the special effects and give him company after the day's work is over. Nobody has ever needed me before. I have always been so unnecessary at home.

Sometimes, I sit beside the circular window, cut to resemble a porthole, at the top of the house and think about the words my mother flung at me the day I left.

There are words that no child should ever have to hear, like *ugly* and *unwanted* and *burden* and *accident*. There are mothers who can only hate their children for keeping them trapped in a life they didn't want. As if the children had a choice.

I stare out at the stars sprinkling the skies above the valley. *If I ever have children, they will never doubt that I love them and want them. They might be heavy to carry, but never a burden. Never.*

If they leave home and never look back, it will be over my dead body. No child of mine will be alone in the world and worry that they deserve to feel like that.

I pull the heavy old patchwork quilt over my knees and stroke it for comfort. I will not look back, only forward.

I have a home now, in this odd house on the hill, and my eighteenth birthday is in a week's time. Just seven more days, and then the law can't make me go back to a house where I know I'm not welcome.

I'm lucky, I think sleepily. I could so easily have been injured or killed while I was homeless. Instead, I found shelter

when I needed it and a hiding place that is always mine while Gordon is alive. He's already promised me that.

The eaves of the house rustle around me. I breathe into and with the house, this crumbling old shell of a place that I love with all my heart.

Home, I whisper right before I fall asleep. It's a beautiful dream to have.

Below in the valley, a car's headlights flash on and sweep across the road. I sleep on, oblivious to the danger on the horizon.

The car starts to make the climb up the hill and then halts.

Tomorrow. My life is going to change tomorrow, and I still have no idea how much I will be asked to sacrifice.

Jeremy

The next day

The lights of the old city dim and glare in harsh white streaks as the city passes by. Inside the Japanese bullet train, there is peace.

I idly roll my head back. There's nobody in my compartment except for me. After the frantic pace of both business and nightlife that I have experienced in Tokyo lately, it is a blessed relief.

I feel old. The thought flashes through my mind like a silverfish, darting in and out of the current of my thoughts to leave the imprint of an unease I'm all too familiar with, a hint of a bitter aftertaste.

I'm in Japan alone because I usually prefer to travel alone. This time, I feel a bit more isolated than usual. Perhaps there is a sense that life has left me behind. Maybe it's about having to leave Brian back in the States.

"Come with me," I remember urging him. "It'll be good for you to get out of your house for a while, and we can come straight back if anything happens."

"If anything happens?" I remember him looking at me with old, tired eyes, shaking his head stubbornly. It has been months since his daughter left, and he is a shell of the man he used to be. He's afraid to leave home in case Melissa comes back and finds him gone.

Even at the best of times, Brian was never going to be a happy globetrotter like me. Lately, he has rooted himself in the only place in the world that gapes open like a raw wound with the pain of missing someone near and dear.

It doesn't occur to me until I'm here on this train that grief is also a privilege.

I'm only a few years younger than Brian, and I have no real close family ties. No wife, no kids, no warm relationships with my assorted siblings. I have had a successful business and a string of sophisticated girlfriends who knew their exact place in my life, which was convenient but never too close.

I think of what it might mean to lose someone you love and not know whether they're dead or alive. I don't know how I would feel. Especially not if it were my child.

I tuck the packages under my arm a bit closer. They are gifts for the children of a Japanese colleague, a very erudite and pleasant man who could not let me leave Tokyo before inviting me to dinner at his house. I hope I have bought things that will make his kids happy, but the Japanese raise their children to be as exquisitely polite as adults, so I'm unlikely to realize even if I did get it wrong.

The train signals the approach of Hiroo, my destination. I disembark at one of the glossiest, cleanest train stations I have ever seen in the world to find an assigned driver already waiting to escort me to a cab.

I'm touched by this unexpected courtesy. My good friend Kenshin has arranged everything, so now I don't have to struggle with navigating to his house.

All I have to do is relax in the scrupulously clean cab as I'm driven through an upscale and refreshingly leafy neighborhood. Kenshin Takahashi lives in an attractive wooden mansion constructed in a very traditional Japanese style.

This does not prevent him from using the best of modern technology, however. I spot extremely expensive security

cameras and automated sprinklers in his graceful garden before I'm decanted at his door.

My old colleague hurries forward to receive me, trading a handshake for a quick bow. He and his wife are both in conservative western clothing, I'm guessing in deference to me. A pair of bright-eyed children peer around the plain wooden doors, looking more at the packages in my arms than at me.

"Hello, Kenshin." I smile, handing over the brightly wrapped presents. Mrs. Takahashi brings her children forward to say *hello* and *thank you* before she lets them even touch their gifts. Their father smiles indulgently as he leads me indoors into a graceful low foyer and settles me in front of an array of whisky, sake, and other drinks.

"I thought you might appreciate a moment to relax before dinner," he says to me, a wry twist to his mouth. "I'm told the auction today was exhausting. How long were you there? Seven hours?"

"Eight," I sigh, reaching for a glass of golden cognac. "There was fierce competition for the calligraphy panels. Who knew the old Imperial styles would become so popular, eh? I counted at least a dozen other Americans in the bidding, though the Germans were not far behind."

"Ah, it's a trend." He shrugs. "Five years ago, they all wanted heads of armor and Samurai swords. Today it is Japanese calligraphy, tomorrow it will be Chinese porcelain. You and I, we make our living where we can."

Kenshin Takahashi owns an exquisite gallery in Tokyo, one in San Francisco, and one in Milan. Art was not his family business originally, but like me, he found a new space for his own tastes and thrives among connoisseur and amateur enthusiasts for classic art alike.

"Your house is as beautiful as I thought," I compliment him, glancing around at the paper walls, hand-painted with incredible craftsmanship. The whole house sprawls around a central courtyard on one floor only. In crowded Tokyo, owning enough acreage for a lawn is wealth indeed.

“Thank you,” he says, sipping at his sake. “I’m pleased you like it. Though I must confess to an ulterior motive. I wanted to see you once before you returned to the States, and in private. This dinner is merely an excuse to ask a favor.”

“Oh?” I lean forward, my ears pricked up. I can see my own reflection in the mirrored table before me, graying at the temples and my face distorted out of the usual craggy lines. But I’m not so old as to be blind to the opportunities here.

Doing a favor for Kenshin Takahashi is no small matter. I speculate briefly on the possible reward for my own business, smaller but more ambitious than his. From the spark in his eyes, he knows what I’m thinking before I do.

“A personal favor,” he corrects gently. “My wife wishes to travel to your country, old friend. Her cousin is soon to be married in Washington, DC, and she wants us to go. While we are there, we would like our children to see a little of America. Perhaps a road trip? I have seen it in the movies. Do you think it is safe enough?”

I stare at the older Japanese man, trying to picture his careful speech and beautiful courtesy in a series of gas stations and cheap diners across America. I can’t help but break into a smile.

“What kind of movies have you been watching?” I ask him, chortling. “I would love to host you in my country, Kenshin, and of course, your family as well, but I must warn you, nothing over there is as exciting as Hollywood would like to make out.”

“I don’t know which movies!” He shrugs, smiling as well. “Whatever my children like to watch. My older boy, Daiki, has decided he likes a great deal of action and bloodshed, so he wants to see Texas. My younger daughter, Akari, is more civilized, so she will settle for Disneyland.”

“I see,” I say, swirling my cognac around meditatively. “It is to be an extensive cross-country trip, then. But we have very good domestic flights. There is no need for you to waste time driving around.”

He tilts his head to one side. “Is it not safe for my family?”

“Well . . .” I hesitate. “I don’t know if it is unsafe, exactly, but I would feel more comfortable if you had a local guide with you at all times.”

He gives me a hopeful look. I, mellowed by brandy and a successful day at the auction house, meet my inevitable fate and capitulate with grace.

“I would be very happy to show you around my country myself, of course,” I say at once. “Once the wedding is over, you must visit me in New Orleans, and we’ll set out from there.”

“Wonderful!” he says, clapping his hands together in salutation. “My dear friend, how very kind of you to offer us your time. To tell you the truth, I would not have trusted any American other than yourself on this trip. I do not usually travel with my family, after all.”

“I know,” I say, trying not to sound resigned.

Escorting a pair of children around tourist attractions is not exactly my idea of a good time, but Kenshin has always been courteous to me in the past and might well put business my way in the future.

And it is characteristic of him to make me offer my services as tour guide before he ever even asked. He was always an excellent negotiator, of course.

“Hana!” he calls to his wife. ” Good news! Jeremy has asked us to be his guests when we go to America.”

She appears at the door, a plate of savory appetizers ready in her hands. In sweetly accented English, she says, “You are so kind, Jeremy-San. Thank you very, very much. Please, eat something.”

I bite into something unidentifiable but delicious, a gorgeous bouquet of spices that somehow suits my cognac perfectly.

“And the children will be so happy,” she adds, beaming at me. “They are so pleased with your gifts for them, you cannot

imagine. They love you already.”

“Only because I bribed them with American candy,” I say, my eyes twinkling. Kenshin laughs out loud and pours me another drink.

“No, but truly,” says Hana earnestly. “Daiki is at the age where boys develop sudden obsessions, and for the moment, he is in love with American horror movies. He adores the skull mask that you brought him.”

“Which reminds me,” says Kenshin casually. “I acquired some interesting specimens of Māori death masks earlier this year, and I would like your opinion on them.”

“But only after dinner,” says his charming wife firmly. “First, you must eat some proper food. Come, come.”

Kenshin claps me on the back as I get to my feet. His eyes are filled with warmth and laughter. *I’m looking at a truly happy man*, I find myself thinking unexpectedly. It is a novel thought.

“And you must not let Daiki talk your ear off about blood and gore at the dinner table, either,” he warns me gently. “He’s obsessed with serial killers and horror houses now.”

I make a mental note to find out more. It seems the wishes of a twelve-year-old boy are going to be a prominent feature of my life in the near future, and I don’t want to seem uncool to young Daiki.

My thoughts flash briefly to Brian, perhaps sitting alone at home mourning his daughter at this moment. I feel a prick of guilt, followed by an unease I can’t quite explain. *I’ll call him tomorrow*, I decide. Tonight, I can revel in the warmth of this pretty, happy house for just a while longer before I have to return to the States and to the more unpleasant parts of my life.

“Tell me, Jeremy-San,” says the boy eagerly as I sit at their dining table. “Have you ever seen a real skull?”

And that’s enough to keep me smiling and content for now.

Melissa

Six weeks later

“**S**top running up and down the stairs, Melissa!” yells Gordon. “Anyone would think there’s a fire in the house!”

I ignore him. Gordon has grown increasingly cranky as Halloween approaches, and I don’t have time to soothe him today, of all days. The new mummy has just arrived.

It takes two delivery men, my assistance, and nagging supervision from Gordon to get the gigantic package into the house. I tip them extra with reckless enthusiasm. Business has been good lately, even if Gordon doesn’t approve of all my ideas to make our House of Horrors more interesting to customers.

It takes almost half an hour to unwrap the several layers of packaging, but that’s not the reason I’m so breathless. I’m just in love.

“Look at him!” I fling my hands out for extra drama. “Look at how beautiful he is!”

Gordon grunts. “In my day, linen bandages were good enough for mummies. We didn’t need all this extra nonsense, I can tell you that much.”

Our new mummy stands tall and proud in the center of the refurbished hall. He is a truly magnificent specimen. Almost

six and a half feet tall, trailing authentically aged cloth wrappings and absolutely covered with disgusting scars.

“It’s for the backstory, Gordon,” I say in a wounded tone. “If we’re going to say he was punished by an ancient curse to be eaten alive by fire ants, he has to look like it.”

“It should be scarab beetles,” says Gordon disconsolately. “Scarab beetles are traditional, you know. Not that you care.”

I actually do, but I have also done careful market research, and basically, any carnivorous creepy-crawly bug can feature in a horror house as long as you can accurately display what happens after they’re done attacking you and chewing you up.

“Well, it fits with our general vibe well enough,” I say firmly, and it’s true. I’ve also put fake snakes under the beds and vanishing scorpions under the lawn. The goal is to keep everyone alert for unexpected terrors throughout every inch of the house and grounds.

Nowhere Is Safe is literally the caption for my Facebook ad blast for this year’s Halloween-themed events, after all. *Murder Amidst the Mundane* and *Crawls Around Corners* have also proven to be popular with the incoming rush of people eager to experience thrills and chills at our place.

Gordon hates it. He’s old-school enough that he thinks putting printed pamphlets up around town is enough, and I’m starting to think he actively hates too many visitors at a time.

It’s frustrating, but I can’t let his stodginess stop me from doing the best I can for the house. From the day he first took me in, I started thinking of this old house atop a hill as home, and I know that I would die to keep it that way for both of us.

Gordon’s grumbling follows me as I wheel the trolley carrying the mummy very, very carefully to the concealed alcove at the back of the hall.

“And what are we going to do about all that candy, eh?” he huffs, pouting like a child. “You’ve taken over everything, so now I have to stand at the door like some kind of glorified snack valet?”

“I haven’t taken it over, I’ve just automated it on the Bluetooth,” I tell him for the hundredth time. “You know, so neither of us falls down and fractures something while we rush around to get the special effects running for the whole tour. We can’t run the house from hospital beds, can we?”

“I’m not that old,” he says stubbornly. “And I don’t want to be the butler. I don’t like the new suit.”

“You’re *supposed* to be sad,” I retort. “You are undead, ghostly, tied to an abandoned mansion by your own unquiet spirit. You’re not supposed to like anything about it. The suit just helps you stay in character.”

I tenderly brush some stray lint off the ant-eaten mummy’s savagely disfigured face, ignoring Gordon’s muttering. Some of the words that float into my hearing include *dumb*, *brat*, and *had enough*.

I look back at him and wink. “But admit it. He is splendid, isn’t he? I think I’ll call him Brian.”

“After your dad?” Gordon’s eyebrows rise up to meet his wispy gray hairline. “You want to name this caricature of the ancient undead after your father?”

I nod. “Yep. He’s sad, helpless, and eaten alive by forces beyond his control. What more do you want?”

Gordon eyes me ruminatively. “Hmm.”

It was months before I could bring myself to tell Gordon about my family. I deliberately waited until I’d crossed my eighteenth birthday in August, just in case he decided to send me back.

After that, the secrets came spilling out. The years of loneliness, all the spite from my mom, and my dad always being gone. Things that other people may call abuse or neglect but I think of as *just my life*.

Bad luck. That’s all it ever was. Enough to drive me out onto the streets because living outdoors felt like a better choice than being trapped in the foster care system that my mom had threatened me with ever since I was a tiny toddler.

Gordon listened, silently and patiently, for hours at a time. I think now of how many times I have cried in front of him. Sometimes, I resort to cursing and anger to feel better. Sometimes, my hands still shake in the aftermath of letting all the fear out.

Throughout it all, Gordon has never judged me. He has offered me a permanent home and a safe job, and as far as I'm concerned, he gets to do or say whatever he wants from now until the end of time.

I wish he were my real father sometimes. I have never told him this in words, but I think he knows. Otherwise, his faded blue eyes wouldn't look so kind when I say random shit like this.

"You haven't seen my costume yet, have you?" I say brightly to cover the awkward silence. "I splurged a bit, but I think it's worth it for the quality of the fabric. It should last for years."

"Nope," says Gordon, tacitly accepting my decision to change the subject. He never reacts well to too much emotion, which suits me perfectly. "You've driven me mad about everything else, though, so let me have a look before the house opens today."

"I'll change into it right now!" I squeak excitedly. "Wait here."

"As if I have anywhere else to be," he mutters, but he is smiling slightly. I decide it's safe to leave him alone with undead Brian and head up to my attic room to get my new dress out.

A lot has changed since I first moved in. Since I had no extra clothes or possessions, Gordon let me ransack his stores of old costumes for the first couple of days until he had a chance to drive me to the nearest clothing chain store. Seahollow turned out to have a couple of great thrift shops as well, so my wardrobe now contains plenty of good, if slightly old-fashioned, clothes.

But the Halloween gown will be my first new dress since my mom threw my Sweet Sixteen birthday party. She forgot to invite my few friends, invited all of hers instead, stuffed me into a dress I didn't want, and then made fun of my being fat for the rest of the night. I remember that Dad got drunk and I threw up. Not one of my best nights.

This time will be different, I tell myself gleefully. I chose this dress myself, and I have made sure it makes the best of my admittedly abundant curves. Even if it doesn't, I feel completely safe showing it to Gordon. He might hate it, but he's never called me fat or even mentioned the shape of my body at all. In fact, he usually tries to make me eat more at mealtimes.

I throw a quick glance around my room, narrow and cramped under the eaves and inexpressibly dear to me.

Gordon never comes up here, though he has every right. In the months I've been here, I have put a stray box of Christmas ribbons on a small box near the bed and a few old movie posters on the wall. Just a few touches of color to make the place feel brighter, more *mine*.

I go downstairs, carefully patting my hair down. I have put it up in a fairly basic coiled braid around my temples, letting the rest of my thick, dark, curly hair cascade over my shoulders and down my back. The gown fits me well without constricting my movements, and the rustle of silk on the staircases makes me feel like a princess.

Actually, not a princess. A queen of the night.

I descend slowly down the rickety staircase, taking care not to trip over the flowing skirts. Gordon looks up and his eyes widen. Is it dismay or delight?

"How much did you say that cost?" he nearly shrieks. Right, okay. Dismay, then.

But I'm the one who handles our budget now, and I know we can afford this, just about. I skip lightly down the last few steps and come to a halt under Gordon's disapproving glare.

“Worth every red cent,” I tell him brightly. “Wait, let me look.”

My room upstairs is too small to hold more than a tiny mirror on the wall. But down here, there is a set of floor length mirrors edged with gilt, though it takes practice to remember which one holds the true reflection among all the others which throw up distorted shapes. Gordon got them from a funhouse for cheap long ago, but they are very useful for setting up a maze for the house.

I prance up to the selection of mirror frames set up at careful angles to each other to create illusions and choose the fifth one from the first row, third one from the left. *Oh. Wow.*

A stranger stares back at me. She looks much older than I really am, powerful and confident and dangerously beautiful.

It’s this magical dress. It makes me look taller, even slimmer. It makes the most of my shoulders and collarbones, which are exposed above a dramatically low neckline of blood scarlet lined with funereal black. Below the cinched waist, there is a waterfall of red and black tulle that gives mystery and grace to my every movement.

“I almost look *pretty*,” I say in a hushed voice. “Can you imagine?”

A faint smile touches Gordon’s lips. “You look expensive. But yes, pretty,” he allows. “Wait here.”

He stomps off to his rooms in the back of the house, where he keeps all his old stuff. Behind the horror decorations and magic mirrors and mummies in sarcophagi is a kind of continuous backstage which we mainly use for storage. Gordon limits himself to the tiny kitchen which used to be a butler’s pantry and a small room behind it where he sleeps in an ancient Chinese box bed, inside drapes and all.

I secretly covet that exotic bed. I know for a fact that Gordon has odd little treasures hidden in the concealed drawers of the four bedposts. He comes hurrying back with one of them in his hands.

“Take this,” he says and hurriedly thrusts it at me. I gasp.

It is an immense blood-red jewel, as large as a pigeon's egg and shining like volcanic fire, set in a locket of pale amethysts on a chain of heavy silver. I touch it in disbelief.

"Is it real?" I ask breathlessly. I can't tear my gaze from it.

"No, of course not," I reply before Gordon can break the illusion. "But I love it. It goes perfectly with the dress. Thank you, Gordon, with all my heart."

Gordon shuffles uncomfortably, as he always does when I thank him. From the other end of the hall, a hollow booming signals the first visitors of the day.

"I'll get that," says Gordon, yanking on his antique tie and coattails. "Positions!"

I hurry to the foot of the stairs, working hard to put on my best regal and disdainful expression. *Showtime.*

"Welcome, welcome, weary travelers, to Gordon Blaine's House of Horrors," intones Gordon from the high front door. "Enter if you dare."

And then Dracula steps into the house and my breath stops.

Jeremy

The website claims that this is the best haunted house in Maine, and from the outside, it certainly appears to be the most decrepit. I wonder if I'm doing the right thing by showing the Takahashi family this particular tourist trap.

At least the prices are decent. Some of the other haunted houses we toured were just poorly constructed jump scares and ghosts that moved obviously by someone pulling a pulley.

I knew there were some haunted houses in the country where you could stay overnight, and I had been determined to stay in one with my guests, but most were booked in advance, or the reviews were shoddy.

I'm happy, though. Daiki is having the time of his life, and it seems that Kenshin and his doting wife are pleased whenever their children are happy.

I'm delighted because every day, I'm becoming closer to Kenshin and the businesses he represents. I have already been the recipient of several gifts that fit well in my collection at home and the office. Kenshin spares no expense with those he considers his friends, and I appreciate his kind manner more and more each day.

"Jeremy-San." Daiki comes up and touches my hand. "This is the scariest house we've seen so far, and we're not

even at the door. And look.” He points to the side of the house. “They have a pet cemetery!”

All of the boy’s dreams of meeting Stephen King and exploring the many haunted houses across the US are coming to fruition, and the kid’s glee is infectious.

“Hey, Daiki,” I said, an idea igniting in my head. “If we take a trip after this to Bangor, we can at least drop by Stephen King’s house to look through the gate and see where all the magic happens.”

I don’t think the kid’s eyes could widen any more. He bursts into an uncharacteristic giggle that makes even his sister laugh.

Both kids turn toward their parents for approval. Kenshin, seeing their joy, shrugs, saying, “I suppose it won’t be too much out of the way. Where are we now, Jeremy-San?”

“A blip on the map called Seahollow. The biggest attraction at this stop is Blaine’s House of Horrors.” I gesture to the rambling mansion. Looking harder at the building, I can see someone has been working diligently to keep the old Victorian house up to date.

The steps creak as we walk up but do not overly bend under our weight. Instead of a traditional door knocker, a big rope dangles to the side of the door. I test it, pulling gently. A sonorous bell sounds from within. Then, seemingly without aid, the doors open.

A man stands motionless, wearing a moth-eaten top hat and a black suit that has seen better days. From his makeup, I can see he is weary and likely trying to come off as an undead servant. Whoever’s running this place has done a good job because the faux corpse looks truly miserable.

And then I hear a voice like a bell. It chimes, “Welcome to Blaine’s House of Horrors, where the dead never rest, your scariest nightmares come true, and every day is Halloween.”

The undead butler shuffles over to the children and offers them candy from a pumpkin basket.

Then I catch the eye of the woman speaking, and my jaw drops.

She is dressed in black and red, a silk dress that is cut low on her chest, scandalously hinting at the soft mounds of her breasts. Nestled deliciously in her cleavage sits a beautiful and very expensive piece of jewelry with a ruby the size of a child's fist. *And if that is a fake, I'll eat my hat.*

But it isn't her breasts or jewels I'm admiring. It is the mature version of my best friend's missing daughter. She has never looked as stunning to me, and boy, has she grown up. I feel my face flushing.

I immediately want to drag her right out of the building and demand that she put some more appropriate clothes on so I can take her back to her father, Brian. *God, Brian.* If only he could see her now.

But with the whole Takahashi tribe here, this isn't an option. So I have to play along so as not to ruin the family's vacation or involve Kenshin in an awkward situation. He would really hate that.

But damn, she looks good. Her hair is long and cascades sexily down to the middle of her back. Her green eyes encounter mine at last, and I see her little jump.

So she recognizes me, too. This should be interesting.

She gives me a timid smile with ruby-red lips. I have never realized how much difference a dress and some light makeup could make before. She is so hauntingly beautiful.

I pinch myself. This can't be real. The child who has been causing her father agonizing pain with her disappearance hasn't ended up on the streets but has made something of herself, even if it is in a cheesy tourist trap in quiet, old Maine.

Melissa looks at me, lays a pleading finger against her plump lips, and gives me a wink. Against my will, I feel myself tightening in my pants in response.

She had always been on the chubby side, but now she has filled out to claim the coveted hourglass shape of a curvy woman. There are some hard edges about her, however, and I

can't help but wonder what a tumble in the sack with her would be like.

“Alright, is everyone ready?” she asks the small crowd that has piled in even as I have been silently admiring her. I may want to call Brian immediately, but something tells me to hold off.

I have to know what had happened that was so bad, it would cause a seventeen-year-old to want to set off from the only home she has ever known.

There is something not right about this situation, and I need to know both sides of the story before making a decision.

How am I to reach out to Melissa without scaring her off? And why does she have to look so exquisite in that antiquated dress? The last thing I want to do is cause her to up and disappear again.

Every time my dark eyes meet her fiery green, I feel an electric tingle up my spine. She's more than beautiful. She's *intriguing*.

A finger touches my shoulder, and I jump. It is Kenshin, interrupting my reverie with a cheerful grin on his face.

“If you are going to stare so much at our guide, Jeremy, old friend, I suggest you ask for her number.”

“Funny man,” I say, though I flush slightly. “Look, we're not all as lucky as you are, to find the perfect wife and have the most perfect children, are we?”

Kenshin just shrugs.

“You can manifest anything into your life if you want it bad enough,” he says sagely. I just roll my eyes, causing him to chuckle.

After the children take a treat each from the undead butler, Melissa warns them that the scares are about to start and to be prepared. She suggests holding hands if anyone becomes too nervous in a suitably chilly whisper. *And away we go.*

To the back of the foyer stands a giant mummy, but while he has tattered wraps around his body, there are chunks where

you can tell some sort of insect had been gnawing at his flesh. It is eerie, I have to admit. I'm definitely not a fan of bugs of any kind.

Melissa waves toward the mummy. "This was a prince in a past life until he decided he did not want to be a prince any longer, but a pharaoh. The prince slew the real pharaoh, who was also his brother, and his children. Children that he had been kind to their whole lives. The people of ancient Egypt wondered if he just went mad or had really been so covetous throughout his life to force him to commit such atrocities. In the end, it was all for nothing. The queen rose up and commanded vengeance. So the prince was fed to red fire ants and died in pain from their countless lethal bites."

Daiki and Akari are both already holding their parents' hands, shivering in delicious fright. It's an effective spiel, but I just don't want to look at the gaping bug bites anymore.

I look around the large entrance hall instead and notice that though there are cobwebs, probably of the fake kind, the rest of the trinkets and odd-looking instruments are well-dusted and cared for by loving hands. Melissa's work?

I notice that she has dropped back to speak with Hana and the children.

I step closer to listen in. Kenshin is giving me a smirking look, as well as a solemn man can. "Is everything alright? You look a little heated."

I lower my voice so only he could hear. "That's my best friend's missing daughter. You must excuse me at some point because I have to speak with her and convince her to go home."

"She doesn't look the age of a child, Jeremy." Kenshin eyes her sideways.

"No, she doesn't," is all I can say. But I owe it to Brian to at least try to convince her to return home. If not, Brian should get here as soon as possible to make things right between them.

In my head, I keep trying to rehearse excuses for Melissa's dad. It wasn't his fault he was an absent father. His senior management position had made him distant from Melissa, and his upbringing didn't help. He had always seemed flabbergasted by young teens. He just didn't know how to relate.

And that bitch Talissa was no prize, either. She was about as useful as tits on a bull. She didn't deserve Brian and was likely the cause of Melissa's running away. She would make fun of her child in public but do nothing to improve her situation. I wouldn't be surprised if something Talissa did or said turned out to have been the last straw for Melissa.

I trail behind the family as they swarm around Melissa. I can hear her and Daiki talking about Stephen King, and I can only shake my head. With Melissa's background, I didn't even think she had access to books created by horror masters. Her parents have always been strict and distant, and for a moment, I can see how living in that situation would be annoying to a blossoming young woman wanting to be taken seriously as a young adult.

And boy, did she blossom.

Her smile is radiant as she talks, discussing the ghosts in the hall and the weird creatures they keep in cells in the basement. As I watch each special effect, I become even more impressed. You can tell that a lot of love has been put into the creation of this haunted house, and what is even better is the fact that Kenshin and his family are having a great time.

But over and over, I'm drawn back to the magnificent young woman striding ahead of me. Maybe she isn't the pampered socialite she was supposedly raised to be. Her penchant for Gothic attire and the shunning of her dad's spiritual beliefs must have been hard on the family.

But to see Melissa smile and laugh, well, it was more pleasure than I have ever seen on her face. She likes what she is doing here, and I know that though I might try, it's doubtful that she would be returning with me to Springfield willingly.

Even I don't want to go to Springfield, but I'll do it for Brian.

I catch her peering at me. Damn, my cover is blown. I know she must have figured out who I am by now, but she's too professional to let it disturb the tour.

Instead, she keeps an eye on me. She probably hoped I wouldn't recognize her. It has been quite some time since we have seen each other. I still can't believe it's her. What are the chances?

And why had she come here? Was it some accident of fate? Or just plain blind luck on my part?

Now I have to figure out the best way to approach her before the tour ends.

I have time. The tour is only about halfway done. So I spend the time wondering about what I will say and praying she won't take offense or freak out. Hopefully.

She was only seventeen when she went missing, maybe closer to eighteen. Which would make her almost nineteen right now, I think.

And as she is an adult, she can do as she wishes. Which means her parents have no legal rights over her anymore.

I now know that this is going to be much more difficult. I must evolve a plan to get her to come with me in peace.

Melissa

I think I absolutely adore the two little Japanese kids and their family. The young boy is practically bouncing, he is so excited. The little girl peeks out from behind her mother's legs once in a while, but she seems rather shy. When she sees the giant mummy, her eyes almost pop out of her head. I knew it was a good purchase, no matter what Gordon said.

And despite being a little moody today, Gordon diligently plays his role as the undead butler. I'm playing the queen of the undead, and I feel commanding and beautiful in this gown. The way the older man stares at me seems to prove that this costume is a hit.

But the man is staring at me a bit too hard, and his face evokes a rapid flash of emotions. Some gazes are admiring, while others border on hate. I don't get the man, so I decide to ignore him.

However, for an older man, he is totally a fox. In fact, he kind of reminds me of Dracula. His face is almost pale against the jet-black hair on his head, liberally streaked with gray at the temples, and it comes to a widow's peak in the center of his forehead. *Wow. Hot.*

His dark eyes are like deep lagoons where you think you could sink into their endless depths. And I almost feel like I

have met this man before, though I just cannot pinpoint where.

But I'm not paid to wonder about customers, so I lead the small group deeper into the house.

I begin talking about how the bride once leaped from the top rafters, and the kids squeal in fear when they spot her blood-red eyes up above. And then, one of my additions to the foyer flops down around the heads of the guests. It is a small bunch of rubber bats with a sound machine that makes the screeches and flapping noises, convincing enough to pass as a swarm. With satisfaction, I watch the group run to escape into the next room.

Here, we enter the old dining room. Even to me, the place is kind of spooky. You can see the apprehension in their eyes as their glances flicker from side to side, waiting for the next scare. Gordon sidles up to me, ready to tell the next part of the house's history, the presence of a banished voodoo priestess spirit.

The story goes that she had been captured during the era when enslaved people were traveling north to the safety of Canada by any means necessary. So now, the priestess curses any who dares look into her eyes.

The little girl covers her own eyes almost immediately while her brother's head sways and bobs, wondering where she might come out from.

Suddenly, there is a cackling laugh coming from a wardrobe. It swings out, revealing a skeletal woman with clacking beads in her hair and hands that reach toward the tourists. The Japanese woman screeches unexpectedly, then starts laughing at herself. Her husband and kids laugh with her. I'm happy they are having such a good time.

But I can still feel that man's gaze on the back of my neck. I chalk it up to the dress and the fancy jewel, but there is a nagging feeling that there might be more to this man than I initially thought.

Disturbingly so, in fact. In some ways, he reminds me of my dad. I just can't figure out why. However, this man smiles

a lot more, at least when it comes to the group he was with.

I sneak a peek, only to see that he is staring at me again. He's grimacing and doesn't look pleased with me. It reminds me of when I was a kid for some reason. *Huh*. I turn away and tell myself to stop gawking at the man, but then it hits me.

Oh, shit. This is Jeremy.

I recognize the man now as one of my father's friends. *Oh, shit, oh shit, oh shit*. I have to struggle to control my breathing.

Think, Melly, think.

Now, he is likely going to tell my father where I am. I have been missing for over a year and am past the age of eighteen. So . . .

He can't very well drag me back to my parents because I'm an adult. I have managed to find a job and a home on my own—well, with Gordon's help, of course. That doesn't stop the roiling anxiety inside me from turning my mouth sour, though.

My biggest worry now is that he will try to corner me to get me to talk. Judging from the stern looks he is giving me, he would like to do that very thing right away, but then he must have to refrain as well since he's hosting the Japanese family. *Poor man*, I think snidely. *What a dilemma*.

Suppressing my instinctive panic, I begin to listen to the gory tale that Gordon has devised for the voodoo priestess. In a way, it still amazes me how passionate he becomes when he is discussing gore. You'd swear he is a mass murderer by the pure glee in his voice.

Taking advantage of the distraction, I slip out of the hall and into a nearby spare room. There is gear here that needs to be set up for when they enter the part of the tour with the poltergeist, objects which seem to be flying through the adjacent room. No one is permitted to enter, just observe through the door. That way, no one gets hurt. This was one of my favorites that we had added recently. From the perspective of the hallway, it looks convincing enough.

After I set the room into motion, I slip back into the hallway, discovering that I have to squeeze past my father's friend. *Jeremy. I'm fairly sure it is Jeremy.*

It isn't like my father even has many friends, being the distant person he is. If I can still remember him, well, it is largely from his absence in my daily life.

Instead, back home, I was stuck with Talissa, and she was always the worst mother a lonely kid could have. Anything was more important than her one and only child. I still don't understand why she seemed to loathe me so much. I only know there is nothing I could have done to fix it, hard though it was to give up and walk away.

I feel my heart start to pound and my hands become tremblingly weak. *Oh, God. Not now.*

Living on the streets is hard, but being near this one man seems so much scarier, somehow. I will have to leave the minute this tour ends. I don't want them to find me. I can't go back.

My whole body shivers at the thought.

The rest of the tour goes by fast, too fast. I decide to strictly ignore the man and interact primarily with the children and their sweet mother. I love the fact that the little boy, Daiki, loves Stephen King. We have bonded on this slender thread of connection, enough for him to begin listing off his favorite books.

It swiftly becomes a contest as to who can list the scariest books. It is a tight competition, but I pretend I'm out of books to remember, and the boy dances around, hopping from foot to foot victoriously.

It is then that I notice the man approaching us. He kneels beside Daiki and asks if he wants anything from the gift shop.

"Your mother and father are going next door to see if they can get some gifts for your family back home. Would you like to get something for your friends and family?"

Daiki nods, turns back, hugs my waist tightly, and takes off running after his parents.

Once the kid is a fair distance away, the man rounds on me. My tummy clenches.

“You’re Melissa Caldwell.”

I grit my teeth. “Perhaps I am. What is it to you?”

“It’s what it’s doing to your father that concerns me. Are you completely heartless? A simple call to let him know you are alive wouldn’t have hurt.”

My brows furrow. “I don’t want them to find me. And it’s not like my father noticed me when I was there. Why does he suddenly care now? He probably feels guilty for leaving me with my horrible excuse for a mother.”

It’s more than I meant to say. A lot more. I feel tears starting up in my eyes, my heart falling in seconds. I turn away from the man and wipe it all away.

“Who are you, anyway?” I ask, sniffing. I’m just playing for time, but also, I need to confirm his identity fully.

“I’m Jeremy Steele. You must remember me. I’ve been a friend of your father’s since we were kids.” He frowns at me before he continues.

“I know your dad can come off as a little cold sometimes, but I assure you that you have been permanently on his mind since you went missing. I think he blames himself for not taking better care of you.” Jeremy takes a breath. “And trust me, he knows what your mother is like. They are basically separated.”

I bite into my lower lip as I listen to his spiel. I don’t believe it, though. I’m not that dumb.

My father would never leave his wife. I don’t even want to think of her as my mother.

I had been in that house for seventeen years, and he never seemed to notice me back then. There were no big hugs or presents, and no one ever read a book to me before bed. It was always just strict rules and silence and punishments and more silence.

My mother got all the attention, centered all the drama around herself. Maybe that's why she loathes me, because I stole a meager amount of time in the spotlight from her. The woman is nothing if not jealous and cruel.

Shake it off, Melly. None of that matters anymore.

"Don't tell them I'm here, please," I beg, now. "I'm finally happy. I have a good job that I love and people who care about me. I'm okay. I just want to be left alone. Please, Mr. Steele."

He looks unconvinced. So for some insane reason, I decide to try out my so-called womanly wiles. I let my lips pinch into a pout and lean forward, giving him a good look at this daring neckline to distract him. And boy, does it ever!

I watch his gaze become fiery as he surveys me. He suddenly doesn't look angry. He looks hungry, and the morsel he wants is me. It's intoxicating to experience that sense of power over a grown man.

I can't help but start to blush. *This is the way my mother would act.*

I will not stoop to her level. I stand up straight and awkwardly readjust my top. This seems to grab even more of his attention, so I attempt to zip away down the hall. I can hear his footsteps thudding behind me even as I stumble.

He catches me by the upper arm and spins me around to face him.

"Melissa," he says seriously, "If you don't tell them, then I will have to. I'll give you three days to contact him."

Three days? I could be a fair distance away in three days, so I nod.

"Please let me go," I say, pulling out of his grip. "I'll consider it. How long are you in town?" I'm asking so I can make my plans to escape.

"I'm not sure yet," he says in a clipped voice. "Don't think you can just take off. Swear to me you won't disappear again, or I will call your father right now. If you'll wait, I can even take you home if that is your wish. Promise me."

I look around the room as if there is an answer forthcoming from within the old walls.

When I don't answer, he asks, "How can I get ahold of you?"

"I don't have a cell, but you can reach me at the haunted house's number. Gordon may answer, but he'll come and get me."

Jeremy smiles then, and I'm not sure why. His sardonic expression unnerves me. But he just turns around on his heel and walks out of the room without a backward glance.

I fall to the floor and start crying, clutching at my knees to make myself smaller.

What am I going to do? Do I want my father in my life? He couldn't make time for me before, so why the change? It's not like he ever even wanted me around.

And my mother, at a guess, is probably living it up now that she doesn't have to put up with me.

Gordon bustles up from somewhere and rests a reassuring hand on my shoulder. He's clearly been eavesdropping.

"Don't worry, child, no one is going to take you anywhere you don't want to go. This house has a million hiding spaces if worse comes to worst." He helps me up off the floor.

"Now pull yourself together. We have another show to do in an hour. You did a wonderful job, and I agree that the dress was a good choice. It seemed to have a magical effect." Gordon laughs and then walks away with a wink and a tip of his old top hat.

Jeremy

I watch as Melissa transforms my guests into a delighted group. Even Kenshin and his wife are enchanted as she tells her gruesome stories. I expect the kids to be scared, but they are enraptured as each tale is revealed. Melissa is magnificent with kids, and I thoroughly enjoy watching her spin her tales.

I can't help but think of her as a totally different person from the kid who ran away from her parents. This is a woman in full bloom, not a wayward child I sought to grab by the scruff of the neck and drag home.

I can't help but wonder how I'm going to handle this tactfully. I have to at least get her to call her father. But how do I convince her of that?

Watching her sway her hips and how the dress billows as she moves is a completely different sensual experience. And the low-cut top has caught my eyes again and again. I feel a bit perverted thinking of my best friend's daughter this way, but she *has* grown up to be lovely, with a smile that could crush a man's heart. Her rosebud lips are painted a bright red, showing the perfection of her white teeth.

I can't help but admire how much Daiki likes her. He's even holding her hand at times, guiding her like it is his

haunted house. I snicker to myself. The boy clearly has a crush.

Eventually, we go back to our motel on the edge of town. It is nothing like our usual five-star hotels, but Kenshin and his family seem to enjoy the novelty.

Kenshin approaches me. "It seems the hostess at the horror house has stolen the heart of my child." He laughs wholeheartedly.

"I'm glad he is enjoying himself. Some of the other haunted houses we visited were . . . not as good as this one. I apologize. But I'm glad we found this place."

He smiles. "As we are nearing the end of our trip, I want to make you an offer."

My heart starts pounding. I had hoped something like this would happen. Kenshin has lucrative business opportunities all over the world, and I have heard he may be expanding. I hold my breath in anticipation.

"I want you to run all my new art galleries in North America. I know you are primarily based in New Orleans, but I intend to open a gallery in all the major cities. And as I know, you have impeccable taste when selecting art pieces. Will you set them up, stock them with the finest pieces you can dig up, and run everything on this side of the world?"

A full partnership? This is more than I ever dreamed of. I'm stunned into silence.

Kenshin raises a hand and rests it on my shoulder. "You don't have to answer right now, Jeremy-San."

"I'll do it!" I agree immediately, perhaps a bit more loudly than I need to. "Working with you would be an honor and a privilege."

Kenshin smiles and bows to me. "I'm so happy to hear that, my friend. We will have a drink later to celebrate this new endeavor. For now, I think I will take the children and my wife to a restaurant I saw on the way in. I find Maine quite beautiful and would like to taste some of its world-famous lobster."

“If you wouldn’t mind, I would love to join you. There is just a phone call I would like to make first.”

“Of course. Of course,” he says. “It will take a while to calm them down after the haunted house. Daiki is practically bouncing off the walls. We will wait. Come knock on our door when you are ready.”

I unlock the door to my room on the other side of the building. When I walk in, I see the room is grubbier than expected. I hope the Takahashis’ room is nicer than this. *Maybe we should have stayed in Bangor instead.*

Hopping in the shower, I find my cock growing hard. I’m abruptly, appallingly distracted, and I know the reason.

The vision of Melissa with her long raven hair and penetrating green eyes is enchanting, not to mention that she has curves for days. I love how she was nearly bursting out of that dress, and I can’t help but imagine what it would feel like to nuzzle and touch her supple breasts.

I add some soap to my palm and then begin to stroke my throbbing cock. It has been a while since I pleased myself.

I usually have a woman or two lined up to take care of my needs. But they’re all one and the same, upper-class women who’re looking for company while their husbands are “working late”, usually in some other woman’s company.

That scene is getting old, and I no longer find the thrill of being someone’s dirty little secret so attractive.

I want a real woman now. One like my best friend’s daughter. But that is out of bounds, isn’t it? Brian would want to string me up if he knew I was jerking off to images of her bending over with her wide hips and beautiful bubble butt.

But I can’t stop. I have to imagine what it would feel like, stripping her naked and having her to myself. I feel myself getting harder.

She is so young, too young for me, but so delicious all the same. I want to delve into her with my tongue and taste the sweetness that is hers alone. I can’t help but wonder if Melissa has ever had a man treat her the way she deserves.

I'm getting closer, even knowing this is wrong. Is that the attraction here?

It's too late to stop now. I picture my cock sliding into her wet mouth and immediately blow my load all over the shower. It takes me apart in the best possible way.

I spend a minute pulling myself back together. I feel weak in a good way, and the release has been ecstatic, if shameful.

I continue my shower, get out, and shave, preparing myself for the nice evening meal at a cute little restaurant on the beachfront outside the town limits.

As I'm drying off, I'm still conflicted about how I should feel toward Brian's daughter. She is of age, but barely. I feel like a cretin for a while before I realize that no woman in umpteen years has made me want her to the point that I had to jerk off. There's something special about her.

Should I call her and ask her to dinner? I would probably take her to another restaurant, though. I don't want to involve Kenshin's family any more than needed.

And Melissa would likely know the best places to eat in this sleepy little town.

I pick up the phone and dial the number for Gordon Blaine. The phone seems to ring for an eternity before a gruff voice picks up the phone.

"Blaine's House of Horrors. How may we scare you?"

"Not looking to be scared, sir. But may I speak to Melissa?"

There is a long pause.

"Who should I say is calling?"

"Jeremy. She knows who I am."

After a couple of seconds, I hear the phone being set down and the receding footsteps. I wait for a long time before Melissa breathlessly answers the phone.

"Hello, this is Melissa. How are you, Jeremy? I hadn't expected to hear from you so quickly."

“Understandable,” I say. “I know this may be short notice, but would you be available to have supper with me around 7:30?”

“Why?” she asks bluntly. “You’re not going to convince me to return to my family. I found a home here and a job that I love. That life is behind me, and you know what my mother and father are like. You’ve known them longer than me. Talissa couldn’t care less, and my father is Mr. Ice Cold. I’m surprised they even noticed my absence.”

“No,” I state emphatically. “Your father misses you like crazy. You need to call him, at least. But that is not why I called or am asking you to dinner. Please let me know if you would like to join me?”

A slight pause. I can practically hear her wondering what I’m up to now.

“Where were you planning on going?”

“I hadn’t decided. I figured you would know the best place to eat in this village.” I can’t very well call it a city.

“Hmm . . .” She sounds hesitant. “What are you in the mood for?”

There is a long list of things I’m in the mood for, none of which have to do with food. “I don’t know. You choose. Maybe something not too fancy. Or greasy.”

She laughs like a bell in the night. I think I’ve heard that line in a song at some point, but I can’t remember exactly which one.

“That doesn’t leave a lot of options,” she says more lightly. “There *is* a nice restaurant on the edge of town if you like seafood.”

“I would go there, but the rest of my group are eating there, and I don’t want to interrupt their night.” I let regret seep into my voice. I love seafood as a rule.

“Then I say we grab a bucket of chicken, take it down to the shore, light a fire in one of their fire pits, and chow down. We don’t have to dress up, and I’ll bring a blanket, and we’ll

gaze at the stars and talk about anything besides my parents.” She sounds firm on that note.

Alone with her on a beach? *Sign me up.*

“Sounds perfect. Do me a favor and wear that dress?”

She starts laughing again, and I can’t help but grin.

“I’ll be dressing a tad more modern. Sorry.” I can almost hear the smirk in her voice. She knows. She must know how sexy she looks in that gown.

“Then I can’t wait to see what you’ll wear tonight.” *Uh-oh, this is getting very flirty.*

“I’ll be sure to dress to please.”

I like the sound of that. It would be a pleasure to get to undress her, no matter what she is wearing. I shake my head to pull myself back out of the gutter.

“I’m going to take my guest for a drink and head back to the haunted house around 7:30. Does that give you enough time?”

“It’s perfect. I’ll see you then. Bye, Jeremy.”

“Bye.”

I’m grinning like the Cheshire Cat as I swiftly get dressed. I do not want to leave Kenshin hanging. We still need that drink to close the deal. I look around the motel and spot a pub a block away. *Perfect.*

Knocking on Kenshin’s door, I ensure I have my wallet and phone with a quick pat-down. I dressed in a blue knit sweater and khakis, not wanting to look too formal.

Kenshin answers the door, and I can see the family is still in the process of dressing up.

“Hey,” I say, “I hope you don’t think this is rude, but I just wanted to let you know I will be dining with a friend tonight. I still wanted that drink with you, though. Want to hit the pub across the street?”

Kenshin nods, sticks up a finger for one second, and then closes the door again. Sounds of a questioning feminine voice drift out, then a male chuckle.

A few minutes later, he walks out, and we hit the pub. It seems to be a quiet night, with most patrons sitting on the bar stools. Kenshin and I take a booth in a corner.

“A bottle of champagne, please,” I say to the barmaid, who looks at me with sultry gray eyes. She is certainly pretty, but all I can think about is Melissa.

“What’s the celebration, gentlemen?” purrs the barmaid.

Kenshin answers ebulliently. “To a worldwide takeover, Miss. And to the success of a date this man has later this evening.” He chuckles again.

You can’t hide anything from Kenshin. He may seem timid, but his wits are sharp, and his business acumen is always spot on.

The waitress bends over in an attempt to get me to check out her assets, but I don’t look. She sashays to the bar nonetheless, and Kenshin and I watch the slender woman walk away with raised eyebrows.

“She’s a beautiful woman,” Kenshin says after a while. I know he’s talking about Melissa without having to ask.

“And she has a sweet way about her,” he continues. “She would make an excellent bride.”

“Whoa,” I say quickly. “When I said a friend, I meant it.”

“If you say so,” he replies with a shit-eating grin. The server returns and hands the bottle to Kenshin, and he pops the cork.

“To new endeavors . . . of all sorts.”

I just shake my head and join in his laughter. He may be a cheeky asshole, but I can’t deny I’m hopeful about tonight.

Melissa

I stand there with the phone in my hand, feeling a bit lightheaded. That's when Gordon decides to pop around the corner, scaring the life out of me.

"That's the gentleman with the Japanese family who visited the house today, isn't it?"

"Maybe." I smile uncertainly. I don't know how he's going to feel about this. "Were you listening in on my conversation?"

"No, no," Gordon says guiltily. "You know we oldies can't hear well. I was just . . . admiring the fine China."

I snort and head back to my room upstairs, wondering what to wear for my date.

"Don't be out all night!" Gordon hollers after me. "Or if you are, at least be back for opening hours tomorrow, please!"

"I won't let you down, Gordon," I toss over my shoulder. "You know that."

I hear him muttering on his way to his rooms. He is likely worried for my safety.

The older man never had kids of his own that I know about. But he has a big heart, and I've never really gone out on my own since I moved in with him. No wonder he's worried.

The stairs to the upper level are quite the climb, but I'm used to it and have now acquired thighs and buns of steel. I have also gotten quite busty in the past two years, with no regrets.

I suspect my mother would resent me more, now, for the figure I've developed. She probably would have tried to off me like Snow White's stepmother did for becoming fairer than her. Or at the very least, she would make a daily ritual out of putting me down, her favorite recreational sport.

I knew I could be beautiful, once. But it has taken months on the streets, and then living here with Gordon, for me to regain some self-confidence, and I want to show this strikingly handsome older man just how beautiful I can be if I try. I look at the clock and see that I have about an hour to prepare.

So I hop in the shower and shave all of my body hair off, hoping for I don't even know what. I wash my hair with my tropical-smelling shampoo, cheap though it is, and put on a hair mask afterward. Rinsing it out, I begin to hum tunelessly.

I love self-care moments. They come by infrequently enough. I can't afford to splurge on makeup and accessories, but I'm trying to make an effort tonight. And there is always the option of going through the costume makeup for the haunted house, but I don't want to waste Gordon's money for personal reasons, though I doubt he'd hold a grudge about it.

The shower refreshes me, and I quickly start rummaging through the tiny closet in my towel. I turn on the radio and dance a little while deciding what to wear.

I have a long white knit sweater dress that makes me look comfortable and cuddly, and adding a pair of beige tights seems just the right choice to pull the look together. I set aside some brown flats for walking on the sandy beach.

Rushing back into the bathroom, I blow-dry my hair. I wish I had a straightener, but that is out of my budget for the time being, so I have to make do.

Now, for my makeup. I can't decide whether to go with the nude palette or be a bit bolder with my shimmering one. I hold

each up to my face and decide to go bold.

I know it's going to be dark, and my skin has cleared up since my early teens, so I forgo the foundation and use a light translucent powder instead. I add a pale pink blush and highlight my cheekbones a bit. Lastly, I choose a dark rose-colored lipstick. *Perfect.*

I check the clock. I'm right on time.

Not a moment too soon. I hear the loud chime of the front doorknocker and send up a silent prayer.

I'm starting to sweat as my nerves get to me. I have never been on a date, nor have I ever had a boyfriend. I'm still a virgin, to my secret shame, and I'm going out with a man who is old enough to have been my father!

What am I thinking? I stop dead for a second.

Well. I'm thinking of how handsome he is, and refreshingly mature. It's not like the age gap freaks me out. Jeremy is closer to my age than Gordon, who I spend most of my time with.

No, it's Jeremy's connection to my dad which is freaking me out right now.

Gordon gets to the door first and gives Jeremy a hard glare. Jeremy flushes under his gaze, but his eyes practically glow when he makes eye contact with me and takes me in.

"You look lovely, Melissa," he says smoothly. I look at what he's wearing and realize we are almost a matching pair.

Both of us are wearing knitted material, and his khakis and my tights are the same color. I foolishly wonder whether this is a good sign or not. Do great minds truly think alike?

Snap out of it, Melly.

"You don't look too bad yourself." I grin and go to give Gordon a hug and a light peck on the cheek. I accidentally leave some lipstick behind, but Gordon just smiles like a doting parent.

“Have a nice night, Melissa. You too, uh, Jeremy.” They shake hands, and Jeremy and I depart, the old door creaking shut behind us.

“I called ahead to the restaurant for a bucket of chicken and potato wedges. I figured we wouldn’t have to wait forever and could get to the beach quicker.”

He smiles, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. I like the fact that he has smile lines. It makes him seem that much more friendly and approachable.

“That was smart of you,” I say. “We’re going to have to pick up a bundle of wood from the corner store for the campfire, too. And damn it, I forgot the blanket.”

“Way ahead of you,” he replies, gesturing to the trunk of the rental vehicle. I’m impressed with his foresight.

We are at the Chicken Shack within minutes, picking up our food. I’m happy, almost terrifyingly excited. Eating meals out of the house just never happens, usually. I can’t imagine spending money for frivolous reasons. Gordon might always grumble, but I’m tight with my hundred-dollar paychecks.

It’s a short drive to the lake’s shore, and I begin to ask Jeremy questions, if only to gauge his true motives about taking me out.

“What do you do for a living, Jeremy?”

He throws me an odd look. “Your dad never told you? I’m an art dealer. Well, I was before today. I just accepted an offer to manage multiple art galleries within North America. It’s the contract of my dreams. I never expected to make it this far when I left Springfield.”

An unreadable expression crosses his face, and then I remember that he and my dad were raised in Springfield together. I wonder how he ever managed to escape.

“How did you know art was your thing?” I ask next.

“Since I could finger paint. Now it’s my turn to ask two questions.”

I eye him suspiciously.

“Why did you run away?” I knew he was going to ask that.

“Because my mother made my life a living hell, and my dad did nothing to stop her. In fact, it made it even worse because it seemed like he forgot he even had a daughter.”

Jeremy is quiet for a while. I don't care. I don't even have to blink back tears this time.

“Whenever we spoke, you were all Brian would talk about,” he says after a while. “He worked hard to ensure you and your mother had the best of everything. He is not the most expressive person, but you were always a priority to him.”

But he said that to you, not to me, so how was I supposed to trust in that?

Better to leave that particular question unspoken.

“Could have fooled me,” I say, realizing too late that I sound like a whiny baby.

“Alright, question two.” He pauses. “Are you happy?”

I know exactly how to answer this one.

“I have never been happier,” I say firmly. “I love where I live. I love my job. Sure, I could use a few friends, and a boyfriend wouldn't hurt, but I'm content.”

“I didn't ask if you were content.” His knuckles are white on the steering wheel.

“Okay, then yes, I'm happy. At least happier than I ever remember being.” I see a look of pity, but he hides it quickly. He is no stranger to my family's private business, after all.

“Is my father still working his ass off while he gets underlings to search for me?” I ask, despising myself for needing to know the answer.

“No, he's done it all himself. Lately, I don't think the cops are even involved any longer. They probably assume you were murdered by now, to tell you the truth.”

“And when I saw you in the haunted house, I felt like I was seeing your ghost. It took my brain a lot of convincing that it was actually you.”

“But here we are,” I say, a little melancholy in my voice. I hope he’s not lying about my dad looking for me. False hope is the worst.

“Are you regretting your decision to come out with me?” he asks suddenly, clearly worried about *my* motives.

“No, not yet, at least.” I giggle faintly. “Though I may have to dig into this bucket now. I’m starving.”

We pull up right onto the beach and park near the furthest fire. Two other couples have clearly had the same idea, but we keep ourselves at a distance.

I grab the blanket and chicken, and he starts setting up the fire while I spread out the blanket and arrange our food.

For a while, we stay silent under the canopy of stars. It’s a perfect night for sky watching. The air is so clear. You can almost see the Milky Way.

Every time I marvel at the sky, I can’t help wondering if there is more to life out there somewhere. But I keep these dreams in my head for now. I don’t trust Jeremy that much.

Soon, the fire is blazing, and we sit side-by-side, gazing out at the still water, which reflects the sky almost perfectly. The chicken is delicious. I eat a thigh and a drumstick and discover I’m feeling rather full. Jeremy devours a ton of chicken and half the potato wedges without stopping. He eats as intensely as if it’s his last meal.

I hold my hands out to the fire, and the heat warms my skin. I wiggle closer.

“Are you cold?” Jeremy asks.

“No, just admiring the stars.”

He moves closer to me, leaning on one arm and tossing his head back to take it all in. I also notice how close his hand is getting to mine.

Part of me wants to pull it back, but my libido is saying otherwise. My whole body is telling me I want him to be my first. To see where this goes.

Why not? It's Jeremy, not some random stranger. He is intelligent, funny, and smart. Nothing else should matter, right?

"The stars are almost as beautiful as you are. Do you know any of the constellations?" he asks after a while.

"I know a few, Ursa Major and Minor, Orion's belt, Hercules, the Dragon, and Cassiopeia."

I feel proud of myself for remembering those few names, too. And of the fact that I'm not at the babbling stage. Yet.

All he knows is Orion's belt, so I start to tell him about Gordon's belief that we came from the second star in the belt. But when I turn to him, he's not listening.

He's looking at my mouth.

And suddenly, our lips lock, and I feel entirely overtaken.

I don't even know how to kiss right. I copy whatever Jeremy does to me, assuming, hoping that it's what he wants too. His hands are soft as he touches my skin through the knit dress.

Like a true gentleman, he will clearly only try something more after asking for my permission. I like that because I'm not sure what I want, not yet. Also, I think I've forgotten how to speak for the time being.

Jeremy leans over. "Can I taste you?"

I'm unsure of what he means, but his eyes glow deep in the dark and I've pretty much lost my mind already, so I nod.

Yes. Anything you want.

And once again, the words go unsaid.

Jeremy lifts my sweater dress to the waistband of my tights and rolls them down my legs with exquisite care. He starts by nibbling the side of my foot and working up my calf. He is clean-shaven, and the smoothness rubs between my thighs.

Then I feel the tip of his probing tongue on my most intimate parts. My head falls back in a breathless and delighted sigh.

I wasn't expecting we'd go this far or I would have worn more exciting panties. When he starts flicking his tongue down there, he probes my inner channel with two fingers. Then all too abruptly, he stops.

He is surprised by something and has pulled back and out from between my legs.

"You're a virgin!" He says it like it's a bad thing. I flush and scramble to cover myself.

"Yes, so why is that a problem?" I snap tersely. "That is my decision, and I won't have anyone else make it for me."

He looks at me, and I glare back. I'm so frustrated. Why is he being so annoying?

Because it's not his decision to make, right? Right.

I roll on top of him and straddle him. He's taken by surprise, too much so to hide his natural reaction. His cock is large and bulging right where I'm the warmest. I squirm instinctively.

"Should I stop?" I ask, knowing that if he says yes I'm going to go home and want to kill myself just to get over the embarrassment.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he shifts slowly under me, his eyes locked to mine.

It doesn't take too long for him to start panting either. He's struggling to take his trousers down. When I see the full length of his manhood, I gasp.

He fastens his hands to my hips and tells me what to do. Somehow, this makes me even hotter.

"Sink onto me slowly, Melissa. Go easy, and ease up and down until you're ready. I can guide your hips if you want."

I nod. I have very little idea of what I'm doing and we both know it, so I just follow his instructions.

His cock is huge and hard and has an oddly endearing little curve in it. With his hands, he centers me over himself. And then I proceed to lower myself.

I feel my tightness stretched out as never before. It is painful at first, and then not, but then I begin to feel self-conscious. Especially with the way Jeremy is looking at me, as if he's waiting for something.

Maybe this was a mistake.

I'm about to climb off, unsure whether this is the right thing to do, when he wraps his arms around me and rolls us so that he is on top.

“Are you alright?” he asks. I tremble.

Because I don't know how to answer. I just don't.

What the hell am I doing to myself right now?

Jeremy

I've never been with a virgin. I never wanted to. It never occurred to me that anything could feel so precious before.

I want to cry out in pleasure, but then again, I don't want to ruin the moment. I want to lose my mind, but it's so important to stay in control right now.

I take Melissa's hips and hold her steady as I slide in and out of her with excruciating slowness. I don't know if it is her virginal blood or if she's getting wet and lubricated, but soon, I hope, the pain will become more pleasurable.

I need it to. I need her to be right with me when I come.

"I want to see you naked," I say breathlessly. Melissa shakes her head. We aren't private enough for that, I realize.

I'm actually surprised no one on the beach has caught us yet. She obviously feels overexposed, and I know this was a bad idea. Plus, there is sand where no sand should be, which could get painful afterward.

I take a deep breath and pause.

"Would you like to come back to my motel room? We can have more privacy there and an opportunity to clean up. But expect me to ravish you, more slowly next time."

I say all this while hip-deep into her warm and wet core. It's a miracle I can even speak basic English at this point.

She pauses too. Is that a look of relief I see? I hope not.

“That would be nice. I wasn’t planning on going this far, but now that we have, I want to experience the best sex possible.”

Well, that’s a firmly positive reply, at any rate. I grin and scoop her up, wrapping the blanket around her and carrying her to the car like a princess. She is no stick figure, but I feel like I’m carrying a warm cloud.

A warm, sexy, delightfully enticing and inexperienced cloud. When I set her on the seat, I see that she has bled a fair amount. I use the blanket to make her comfortable and hope it won’t seep through to the car seat. I don’t want to explain that to the rental company.

I hop in the vehicle, and we are at the motel on the edge of town within minutes. I like to refer to it as the Bates Motel, even though I know a kindly elderly lady runs the place. No signs of a psychopathic son, thankfully.

I open the door of the car, peeking up at the windows of the Takahashi rooms. They are still dark, so the family probably hasn’t gotten through dinner yet.

I go around the vehicle and pick up Melissa in my arms. This time, I throw her over my shoulder caveman style, making her shriek.

“Quiet!” I hiss, and I smack her ass reprovably. She giggles. I wonder briefly if this was anything like she expected her first time to be. I want to make it really special for her.

The moment we are safely in my room, I place her tenderly on the double bed and go to fetch something so she can clean up.

But when I return, she’s on her feet. I stare in amazement as she bends over and starts giving me a strip show.

As she removes the long, white knit sweater dress, I think incoherently about dreams coming true in paradise. She’s stunning. Mind-blowing. There are no words for her beauty and her innate grace.

I notice a few spots of blood on her thighs, however, and move to clean them up for her. The dress looked amazing on Melissa, but she is enchanting without it. And shy. I can't help but notice how she quivers at my touch.

I stand in front of her, waiting for her breathing to slow down.

“Lie on your back,” I say before I can pull the words back. “I want to taste you again.”

She obeys me instantly, despite her fear. I'm hard as a rock again, but I move as slowly as I can, so as not to alarm her.

Gently, smoothly, I slide down her body, kissing the tips of her pink nipples and running my tongue along the undersides of her perky breasts. She tastes slightly salty, but in the best possible way, so I drag my tongue from her chest down to her belly button.

“Don't stop,” she whispers. “It feels so good.”

There it is. That's the reward I was hoping for.

I proceed gently, teasing Melissa's nub with the roughness of my tongue. Her breath catches, but I can tell she likes it. Her body instinctively arches toward mine, making her bountiful curves ripple in all their glory.

“Do you want to have a bath?” I ask. She shakes her head, and her raven hair splays out.

“I want you inside me again,” she groans. “On top and facing me. I want to see the look on your face while we make love.”

I chuckle in delighted bemusement and strip down to my socks. I can smell Melissa's distinctive perfume from here, and it makes me want to bury my face in the sweet scent.

In a moment, I have lifted one of her legs over my shoulder, and the second follows. I start kissing the inside of her thighs. Tasting her skin makes me feel closer to her for some odd reason, but instead of over-analyzing myself, I just let myself feel the sensations.

Again, her thighs quiver, and I know it's almost time to slip my tongue between the soft folds of her pussy. To start with, I put in two fingers and apply pressure to the tiny bud of her clit. Her back arches as my tongue whips across her sweet, tender slit. As I drag my tongue up and down in long, slow licks, she purrs like a kitten.

I move fast once I have her wet and fully aroused. I flick my tongue hard and fast, jamming my fingers up her slick entrance. She squirms and wriggles like an eel, panting and moaning in strained little bursts, and I know she isn't far from climax. So I stop here.

I want her first orgasm to be from my cock. I want to look at her face and watch the effect on her.

I pull out, and trailing kisses, I make my way up her body. Once I'm nestled over her, I slide my cock teasingly up and down her slit before I move inward.

Her mouth opens in a soft *O* of surprise. She and I can already tell how different this is from the beach. This time, she's ready, wet, and eager for my cock.

I move at an increasingly slower pace. I want her to feel every inch of my cock, every aching controlled movement. She is so wet and tight. I feel somehow blessed that she let me deflower her. *Melissa, the miracle I don't deserve.*

"Would you like to try another position?" I ask her, anxious to please.

Her face is flushed, and her stunning green eyes stare intensely into mine. She seems like she can't speak, so I answer her nod. I pick up both of her legs and place them on my shoulders, enjoying the way her pussy stretches and flutters around my cock in the process. And as I lean back, I feel my cock hitting just the right spot for her to quickly come.

I don't think I can wait much longer. It has been quite some time since I've had a woman. Even if I hadn't gone without, Melissa would be able to break through my self-control every time. Somewhere deep in my body, I'm sure of that.

I grab two handfuls of her tight, luscious ass, vowing that one day, I would show her the pleasures of anal play. But this is not the time or the place. Right now, I'm deliriously happy exactly where I am.

I pump hard and feel my breathing quicken. My heart pounds as I near climax, and I begin to rub Melissa's clit with my thumb. I want us to come at the same time.

As it turns out, I time it nearly perfectly. She starts pulling me harder into her, and each thrust causes a small noise to escape her cherry-smudged lips.

And then I release a gush of fluids, and so does she, as our juices mingle between us. It is more than blissful, perhaps closer to perfection than I've ever felt before.

It's a while before it occurs to me. What are the chances my beautiful virgin Melissa is on birth control? Very slim, I have no doubt.

And I was so eager to have her, I hadn't even thought to bring a condom. I gulp.

I might have just started another crisis. One that could well end with Brian adding me to his collection of taxidermy animals, the ones he decorates his office with.

I start mentally cursing myself. My body grows rigid, but with self-loathing instead of arousal this time.

I hear Melissa ask timidly, "Is there something wrong, Jeremy?"

"No, sweetheart," I mumble. Then I pause to reflect. Perhaps I should at least try to warn her of the consequences here.

"I was just thinking about what would happen if your father found out."

"He never will." She says it firmly with hard eyes. "Promise me, Jeremy. Promise that you'll never talk to my father about me again."

I know why she's really asking me that. I knew she was going to ask before I picked her up in the car tonight.

But that was then and this is now. When I'm in her arms, with her emerald-green eyes fixed on me in a pleading gaze, I can't help but agree to her demands.

Though I capitulate so weakly, I know the risks here. If Brian ever finds out, I know I would lose them both. It is a dangerous game I'm playing, but I've been cornered into it by my own bad choices here, so I have nobody to blame but myself.

Melissa's eyes gleam with sudden mischief.

"Are you hard again?" She reaches under the sheets and finds that I'm still out of commission. "Hmm. Well, perhaps I could . . ."

She goes under the blanket and begins licking my exhausted cock. I seriously doubt that she could get me hard again so fast, but then the miracle happens anyway. I smile with guilty pleasure.

Just the thought of her drenched pussy is enough to make me hard, it seems. I groan.

My cock is ready to explode again. I sit up quickly, turn, push Melissa forward on all fours, and take her from behind. I wrap an arm around her waist to rub her clit with my thumb, and my other hand holds one of her firm tits in my hand.

I hammer into her like I have never fucked a woman before. I watch her perfect ass bump against my pelvis. Each time it hits, the smacking sound pushes me a bit closer to the brink.

Now Melissa is gyrating on my cock and squealing each time I sink my shaft inside her. She'll be sore tomorrow, but I let her enjoy the ecstasy for now. Her sensuality knows no bounds. Even her soft sighs of delight make me feel better about myself. I still can't believe she let me take her for the first time.

What might come of this? I'm not even sure whether I could ever face Brian again. I want to convince Melissa to speak to her family. Only then can something positive happen.

My rush of guilt makes me slow down, then stop. I extract myself gently and hold Melissa in a tight embrace instead.

She lies facing away from me, and I roll her onto her side. She looks at me, and tears are leaking from the corner of her eyes.

Is she having second thoughts, too?

“Melissa, is there something wrong?”

She shakes her head, but the tears keep falling.

I hold her tighter to me, trying to provide some comfort. “I’m sorry if I hurt you. I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s not that,” she says with a small sniff. “I just never expected that I would feel this good and that it would feel like that. I felt as if we’re linked in some way I can’t explain.”

“I think that’s normal for the first time. There will be other men who’ll do it in other ways.”

Her mouth popped open in an O of surprise. “I never thought about other men, especially when I’m—well, I don’t expect there to be another for a long time.”

“Well, that’s all in your control. You get to pick and choose who your next lover will be.”

She is suddenly distant, and I realize my error. I’m already talking about our interlude as if it is nothing but another event in a series.

I suppose I would feel a bit humiliated if someone said that to me. It is probably this attitude that has kept me single all my life.

“Melissa, I have never been so turned on by a woman. You are gorgeous and as lovely as an orchid. I’m honored that you chose me. I truly am. Is there anything you need? A shower? Bath? Maybe a massage?”

She lies on the bed, expressionless, staring at me with those eyes that seem a lot colder now, a green ocean turning into frost.

“A bath and a massage would be nice.” Something in her eyes sparks. “But you have to get in the bath with me. I’ll need someone to scrub me down so I’m nice and clean for my massage. Then we can sleep.”

“It’s a deal.” I go into the motel bathroom and am happy to note that the tub is a good size. I hate that about hotels. They always skimp on the tub unless you reserve a room with a jacuzzi or whirlpool.

Soon, we have a tub full of hot water, and I set her in the tub and begin to scrub her down with a loofah. Afterward, I give her an abbreviated massage before we fall asleep together. I kiss her on her delicate eyelids at some point and pray that she won’t come to hate me for tonight.

It feels good to fall asleep with someone. I can’t remember the last time I felt so content. So alive.

Melissa

I wake up wondering where I am and who has their arm across my chest. I look and see it is Jeremy, and I can't help but grimace.

I've made a big mistake here. This isn't just any man. This is my father's best friend. I'd be in severe shit if he decides to give my dad a call.

Panic sets in. I slowly lift up his heavy arm and set it beside me so I can slide out of the bed unnoticed. It takes a bit of maneuvering, but soon, I'm free of the bed.

The room is still dark, though daylight filters in from behind the curtains. It is making finding my clothes difficult.

After finding everything, I realize I still have blood on the back of my beautiful dress. I'll never get that out after it has been set into the material for so long.

I hold it up to a ray of light, peeking through the blackout curtains, and see someone had put something on it and that it's wet.

Hmm . . .

I look until I find Jeremy's blue sweater and decide he can afford another one. Slipping on my flats, I make my silent way to the door. Once there, I turn the lock and slip out so fast that

I almost crash into someone. Thankfully, it's nobody I know from town.

But soon, I'm walking the main road back to Gordon's house. I wonder if he'd be disappointed in me.

All I know is that I'm disappointed in myself. I have always imagined saving myself for my future husband. But after a teenage life of no boyfriends and then living in a small village like Seahollow with no real prospects, the chance to experiment had been too inviting. No, strike that. Experimenting with *Jeremy* was too inviting.

It takes me two hours to return to the house, and my feet hurt. These flats were definitely not made for long treks. I remind myself to get a new pair of sneakers as fast as possible. I should be walking and enjoying the beauty of the area, not hiding out in Gordon's place as much. Maybe I might even make a friend or two.

But I know it wasn't meant to be. I would have to leave Seahollow, possibly even Maine itself. I can't let them find me. I just can't.

It is my greatest fear. Maybe my having sex with Jeremy has made him not want to admit to my father, Brian, that he has seen me. Because then he would have to explain how he lost his head and had said daughter for a night of passion where he deflowered her.

Never mind, I think. This could be the way I blackmail Jeremy into keeping his silence. Things couldn't have worked out better.

I trudge up the long stairs to the door and knock. Gordon still hasn't gotten around to giving me a key. It is almost as if he was waiting for me. The door flies open, and he looks me up and down speculatively.

"Out all night, were we?" he says, more stating a fact than asking a question.

"Yes, Gordon. And I already regret it."

"Too much alcohol?"

“I’m not old enough to drink, Gordon.”

“Hasn’t stopped you before.”

I shrug and squeeze by him. I’m not in the mood for one of his scathing remarks.

“I walked a long way. I need a nap.” I begin climbing the steps but want to take the dumbwaiter up. I’m so tired. Too bad the thing is more likely to break and make me fall into the basement. We really should invest in getting that fixed.

Stop, Melissa. This is no longer your home.

I’m not looking forward to being a street kid again and always having to watch my back, protecting the little I do have from those who would strangle me for it. The whole thought of it is daunting as hell. All those times I swore I wouldn’t go back . . .

I feel bad for leaving Gordon without any help, too. He isn’t as spry as he used to be, and most of the new props need at least one other person to set them up and release pulleys and ropes. He’ll have to hire someone else now.

Gloomily, I climb the stairs, and when I reach my room, I strip, throw my ruined dress on the floor, and flop face-first into bed. I feel sore everywhere, but more particularly between my legs. Maybe most in the approximate region of my heart.

Melly, you idiot. Men like that don’t want romance. Perish the very thought.

I want another bath and begin to fill the ancient clawfoot tub in my adjacent bathroom. I also consider taking a Tylenol or something. My vagina is sore and tender when I touch it. But I can’t help but remember how good it felt when he was all the way inside me.

And the way it felt when he went down on me is almost indescribable. I have tried playing with myself before, but cunnilingus is clearly much more pleasurable than doing it to yourself. I shiver involuntarily, my muscles reacting to the memory with pleasure.

The tub is almost full when I hear the distant chime, which means the phone is ringing. It dings on and on. Gordon is either out or isn't in the mood to talk to anybody. I don't blame him. I don't want to talk to anyone either.

I slip into the deep water of the tub and sigh in relief. My feet sting fiercely from walking on all that gravel in flats, and all of my muscles seem strained. I let the feel of the hot water relax me as I doze off.

When I wake, not knowing how much time had passed, the water is tepid, and my fingers and toes look like dried prunes. I'm happy I didn't accidentally drown, though it's not much of a bright spot. I quickly wash my hair and face, then thoroughly clean between my legs.

Panic hits me when I realize I hadn't used protection. Since I have never had sex, I hadn't ever considered being put on birth control pills. And I know we didn't use a condom. I scrub at my crotch even harder, trying to wish away the semen that might be lingering inside.

What are the chances I'd get pregnant the first time I had sex? I'd think very little, even though we had done the deed multiple times. I pray that the older man has had a vasectomy or something, then firmly decide that I would leave the matter in the Creator's hands and not worry about it. *May God have mercy on me.* For once.

My mood is quite improved when I get out of the tub. I wrap myself in the robe that Gordon had given me. It had been in among the props and costumes, and he had figured I could use it. There isn't very much that I own.

I start mentally deciding what stuff I would have to leave behind when I make my escape. I could sell most of my Gothic makeup. It is barely used, and a consignment store might help me sell some of the better-quality clothing I have accrued.

I'm putting on my slippers when I hear the phone chime again. After two rings, I decide I'd better answer it for the sake of the business. I rush down the stairs to the antique phone we use.

“Blaine’s House of Horrors.”

“Is this Melissa?” Oh, no. It’s Jeremy.

“Yes, it is,” I say slowly.

“Why did you leave without waking me or saying goodbye?” He sounds genuinely aggrieved.

“Because I didn’t want to make anything more awkward. You’re my father’s friend. I’m scared you’ll ruin everything by telling him where I am, and it’s not like it would be more than a one-night affair. I figured a clean break would be best.” I end my spiel by breathing heavily, over-emotionally.

There is a long pause on the other end of the line.

“I don’t think you had the right to end things like this,” he says with a tinge of bitterness. “But perhaps you’re right.”

I let a tear drip down my cheek. Part of me doesn’t want him to agree with me. I want him to say he’d stay with me or something.

But I’m too afraid of getting hurt. Of getting caught. My hands are quivering, and so is my mouth.

“Are you going to tell my father?” My voice quavers like the child I used to be.

There is another long pause. So long that I think Jeremy must have hung up. “Hello?” I say shrilly.

“I’m still here. And the answer is, I don’t know. Our date and the night that followed changed things for me. I feel like a dirty rat bastard, to tell you the truth. I should hang up and call him right now. But . . .” He drifts off, and I hold my breath, waiting for the axe to drop.

I hear him choke up. “I don’t think I could face him knowing I deflowered his daughter instead of calling him the minute I found you.”

It’s the solution I wanted. Why do I still feel so sad?

“We’re never going to see each other again, are we?” I ask, not knowing what answer I’m hoping for.

“I doubt it.”

Yeah. Me too.

“Then I think that’s all we have to say to each other. Thank you for keeping my secret.”

“Same, Melissa. Enjoy your life in peace.”

Then the phone clicks, and all I can hear is the dial tone.

I set the phone down and crouch to the floor, crying.

A warm hand touches my shoulder, and I reach up and grasp Gordon’s warm, wrinkled fingers while I sob away all my fears and regrets.

It’s not until a couple of months later that I realize what a mistake I have made.

Life has passed pretty quietly. The haunted house has gained a lot of press and is a roaring success, with ghosthunters and families of all ages coming to our shows.

Gordon has even hired a fifteen-year-old kid to help with the gift shop he has recently opened in the greenhouse on the property. You could buy miniature figures of the various ghosts and creatures we claim roam around the place.

Or you could take an old-fashioned picture with a ghostly figure peeping up in the frame. That one is my idea, and I’m so thrilled with how much people love the sepia photos.

Plus, Gordon has started paying me a good amount because of how hard I have worked to make his dreams a reality. It really makes me feel validated, like I’ve earned my place in his home.

The only thing that worries me is that Gordon has begun to show his age lately, and he has moments of forgetfulness that are not like him. I look at the calendar to see when I might find time to take him to a doctor’s appointment. And that’s when I realize something is terribly wrong.

I should have had my period at least three weeks ago. With all the chaos, I have somehow missed this crucial fact.

I start hyperventilating. I’m never late. Not once in my life.

Running down the stairs, I almost collide with the new kid as he's digging stuff out of the storage closet in the foyer.

"What's the rush?" he asks indignantly.

"I think I'm pregnant."

The kid's eyes widen with shock, and he steps away as if pregnancy is a contagious disease. I suppress the urge to burst out into hysterical laughter just in time.

"Congratulations?" he says, raising his eyebrows in a startled question.

"Yet to be determined," I say before pushing through the door to the kitchen. I pick up the phone and call the doctor's office.

"Dr. McNaughton's office. How can I help you?" asks the secretary in an overly bright tone.

"What do you do for pregnant women? I mean, at first."

"Well, first, we recommend taking an at-home test, and if it shows that you are positive, we arrange for bloodwork to confirm and book an ultrasound in about three to six weeks to make sure the baby is okay."

I'm breathing shakily. "Thank you. I'm going to get tested now. Have a good day."

"No problem."

I walk back into the foyer, and the kid is still there. I should stop calling him the kid and instead call him Eric.

"Eric?"

"Yes?"

"Would you do me a favor and get a pregnancy test from the pharmacy? No, get three different kinds. I'll give you the money."

He flushes but nods his head. He has the cash in hand in a few minutes and is rushing out the door.

I wait patiently, trying to immerse myself in a novel, but I can't focus. If my life is going to change like this . . .

It's so unfair. I don't even feel like I'm done growing up, never mind being ready to be a parent.

When I hear the main doors open, I rush down, grab the tests out of Eric's hands, and give him a ten to keep for himself.

Then I run upstairs like a madwoman. I read the instructions of the first one and pee on the stick. Sitting there waiting for it to reveal my fate is excruciating, the one genre of horror I have never explored. I'm having a full-blown panic attack.

When the time is up, I see a positive sign in pink.

I'm pregnant.

I try test two.

Same result.

Test three.

The same.

Shit. Shit. Shit, fuck, and hell's bells with a side of the devil's fries.

I lie on my side on the bathroom floor and weep for the fate of the unlucky.

I have only ever been with one man—Jeremy. And I sent him away gladly. Not least because he wanted to go.

We made a pact, he and I, and that means I'm alone now.

There is no way I can ever let him know. Ever.

Even if it breaks my heart.

Jeremy

Six Years Later

Falon is hanging off my arm as we stroll through the French Quarter in New Orleans. I have to admit she is quite the accessory. The typically blonde-haired and blue-eyed model is dressed in designer *haute couture* from head to toe and is also wearing so much jewelry, it's lucky we didn't get mugged. Either way, we draw gazes wherever we go.

We are shopping for curios and trinkets to give to guests on the opening night of Kenshin's new gallery in Toronto. I have an eye for this sort of thing, but Falon is clearly bored. I can't wait to hit up each boutique and shop while the bands play in the street and the tourists dance along.

Falon's boredom is a common state of mind for her. I doubt whether I will keep dating her for long, but the gallery is opening in a week, and I don't want to go stag.

I'm sure I can find another woman to be my date, but that is extra time I do not have. Calling an escort agency would be easiest, perhaps. I ponder that thought as we approach one of my favorite shops.

The shop is called the Voodoo Queen and has the oddest objects you could hope to find in the Quarter. Plus, the shopkeeper is a licensed practitioner of Voodoo, and I just generally want to stay on her good side. Just in case. I usually bring her an espresso from her favorite café, but their machine is broken down today.

I know the store owner well, having purchased many items from them throughout the course of my career. All the best stuff they come across in their hunting through abandoned storage containers and antique stores, they hold for me to look over in the back of the shop. I assess each object so they know they are not under- or over-selling, and then I get the first pick of their finds.

It is a great arrangement, and we both profit. Plus, it gives me an excuse to walk through the district. It is my favorite place to be in the whole world. I wasn't born here, but I feel like this city has taken a piece of my soul.

Falon huffs as I leave her in the front of the store, and I follow Greta, the shop owner, through a beaded curtain. I can't believe how jealous Falon gets. As if I'm going to have a fuck fest with an elderly woman in the back room or something. I have to get rid of this particular girlfriend. She is irritating the hell out of me.

Greta shows me the goods, and I grow ecstatic. I have been searching for a real shrunken head for Daiki for months. I hold it up and admire it in the light.

Kenshin's kid has never gotten over his love of gore. I still can't believe he is almost out of high school. Six years have flown by so fast as his dad and I have been opening gallery after gallery.

I'm suddenly a billionaire now, due to smart investments with an art collection I put together from some of the great pieces I find for each new gallery.

Kenshin is very generous with his money, and since he is my partner, he ensures that my bank account stays healthy too. He has even bought me two cottages, one in Colorado and one in Florida. And he promises to build a villa for me in Costa

Rica. All as a sign of his gratitude, for helping him grow his business while he gets to stay mostly at home in Tokyo.

But I barely have time to sleep, let alone take vacations. I finish advising the tiny, wizened Greta and put my haul in a bag. I exit the back room and run into someone.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Let me get out of your way.”

“That’s no prob—” The voice cuts off.

I look at the woman and realize I know her.

It is Melissa Caldwell, of all people. Here. In New Orleans. It is the last place I expect to see her.

I’m just about to ask her, “Why are you here?” when she darts away as if she has been set on fire.

I stand there, confused, but cannot reason why I feel so out of sorts. I spent a single day and night with her, yet she seems to have impacted me in a way I did not expect. I try to chase her down and reach the door, but I cannot find her in the crowded street.

“Jeremy?” I hear Falon whine. “What is going on?” She pouts. “Can we please get out of here? The store stinks.”

“Do you always have to be so ignorant?” I bite at her. I have had enough. This woman will have to mooch off some other wealthy man, because *this* man is going single. I don’t want to be attached to anybody. Especially now, since I have remembered Melissa.

Melissa may have taken off, but with my connections in the city, I know I can find her again.

“How dare you speak to me that way!” Falon screeches. I feel my head rock to one side as she slaps me.

“Get away from me now,” I state, my chest heaving while I attempt to control my anger. I do not hurt people, and the last thing I will put up with is a woman slapping me for saying a few words. Sure, the words are hurtful, but no one should have to put up with being accosted.

I feel a hand touch my elbow. “Do you want me to hex her?” Greta says with a wry smile.

Falon pulls away from me like she has touched a cinder and then stalks away on the cobbled street. Her high heels on the uneven stones make her strut look awkward.

I just shake my head and look back at Greta. “I thought you didn’t do hexes anymore.”

“I don’t. But there are people I know who do.” She grins wickedly.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say with a chuckle.

“Wait, do you know if you have anything that would be perfect for a woman who runs a house of horrors?” Or at least used to?

Greta taps her chin thoughtfully. “Are you looking for a love charm of some sort?” she teases.

“Maybe.” I laugh. “No, I’m thinking of something more like an object you could set up in a haunted house to help scare the unwary. Something really creepy, but authentically so.”

“I think I can come up with something,” she says, gesturing me back inside the shop. When I reenter the store, I inhale and realize the scent Falon seemed to despise was rosemary. The incense is actually rather pleasant.

I shake my head, glad that woman is now out of my life. I really do have poor taste in women. Or maybe it’s just the fact that I never take enough time to get to know them before I sleep with them.

I shrug and explore the shelves for more trinkets. I find about a dozen, and Greta hands me a wrapped present.

“Give this to the girl, and she’ll be yours forever.” Greta smiles. I pay for the items and give the aged Greta a peck on the cheek. “Tell Simion I say hi.”

“He can probably hear you, the old goat.”

“No, I can’t,” comes the disembodied voice of her husband from their upstairs apartment.

“Bye, Simion!”

“Be seeing you, Jeremy!”

I leave the store and walk toward the hotel I usually lunch at when visiting the Quarter. I used to love living on the upper story of the Hotel St. Marie for its beautiful balconies at one point. I would just sit outside with a book and let the bustle of the street below act as my own white noise machine. I have never felt quite so relaxed as I do reading in this spot.

My mind keeps wandering. Was that truly Melissa? She seemed so similar, but if that was indeed her, she looks terrific now. I cannot imagine a sexier woman.

I dial a special number on my phone. It rings once. You have to love good, specialized help.

“Terry here.”

“Terry. I’m looking for a particular woman. Do you think you can find her for me?”

“What’s she look like?”

“She’s about chest high to me, long jet black hair, penetrating green eyes. Her hips are wide, and she has an ass for days. She’s also busty. She might be staying in a hotel somewhere in the Garden District under the name Melissa Caldwell.” I hope I’m guessing right here.

“That should be easy enough. Shall I bring the lady to you?”

“No,” I say. “I just want to know where she is for now. I’ll decide after.”

“Will you be needing the car, then?”

“Yes, bring it around in a few hours. Thanks, Terry.”

I then start wondering what I should wear when I see her again. Men can have moments of self-consciousness, too. I want to look my best without trying too hard. I still find it funny how our last date went and how our clothes matched.

Should I bring Melissa here? Or maybe my favorite restaurant in the French Quarter? Or her hotel room? What

happens if she has a guest of her own?

My brain is running a mile a minute, and I can feel my heart flutter with anxiety.

Why is she overtaking my mind like this?

I briefly wonder if she has spoken to her father. Since she ran away when she bumped into me, I think she has not. In fact, I haven't really spoken to Brian either since that night I took Melissa's virginity.

It wasn't even too difficult to detach from him back then. The man was so lost in his own misery, he basically forgot to notice that I never called him back. Our friendship withered into something a lot more casual, even distant. Brian is just someone I used to know, now.

The thought of Melissa is different, fresh like a wound. I'm amazed at what the mere memory of the dark-haired angel can do to me. What is my obsession?

I begin pacing the hotel lounge. It's beautiful with its old fixtures and dated furniture. They have really kept this place in good shape, and the customer service here is terrific.

My phone rings. "Jeremy."

"Hey, Boss Man. She's staying at the Pontchartrain."

That surprises me. The hotel is on the posh side. I can't picture the girl from the shabby Victorian mansion choosing a hotel like this.

I wonder why she chose the place. Maybe it was to experience something different, but most tourists visiting New Orleans prefer the Quarter.

"Bring the car around after you pick up a good wine. I trust your judgment when it comes to the vintage, Terry."

"I'm happy to hear that. I'll text when I'm outside."

"Thanks." I hang up.

I go to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I'm considering making arrangements for my clothes. Currently, I'm wearing a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. It may be too casual, but

I'd rather not look like a wealthy billionaire dude in front of her. For some reason, I doubt it would impress her if I did look that way.

Now, I feel like I'm overstepping my and her boundaries. She clearly made it seem like she couldn't care less about me after our last conversation. Maybe I'm doing the wrong thing.

I pause and hear my phone ding. Terry's here.

Looking back in the mirror, I see an old man staring back at me. Well, not old, perhaps, but shopworn. Why would she want me now? If she did, wouldn't she have stayed to chat?

I feel as nervous as a teen about to pick up his prom date, sweaty palms and all.

Staring at my reflection, I give myself a mental confidence boost, and then I grab Greta's bag and head down to meet Terry.

Melissa

I 'm so excited to be in New Orleans. There are so many places I want to visit. But I'm here for work first and pleasure second. There are places here where you can get Halloween props and costumes you wouldn't find anywhere else.

There is this one shop that is said to have actual Voodoo practitioners' goods that were used in authentic rituals and spells. I have decided to turn one of the upstairs suites in Gordon's haunted house into a gallery full of haunted objects and curiosities.

The web is full of supposedly haunted objects like dolls and furniture. But in this one shop called the Voodoo Queen, there are apparently hundreds of objects that are the certified real deal. I want to get a few. Some items are pushing the budget a bit. Still, I really want a reputed haunted doll worth a few thousand that contains five poltergeists, as the story goes.

I enter the store, and an old bell rings sonorously. The air smells lovely, like rosemary and thyme. The store is crowded with objects. Some are even hanging from the ceiling. There are the usual trendy items for tourists, such as things with *New Orleans* stamped on them. But I walk further into the store, and the items turn more Gothic and odder.

Noticing a wealthy woman, I see her stuff something into her pocket. I'm pretty sure it is not hers. Her eyes meet mine, and I see savagery in those cold eyes. She looks like she's contemplating saying something to me, but I quickly turn and walk into another section of the shop.

I start eyeballing an extensive collection of gemstones and crystals in a glass case. I'm definitely leaving with some of these. Not for the shop, but to hand out to friends and random people for whom I think the stones suit.

Turning to my right, I collide with a tall man. I bounce off his chest and apologize. I look up into the person's eyes and freeze for a moment.

It's Jeremy! The father of my twins!

Thankfully, the flight reflex takes over instead. I pivot on my heel and walk right out of the store. I brush by the woman on my way out, and she gives me a sullen glare. That must be Jeremy's girlfriend. Maybe his wife. How incredibly awkward it might have been to stay and chat.

My brain shuts down into protective mode, and I start repeating a song in my head as I rush away from the store. Thoughts of Jeremy and the surprise in his dark eyes haunt me. I didn't get much of a look, but he looks like a tycoon type now, judging by his clothes and the hot model girlfriend.

A hot tear drips out of the corner of my eye. *No. I will not cry.*

A part of me scolds myself. Yes, I have been hoping that I might run into Jeremy here. Possibly at his gallery, which I remember him telling me about at some point, but not in one of the French Quarter's oddity boutiques. And especially not with a trophy model on his arm.

But I guess you can buy anything when you're making the money he clearly is.

Stop it, Melly, I say to myself. *Being jealous won't hurt anyone but yourself.*

I have followed his success as he and Kenshin Takahashi spread their passion for classical art around the globe. They

dominated that world, handling works by the greats, such as Picasso, Dali, and Monet. It's all very impressive, *and entirely removed from my little world*, I think sadly.

But little does Jeremy know that he has two beautiful daughters in Seahollow, whom I have nicknamed the Horror Twins. I miss them today, but my friend Samantha always takes good care of them when I travel. I'll call them before bed like I usually do.

I'm just grateful they weren't with me when I bumped into their dad earlier. They're not called horrors just because they have been raised in my old friend Gordon's House of Horrors. It's because they can be a pair of little monsters themselves, without mercy or remorse for the trouble they so frequently cause.

Disappointed that I never got to purchase anything, I start walking down the street. I stop for a while, watch a jazz band, and throw them a twenty in their music case. It is getting close to supper, but I want to visit the Lafayette cemetery before returning to my hotel.

I walk through the cemetery and feel saddened. Gordon would have loved to see this place. It has his name all over it.

I still can't believe it has been two years since the old man passed away. He left all of his money to the House of Horrors and me, on the condition that I stick around to run it. Which of course, I have.

I miss Gordon every day. It is nice not having to worry about money, that's for sure. But I would do anything to see my old friend and business partner laugh again while he terrifies people.

In a melancholy mood, I begin to head back to the hotel. I'm not just sad about Gordon, but also the fact that Jeremy has a girlfriend right now, if she *is* that. Or his wife. I haven't seen that in the media, but he's generally private about his personal life.

I have to admit, I *have* secretly hoped I might run into him, but I never actually thought I would. Today has a touch of fate

to it, almost.

The walk is longer than expected back to the hotel, but I can always use the exercise. The hotel is classy, unlike any place I have ever stayed in before, but I like the novelty of it. It almost makes me feel rich.

Things were so tight for so long, I keep forgetting I'm relatively well-to-do nowadays. Blaine's House of Horrors is rated one of the top haunted houses in the country as of the last three years, and we have tons of tour groups stopping by, including ghost hunters and paranormal researchers with their gear, asking to stay the night to witness occult activity.

Business is booming, and I have actually hired five employees. I have made plenty of friends in this sleepy little town in Maine, and for the first time in my life, I feel like I truly have a home with my daughters and the people in my life.

I walk up the hotel stairs, enter the lobby, and see Jeremy leaning against a wall. He is waiting for me with a bundle under his arms.

The years roll back and my breath stops.

My emotions flash from panic to lust to fear, with dollops of confusion in between.

Did he find out about the twins? Is he here to see me? Did he even recognize me back in the shop?

Jeremy approaches me with his head slanted to one side and a slight smile on his lips. His pronounced widow's peak seems more prominent, but maybe it's just how he has his hair slicked back.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you look like Dracula?" I burst out. *Great start to the conversation, Melly.*

"Just you, but I think that has more to do with your personal tastes than with my appearance." He chuckles at my feeble joke.

"If you say so, Mr. Dracula."

"So, what are you doing in town?" he asks.

“Um.” *No, don’t let my brain stall right now.* “Looking to add to Blaine’s House of Horrors. Plus, a little vacation to celebrate the success of the house.”

“Where’s Gordon? Is he here with you?”

“Ah, no, Jeremy.” My sudden rush of speech dries up. I have to swallow to go on.

“Gordon’s dead. He passed away in his sleep two years ago.”

Jeremy looks down at his feet. I wince from the sympathetic understanding in his face, nonetheless.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He pauses before he plunges on. “How are things with you? Married?”

I laugh. “Me? Married? Yeah, right. No, I’m single.”

His grin widens, and I can’t help but flush.

“Was that your girlfriend in the Voodoo Queen?” I bite my lip, waiting for the bomb to drop.

“*Was* my girlfriend. She isn’t now.”

I give him a slight frown but let my doubts pass. He has no reason to lie to me. I think.

“Congratulations on your success in the art industry. I’ve seen you in magazines and tabloids the past few years. You must be happy. How are the Takahashis?”

“They are doing quite well. They actually have another baby on the way.”

Oh. Wow. “And how’s little Daiki?” I remember the kid well. He was a little charmer, and his passion for Stephen King rivaled mine.

“He’s doing great. He’s looking at universities in the States already. And I found a genuine shrunken head for his macabre collection of artifacts.”

“That’s awesome! I’d love one,” I exclaim involuntarily.

Jeremy holds out the parcel he has in his hand. “It’s not a shrunken head, but I figured you might like this. Be gentle. It’s

old.”

I hesitate, then open my palms. *A gift? For me?* My foolish heart sings with joy.

“Come sit with me over here,” I say instead as I move toward a couple of chairs along the lobby wall. We could do with some privacy right now.

I sit down, and Jeremy sets the package on a small table between us. Slowly, almost fearfully, I pull off the many layers of wrapping paper.

My mouth drops open in awe. “Is this what I think it is?”

“If you think it is the headdress of an actual Voodoo priestess, then yes, you are right.” He looks a bit smug, but it is justified for a prize like this.

“I don’t even want to know how much this must have cost.”

“No gentleman would tell you,” he retorts pretty sharply. “It’s a gift from me to you. Please accept it.”

“I—”

He cuts me off, “And don’t tell me you can’t take it, because you can and you will.”

I frown again, but I have no real reason to not accept the gift. “Thank you, Jeremy. I’ll display it in the house for our guests.”

“Excellent,” he says. “I’d get it insured.”

“I’ll do that, then. The whole house needs a new insurance plan, anyway.” I smile at him, and a tear leaks down my cheek.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, his black eyes widening. God, he’s still so attractive. Why am I such a mess right now?

“It’s nothing. I’m just used to being the gift giver. I don’t have anything for you.” I’m half-lying, but I’m not ready to tell him about the girls. Assuming I’ll ever be ready, that is.

He doesn't reply, just reaches over and grabs my hand. He turns it palm up and begins to draw little circles in the center of my hand with his finger. It's not an explicit gesture, but deeply sensual all the same.

I start feeling warm inside. I turn away, blushing, not daring to make eye contact with him, and start to worry I might blurt out my secrets.

But doesn't he deserve to know?

I wish I had been mentally prepared for a run-in like this. I would never have told Jeremy if I never saw him again. But seeing him like this and feeling this desire welling up inside me is starting to make my anxiety rise.

I want to climb into his lap for comfort just to feel his touch again. I haven't been with a man sexually in over six years. I've had dates, but I never felt even a bit of lust for these random men.

I hadn't been holding back on purpose or anything. I just never have the time between raising the girls and putting on our shows at the House of Horrors. And my urges have been nothing a vibrator couldn't handle.

I pull my hand out of his. My smile feels forced.

"Are you okay, Melissa?" he asks, wrinkling his forehead. "I seem to remember a more spirited girl, willing to say anything on her mind."

He is challenging me, and I know it. It's almost working.

"I seem to remember a man walking away without even a struggle."

There, I said it. The real reason I felt so hurt.

He casts his eyes down at his hands.

"I'm sorry, Melissa." He speaks with difficulty. "I—I thought you wouldn't want to be with someone my age, especially when you were so young and a virgin. I didn't want to rob you of your youth."

"You also didn't want to piss off my father," I snarl.

“Yes, that’s a part of it, too.” He nods his head in acceptance. “I haven’t spoken to him since.” His voice grows husky, and he won’t meet my eyes. Was he holding back tears?

“Well, it’s been nice catching up, but I think we should end it here,” I say firmly. Jeremy looks up, and his pitch-colored eyes narrow at me. There is a slight twist to his mouth.

“No,” he says. “I think we are just getting started.”

I feel a chill, not knowing what to expect.

Jeremy

“You didn’t tell your father you are alive and well, did you?” I demand. I’ll never know why I thought I had the right to say anything like this to her, especially since I’ve stopped speaking to Brian myself. But she hisses at me like a cat and gets up to storm off.

I reach out and grab her hand. “Please don’t go.”

Somehow, this works. She turns her head back toward me.

“How dare you say that after what happened! You said it yourself. You haven’t spoken to him either. So where do you get off telling me what I should or shouldn’t do?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, looking around. We are attracting way too much attention. She notices that too and makes a visible effort to calm down.

“Let’s go for a drink,” she says, pointing to the bar doors off the lobby.

I lift up the bag that Terry had picked up for me. It has wine and some snacks in it. “I brought drinks and treats.”

“I’m not a dog, Jeremy. Treats won’t get me to do tricks for you.”

Wow, she’s got a mouth on her. I admire her boldness.

“I expect you want to go to my room, too.”

Ouch. I feel my face getting hotter. That is, in fact, precisely what I have been hoping for.

She makes an exasperated noise and grabs the headdress off the table. "Let's go."

Melissa doesn't walk with me, but ahead of me. I figure she is giving herself some time to get her thoughts together. I feel like a horny dog being led on a leash.

But let's face it. She could beat me up with that headdress, and I would still want her body on top of mine. I'm amazed at how strong my desire is for her.

We get in the elevator, and she inspects me from the corner of her eye. I can't help but wonder what she is thinking. She is not giving me any indication that she could possibly return the feelings I'm obviously growing for her. *Have had* for her.

I hadn't wanted to end our tryst six years ago, but when I called and she expressed how she felt, I did walk away. I was a coward. She's right about that. The situation with Brian is still too difficult to touch.

But also, she's very talented at hiding her emotions. It's probably why she's such a good actor at Blaine's House of Horrors. Though she hides it, I expect she's got some of Talissa's love for drama in her. This stoic façade she is putting on is more like her father.

But for some reason, she has a look of guilt on her face. It is hard to see, but it *is* there in her jade-green eyes.

Maybe she is actually regretting not getting back in touch with her family. I can only hope, for Brian's sake. Seven years is a long time to not know where your child is.

We exit the elevator, and I see she must have a suite. My pulse starts racing.

I'm about to be alone with her again. I can barely keep the excitement suppressed inside me.

I see her hand tremble as she swipes the keycard to her suite of rooms. Looks like I'm not the only one feeling a bit rattled.

“Jeremy, feel free to pour us a drink. I’m going to go change,” Melissa says as she heads down a small hallway.

“You don’t have to change. You look lovely.”

She’s wearing a black leather jacket with black capris and a pink tank top. Her tank top reveals the tops of her lovely breasts, and all her clothes are form-fitting but classy.

I see her shaking her head as she walks away. Cynicism? Exasperation? I can’t tell.

I head to the marble kitchenette and grab a pair of wine glasses from the hanging rack. I realize I can hear Melissa talking to herself. Or is she on the phone? Whoever she’s talking to, it takes about ten minutes.

She comes out of the room wearing a long, light blue T-shirt dress that comes down to mid-thigh. Aside from that, she hasn’t changed her makeup or anything. I briefly wonder who she was talking to, but I figure it would be rude to ask.

“Sorry for the wait. I had to call home and make sure everything was okay.” She sits beside me on a beige couch, and I pass her a glass of wine.

“It’s no problem. You look sexy. I want to eat you up.”

She smiles briefly and turns away to take a sip of the wine. It’s a decent merlot. Terry sure knows how to pick them.

“That’s delicious!” she exclaims after a moment’s pause.

“I’m glad you like it. My driver’s the wine connoisseur.” I take another sip. “Someone could give *me* tap water, and I’d praise the vintage.”

She laughs like a bell. I have missed that sweet chiming sound. No one laughs quite like her.

What are we doing up here? Why did she invite me upstairs?

There’s only one way to find out.

I lean forward and pull Melissa toward me for a deep kiss. She tastes like sunshine and sweetness.

She moans into my mouth, and I feel my cock start to grow rigid immediately. Melissa pulls away and sets her glass down. I set down mine. And then we are in each other's arms with not a care in the world.

She bites my lip and then straddles my lap. Pushing my head back, she nibbles down the side of my face and onto my neck. Then she bites. Hard.

"Looks like Dracula got bit." She laughs before kissing my lips once more.

I suck on her lower lip, and she moans again. Pulling away, she says, "I can feel how hard you are. How badly do you want me?"

"So badly I could die."

"Well, I'm going to make you beg for it."

"I'll get down on my knees right now." I slide to the floor, forcing her legs apart with my hands. Her bare pussy is in front of me. She isn't even wearing underwear.

I adjust my cock and begin kissing, biting, and slowly making my way to her juicy center.

Her breathing intensifies. I wonder if she remembers how much I love eating her out, and by the time I reach her slippery entrance, I can see the wetness growing there. I slide my tongue in and take a long lick from her slit to her clit. I flick my tongue there, and she sighs and gasps in turn. She tastes so good.

I get up to remove my belt and unbutton my pants. It feels like I have been waiting an eternity to do this to her again. I release my cock from the confines of my jeans and take my palm and rub her pussy with it.

I circle the head of my cock with my wet palm before dragging my hand down its length. I groan and then fall upon her pussy again like a starving man.

"Oh, my God," she whimpers.

I don't stop to think. My hand squeezes my cock and starts jerking as I suck on her nub. Her intoxicating juices drip down

my chin and soak the front of my shirt.

I'd swear she never had another man since me, just by the way her body is reacting to my touch.

Suddenly, she grabs me by my hair and pulls my face against her cunt, hard. My tongue works frantically, trying to help her reach her climax.

It isn't time to use my fingers yet, and her hips start gyrating as she nears her peak.

“Right there. Oh, God, right there. Faster! Harder!”

I feel her body tense all over. Her hips buck, smashing her pelvic bone into my mouth. It hurts, and I can taste blood, but at the same time, I'm stroking my cock faster until I feel my own peak rising.

She reaches her crest with a deep, shuddering sigh. I pull away and smile at her. She blinks at me, startled, then notices the two spots where I've bitten through my own lips.

“Now you really look like a vampire.” She laughs. “You have blood on your mouth. Did I make you do that? I'm sorry. I couldn't help it.”

“No worries.”

“I'm going to get a cloth,” she says, and I admire how her inner thigh is dripping with her juices as she gets up and heads to the bathroom. There is nothing sexier than seeing a woman pleased with my mouth.

She returns swiftly with a white face cloth. Melissa wipes down my chin and neck and then leaves again. She calls, “Come rinse your mouth.”

I pull off my jeans the rest of the way, and my cock is rock hard and purple. It looks ready to explode. She's in the bathroom and hands me a plastic cup of water. I swirl the water in my mouth and spit it into the sink. I probe my lip with my tongue. Yep, I split it. I shrug and dump the water in the sink, turning toward her.

Melissa has a grin on her face, and she points down to my cock.

“I want that in me right now. Fuck me on this sink.”

I love how bossy she is being. She was so shy, so innocent last time. This is like watching a true queen come into her own.

I pick her up and set her down on the edge of the sink. I kiss her and move my body against her. She squirms.

“Please, Jeremy. Do it now. Please.”

“I thought I was supposed to be the one begging.”

“I’m *not* begging.” She gives me a quick, fierce glare, melting into a cheeky smile. “That was a command. Fuck me like your life depends on it.”

I grab my cock, and she raises her hips simultaneously, so I plunge deep inside her cunt. *Fuck*. This is a heaven I haven’t earned, but I’ll take it.

Because that’s the hell of it. It’s Melissa, and whatever she gives me, I’ll take it. Every time.

I love the warm feeling of her pussy. I rock slowly, drawing myself out. I’m already on the verge of coming, but I don’t want to spoil everything by prematurely ejaculating.

But she doesn’t give me a chance. She starts moving, writhing, and I can’t get enough of the sensation.

I hammer her pelvis with my thrusts, and I can feel her pussy contracting around my cock. She’s about to come, too. I can tell by how she’s breathing and the scarlet flush spreading all over her face.

I want to see her breasts, so I pull off the T-shirt dress and discover she’s not wearing a bra. I growl and take the tip of one of her voluptuous breasts into my mouth. *God, she’s divine.*

I can smell coconut lotion and rub my five o’clock shadow on her delicate flesh. Her breasts are bigger than I remember, but that’s just fine with me.

The motion of my hips as I pummel her turns into long, drawn-out slams against her pussy. With each slap against wet

flesh, she makes noises that drive me wild with desire.

I'm not going to be able to hang on much longer. Two more strokes, and my seed starts to spill out.

I should pull out, but I can't help myself. I keep pumping away at her pussy as she writhes through a powerful orgasm. Each contraction of her pussy makes me shake.

A long while later, after my breathing has slowed and my heart is no longer trying to leave my chest, I pull out and look into her eyes.

"Don't run away this time," I say.

"You neither."

With her legs still around me, I walk into the bedroom and flop onto the bed.

I'm careful to put myself squarely across her before I go to sleep, though. My last thought before I fall asleep is, *I can't let her go this time.*

Melissa

Jeremy and I lie in the center of my hotel bed, our bodies entwined and sweaty. It is a good sweat. I feel like I released years of toxins and pent-up sexual frustration.

He looks like he is about to doze off, which is the last thing I want him to do. I want to ride him to completion again. I want to be so in his head that the world's most beautiful supermodels don't even catch a passing glance from him.

I hear a groan from him, and he turns to face me. He rests his head on his arm, and his usually cold gaze softens noticeably. "You are possibly one of the most beautiful creatures in existence."

"Don't say that. You might catch the attention of the gods."

"Which gods are you talking about?" He chuckles.

"All of them," I retort. "Did you know they hung Cassiopeia upside down in the sky for all eternity because she claimed she was more beautiful than Aphrodite?"

He nods his head, amused. "As a matter of fact, I did hear that. And how about Medusa? Wasn't she also changed for being too beautiful?"

"Exactly, and because she tempted Poseidon. Allegedly. Anyway, good to know you're caught up with your Greek

literature.” I laugh softly.

Jeremy reaches over and runs his fingers through my hair. “You have no idea what you do to me,” he says gently. “I want to spend the whole night in your arms.”

I don’t know whether to feel good about his words or run like hell. I find myself speaking before my brain catches up.

“You’re welcome to stay the night.” *Oh, shit. What am I thinking?*

He’s too quick to take me up on that, so I can’t backtrack now.

“Thank you. Would you like to take a bath? I saw you have a hot tub. We can make love there. That is, if you feel like it.”

“You can go another round already?” I ask without surprise.

“Of course, and no, I don’t take Viagra. You just turn me on like a switch. I just need to be in your proximity, and I start to stiffen.”

He smiles lazily, grabs my hand, and puts it on his cock. It is already hard again.

My lips fall open in a silent *O* of surprise. When he releases my hand, I keep it there and start to lightly graze his balls with my nails. I then lower myself down the bed and wrap my fist around his cock before taking it into my mouth.

“Swing your ass around,” he says. “I want to play with your pussy.”

I smile and obey. He slides two fingers into my sopping wet pussy and starts fucking me with his fingers. I begin to moan around his cock, which jerks abruptly. Yep, found the right spot.

As I suck, I can feel him reaming my inner softness with his fingers as hard as possible, and my legs quiver. It’s more than I can take. I tear my mouth away for a second.

“Oh, God, Jeremy. You’re going to make me lose my mind.”

“That’s the point.” I can almost hear his smug smile. My climax builds, but it’s not enough. I want more.

I swing around and settle myself squarely on his cock, planting myself like I’m planting a flag on unclaimed land. *Mine. All mine.*

I see his eyes widen in surprise, and I experience the thrill of undiluted conquest for the first time. Yes. This is me taking control of my pleasure and his. I get that now.

“You’re glorious,” he breathes out hoarsely, running his hands up and down my sides. I lean back and undulate, settling myself into the slow climb down his formidable girth.

I rock back and forth, slowly inching myself downward to the base of that throbbing length of manhood. Jeremy clasps my waist tightly, letting me take my time. When I glance down at him, there is a thin sheen of sweat on his brow, a glazed, almost hypnotized look in his ebony eyes.

Slower, slower again until I’m fully seated and he is entirely inside me. I flex my innermost muscles a little, testing how far I can go still.

“God almighty,” he rasps. “You’re killing me here.”

I lean over him now, my full breasts much closer to his face. “You wish, Mr. Dracula. The torture’s only just beginning.”

I’m as good as my word, controlling my pace as carefully as I can to bring him close to the edge without leaping over the brink into climax. I don’t know where this sudden dominatrix side of me came from, but I’m enjoying myself thoroughly.

“Please,” he gasps, “please.”

Who’s begging now? I think triumphantly, though I won’t say it out loud. I’ll save the crowing for later. The important thing is that I finally figured out to have my revenge on how he takes over my body. The trick is to return the favor, no holds barred. Generosity, with a most satisfying catch.

The realization makes me feel like a grown woman. I’m suddenly acutely conscious of how long it’s been. How much

I've missed this, and how different I am now.

Can he tell? Can he see it? How much older I am, how my body has changed since I gave birth to his children?

I look down, and I see all my petty fears and insecurities are unfounded. The man's got his eyelids firmly squeezed shut.

I huff out a laugh and redouble my pace. I think I read somewhere that this is called riding cowgirl, though I think Jeremy resembles a de Medici prince more than any stallion I've ever met.

Faster and faster and more frantic now. My breath releases in quick pants, and Jeremy bucks up under me. We both race to achieve climax, our mutual frenzy escalating. My mind slips into a state of exalted reaching, climbing to the peak of my pleasure.

Jeremy lets out a hoarse shout, jerking spasmodically into me. I look down to where we're joined, enjoying every tiny microsecond of this precious feeling of release. Just the sight of him letting go brings me to the edge and over.

Afterward, I drift forward and collapse on top of him. I'm sated, sleepy, and very, very tired.

"I didn't bring condoms this time either," he breathes into my ear. I shrug.

"I'm on birth control now," I reply sleepily. "It's probably going to be fine."

Which it wasn't last time, but now is probably not the time to bring it up.

His cock is so sensitive. I'm still holding him inside me, and every slight spasm of my inner walls has him clenching and gasping all over again.

I feel like I'm getting too overstimulated, so I make a suggestion.

"Let's have another glass of wine and then climb into the hot tub. I can rub you down and make you feel relaxed."

Jeremy rolls his eyes at me. “I’m relaxed, or couldn’t you tell by those orgasms?”

“I would hope so,” I say. “It would be weird if you weren’t. I’ll just go get the wine.”

The tiny kitchenette in the hotel suite offers a modicum of privacy, and I badly need my errant thoughts to settle down. I breathe in and out, deep and strong, while I uncork the wine.

First. This didn’t need to happen.

Except that I have zero self-control, which is why I keep falling into Jeremy’s arms every time I see him.

Second. Six years ago, I was a different person. I don’t need to make the same desperate choices now.

Except that deep down, I’m still scared of getting caught.

I suck in a deep breath. *There it is.*

Or rather, that’s what it is. It’s the memory of feeling helpless, like the lost kid I used to be. That’s why Jeremy has this painfully triggering effect on me.

Okay. No more cowardice. I owe him some honesty, but I also owe it to myself.

I march back into the bedroom, wielding the wine bottle like a battle standard.

“I want you to know something,” I tell him. “I’ve never been with any other man.”

Jeremy blinks and then jerks himself up.

“Never?” he asks with painful incredulity. “As in *never*?”

“Never,” I confirm tightly. I try not to think about how many women he might have been with in the last six years. Or men, for that matter, or who knows what else? I’m starting to realize how little I really know about this guy.

“I wasn’t hung up on you or anything,” I say, a bit louder than necessary. “I’ve just had different priorities to focus on.”

He nods immediately. “Right. I know. Gordon’s murder house.”

“Blaine’s House of Horrors,” I correct him coldly. “Gordon might have passed away, but the place is still named after him, as always. It was everything to him, and to me. I had a real home there, for the first time in my life. Gordon gave me a real purpose, you know, and the direction I needed in my life.”

He frowns.

“What’s wrong now?” I ask, reaching out to hand him the wine.

He swigs from it as casually as if it’s a draft beer. “It’s nothing. I’m just thinking about your dad.”

“If you’re going to start with that shit again, you can leave,” I retort.

“Whoa!” He holds his hands up in a “don’t shoot” gesture, almost dropping the wine.

“I’m sorry,” he reassures me. “You don’t have to worry about that. Let’s just focus on this beautiful night. I think it’s time to hit the hot tub.”

I nod instead of saying anything. I think I’m done with confessions for the time being.

There is something about him that I cannot explain. He makes me feel young again, but in a good way. Perhaps I’m recapturing the youth I never really got to enjoy.

Because I had to grow up so fast, almost overnight, and it’s not that I ever blamed Jeremy for it. But at the same time, I wonder how things might have been different sometimes. I suppose every single mother in history has had to think about that. Or perhaps try not to.

Or perhaps I’m overthinking as usual, and I don’t need to. Not while I have a really hot naked man in my hotel room and no inhibitions to worry about.

Now, I want to see his wild side.

He settles me into the tub, which is filling up with bubbly water, extra hot. Once the water covers my knees, he turns on

the jets and slips inside. I make a 'come here' gesture, and he's the one who obeys this time.

I close my eyes in bliss as he manipulates into a position of his liking.

This is me now. Not the old Melly, scared shitless of everything, but Melissa Caldwell, grown woman with a mind of her own and a destiny to match.

I have come far. Very far. And yet here I am, back in the arms of the same man. What does that say about me?

That he's meant for me? Or that my destiny involves my being a persistent moron?

Whatever it is, I need to figure it out, fast.

Jeremy

I wrap my arms around Melissa as she settles on her knees, neck deep in the water. I slide the flat palm of my hand between her legs and start rubbing her mons.

She takes a sip of the wine and then kisses me with it still in her mouth. Some drips down our faces, but feeling her nimble tongue in my mouth was well worth the stickiness.

“Close your eyes,” I say, smiling at her wickedly.

She narrows her eyes in suspicion but closes them.

You can tell her anxiety goes up the minute she closes her eyes. What am I going to do?

The water is lapping at my neck as I move around her in the water. I let her feel my breath on her left shoulder. She turns to face me.

“No, stay where you are,” I command.

I move behind her and snake my arms around her chest and play with her heaving breasts for a moment.

“Lie back against me,” I whisper in her ear. She leans back and lets her legs and feet float.

“Spread your legs. I’m going to support your hips. Trust me. Relax.”

My hands are holding up her hips, and I move her so the jet is shooting between her legs.

“Feel that?” I ask in a hushed tone. “I’m going to make you come, just using that jet. Now, rest your legs on the tiles up there. I’ll hold you in place.”

As we get closer to the jet, I can tell she’s starting to feel the pressure against her pussy. She shivers.

“It feels amazing,” she says. “Oh, it’s so intense. I can feel it *everywhere*.”

First, her legs quiver, then her hips start wriggling in my grip.

She starts gasping for air. “Oh, God, Jeremy. Don’t stop.”

The pressure and the bubbles must feel like a thousand fingers working all over her groin. She starts convulsing and then panting and making pleasurable noises.

My brain stops having cohesive thoughts as I watch her come in my arms. I’m lost, riding on a hot wave of sensations.

“Now I’m going to fuck you in the ass,” I say. I don’t know whether I’m joking or not. Am I up for that kind of thing? Is she?

“Does it hurt?” she asks.

“If it isn’t done correctly using lots of lube and if your partner is not being gentle, then yes, it can be painful. But I can make sure it never hurts. I’ll take my time and play with your pussy, too. If you don’t like it, speak up, and I’ll stop. I promise.”

“You have lots of lube?” She looks somehow even more shocked about that. I see a hint of the adorable innocent she used to be, and it takes me a moment to reorganize my thoughts.

“Uh, no, but we’ll use something close enough. Now, get up and bend over the side of the tub.”

I tuck in a towel where her upper body rests. My genitals are up out of the water. I then put my mouth on her clit. I’m

instantly turned on. I feel depraved, and it is deeply erotic to me.

I rub her asshole and then begin to lick her pussy frantically while using a finger to push on her G-spot. Melissa squirms loudly but doesn't protest.

I pull my finger out and find that it is dripping with her vaginal fluids. I rub it on her little asshole again and tentatively slip a finger in the hole. I'm being so gentle, more than ever.

I slip another finger in, and it slowly stretches her sphincter. I move the digits slowly in and out.

It seems to turn her on, too, judging by the way her pelvic floor contracts. Soon, I position myself behind her to take her doggy style. I thrust my cock into her pussy and fuck her for a little while. It feels good, and my pulse starts racing.

Should I do it or not? The hesitation is killing me.

Then in one slick motion, I pull out of her pussy, press the tip against the hole, and push past the sphincter muscle.

"Oh, fuck." That is all I can hear.

I'm inside her ass. I start slowly going in and out, and I moan as I stretch her tight asshole. My arm snakes around her torso and I start strumming her clit. She cries over and over as each time, I slide deeper and deeper.

"You are fucking sensational."

I'm grunting as I pummel her against the side of the tub. I never expected to be in this situation, but my God, it really does feel good.

I'm so lost in my pleasure that I don't even realize that she is squirting all over the tub. My legs spasm and almost give out on me. I'm close to spent.

Then I grunt hard. "Fuck."

And I climax, pulling her ass onto my cock and shaking in pleasure. We're both gasping with sated lust.

I pull out gently but as quickly as I can. I wonder how much I've hurt her.

"Get back in the tub," I say. "It will ease the pain."

She does as I say. "You're right. My ass is tender, but in a good way. But I can still feel the echoes of the orgasm that was masking the pain. Plus, the wine went right to my head."

"What did you think of the anal?"

"It was not as bad as I thought it'd be." She shrugs. "I can see why some people wouldn't like it. But I didn't mind it. I came before you did."

I laugh, and I realize that the grin she returns is exactly what I needed to soothe my heart.

"Do you want to stay the night?" she asks. I was hoping she would. I don't want to just up and leave and make her feel used.

Because I really, really need to get things right this time around.

"I'd love to," I say with what I hope is a winning smile. She returns it with interest.

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

"Do they have lobster for room service?"

"Yeah, but it isn't like the Northern lobster. I recommend the seafood casserole if you are after something fishy. I'm having steak and potatoes."

"Alright." I nod. "I'll have the same. How do you take your steak?"

"Medium rare."

"Now that's my type of woman."

She throws back her head and laughs. "What is it about men and their steaks?"

I get out of the tub, throw on a robe, and grab the menu from the bedroom. I peruse it while she slips into her pajamas. They are not exactly what I would call sexy, but I think we are

done with that portion of the night. I take one look at her and raise an eyebrow. She's wearing Minnie Mouse PJs.

"For some reason, I didn't expect cartoons to be of any interest to you," I say in a surprised tone.

She doesn't seem to have a good answer, so she shrugs and swipes the menu from my hands. "Did you pick what you want to eat?"

"You."

"Again?"

"Yes, again."

"Are you sure you're not on Viagra or perhaps some sort of sex freak?"

"No Viagra. But I may be a sex freak. Come here. Dracula wants a taste."

"Fuck," she says as I start stripping her PJ bottoms off. I feel an almost obsessive desire to please her, and she slides her ass over and spreads her legs. I insert two fingers in her and pull out some of her precious pearly liquids. She watches me in awe as I slide those fingers in my mouth. I don't think she knows what to think, but I also think it's starting to turn her on.

I begin lapping at her delicate clit. I'm surprised she can feel it at all, but soon, she is rocking her hips against my face. I rest my hand on her inner thigh and massage it with my fingers. The long, slow licks make her twitch, and I can't help but love how I can make her pussy so wet.

I put my fingers in her again, but this time, I bring them to her lips.

"Taste us," I say with a husky voice. Judging by my rock-hard dick, I'm really turned on. She opens her mouth, looking as if she expects some level of nastiness, but the look she gives me is surprised.

"It's rather sweet!" she exclaims.

“I want to be inside you again.” She watches as I wash my cock and then stand up.

“Are you too sore?”

She starts breathing shallowly. “No.”

I pick her up like she is a child and carry her out of the bedroom and into the living room’s seating area. I set her down.

“Let’s fuck against the wall and make the neighbors complain. When I pick you up, wrap your legs around me.” She nods and jumps into my arms.

My robust cock slides into her pussy, and she instantly lets out a pained moan. Maybe she wasn’t ready for this as much as I thought.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I may be a little sore,” she admits.

“Do you want to stop?”

She considers it carefully but shakes her head and swings her hips further down my cock. I put her legs up against my shoulders and lean her against the wall. I feel the heat between her legs. I have her pinned to the wall, and she cries out as my cock rubs against her most intimate core with each thrust.

When she starts coming, the fluid gushes all over my cock and drips down to the floor and along the wall. She is in some sort of sex shock. I don’t think she thought it was possible to come so many times in one night. I have a moment of very masculine triumph at the thought that I could do this for her.

But before I reach my peak, I make her come again. The next time, I join her, and we take the rushing heat together in a single leap over the crest of climax.

We both breathe hard, and I drop us to the floor. I fall over on my side. I feel like a baby lamb, all shaky and breathing heavily. I’m quivering. Never in my life have I felt like this. I never want it to end.

But I realize she has a guilty look on her face.

“What’s that look for?” I ask.

“It’s nothing. I’m just exhausted. I have never had that much sex before.”

She smiles, hoping to distract me. But I know something is up.

Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I have something to say, too.

“I want to tell you something serious,” I say, waiting to drop the bomb. “I think we should tell your father where you are, and then tell him about us.”

There’s a moment where she freezes into utter stillness. Then the reaction sets in.

She shakes her head violently. “No. No. No. No, never, and absolutely not.”

I hold up my hands, willing her to be calm. “At least think about it.”

“No!” she snaps back. “I have a life I have to protect back home. I have a business, I have responsibilities. I’m not inviting disaster into my life when I’m doing so well on my own.”

“I’m serious, Melissa.” I say it quietly. I need her to know it. I need her to know that we can’t run and hide this time.

“No, Jeremy.”

“I will tell him if you won’t do it.”

She jumps to her feet. “Absolutely not, and if you’re going to tell him, I’ll just run again. I think it’s time you left.”

I’m shocked for a second, then the hurt sets in. So much for a second chance at love.

“Okay.” I try not to let my voice break. “Give me a few minutes, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

I pause. “But I mean what I say. Contact your father, or I will. You’re not a child anymore, Melissa, and you know I’m on your side.”

She doesn't answer me. She doesn't say anything at all.

After I'm dressed, I go to give her a goodbye hug and kiss, but she shrugs me away and points to the door.

"Goodbye, Melissa. It's been a pleasure." I set my business card down on the table. "If you change your mind or want to see me again, I wrote my private cell on the back of the card."

With that, I shut the door behind me and lean against it.

There. Congratulations. You've officially ruined things with her now.

Melissa

The following day, I wake up feeling like someone has dragged me behind a car for miles. Oh, and I think I have a slight hangover from the wine. When I open the curtains, I feel the start of a headache in response to the bright light. How long did I sleep in?

I glance at the microwave clock and see it's past checkout time. It's a good thing I'm going to stay here another day and head back to the Voodoo Queen.

The bathroom is a mess. Water is everywhere. It looks exactly like people had wild sex in here. I tidy it up, hoping we didn't cause permanent water damage.

Then I hear my phone ringing in the bedroom. I walk into another mess. The bed is still drenched in our bodily fluids, and the bedding is all helter-skelter. To top it all off, I can't find my phone. It rings endlessly. Whoever is calling must be worked up.

I finally find it under the bed. I look at the phone to see it's Eric calling. He must be checking in for the day. I call him back, sitting on the bed and trying to avoid the wet spots. I can't believe I slept on that bed.

"Melly?" Eric answers. I can tell by the sound of his voice that something is off.

"Yes, what's up? Is everything okay?"

Eric's voice is hoarse. "Melly, I'm so sorry. Pam fainted last night. I took her to the healthcare center, and they've been running tests. They don't know what it is right now and are talking about sending her to a specialist in the city. Please come home. Pat won't stop crying for her sister, and I haven't slept."

My blood freezes into ice. Pam and Pat, the Horror Twins, both of them the center of my life. While I was in bed with Jeremy, Pam was ill, Pat was alone, and I didn't even know.

I jump to my feet immediately. "Were there any other symptoms aside from fainting?" I ask as I get my suitcase out of the closet and throw clothes in haphazardly.

"She was complaining about pain in her stomach. At first, I thought she just had the flu. Then she looked pale and droopy-eyed. Once she fell to the floor, I picked her up and came directly to the health center here in Seahollow. We're still waiting on the bloodwork. She has a rigid belly, whatever that means. I'm so sorry, and I'm scared, Melly. Can you meet us here?"

"Yes, of course." This is my punishment for not telling Jeremy the truth and keeping secrets, I just know it. Karma is a bitch.

"I'm on my way. I'll text you my flight information and be there as soon as possible. Get some sleep if you can. Is Pat there?"

"Yes, I'll let you talk to her." I hear the phone exchange hands.

"Mama?" Pat asks, hiccupping. I can tell by the way her voice cracks that she has been crying very hard for quite some time.

"Yes, baby, it's me. Stop crying. It is only going to make your throat hurt and give you puffy eyes."

"When are you coming home? Pam is sick, and they won't let me see her." She trails off, and I can tell the waterworks are about to fly again.

“Honey, they are just making sure you don’t get sick, too. You’ll see her soon. And I’m coming home on the next plane.”

I start choking up myself. I can hear the fear in her throat. Aside from the common cold, neither of my girls have ever been ill in their lives. And even then, they didn’t get sick enough to take a day off from daycare.

“You promise?” I can hear her voice quavering and on the point of tears again.

“Yes, my love, I swear. And no more crying. You have to be strong for your sister. You must use your Horror Twin powers and scare away the sickness.”

She gives me a slight giggle. Good. She is calming down.

“Okay, Mama. I can do that. I’ll be strong. I’m a good girl.” I hear confidence in her tone, which makes me relieved. At least I will only have to worry about one girl.

“I know, sweetie. You’re my little champion. If you feel better, can you put Eric back on the phone?”

“Yes, Mama. I feel better. I’ll see you soon.”

I hear the phone exchange hands again.

“Thank you!” Eric exclaims. “She’s settled down now.”

I close my eyes, picturing my two daughters with their long black hair and their father’s pronounced widow’s peak. It would take Jeremy one glance to know the girls are his. They even have his black-as-night eyes. Every time I looked at them for the past five years, I thought of him, wondering if he had ever thought of me. But I know he didn’t have the time, not with his achievements, with his job. His real life, in short.

“I have to call the airport, pack, and get ready to leave. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Thank you so much for helping me. I owe you everything, Eric.” I hang up the phone without waiting for a reply.

First, I call the airport and discover there is a plane to Bangor with one stop on the way there. It leaves just after supper.

Figuring I lucked out, I buy the last ticket. I call for a rental car at the airport. It's only a short drive from Bangor to Seahollow.

Now that I have some time, I have a boiling hot shower, washing off all signs of sex. My whole body is so sensitive, and I feel the pain of last night in every muscle. I take a Tylenol to ease my discomfort, but it doesn't help much.

I repack my bag and gently place the Voodoo headdress in the center of the bag so it doesn't get crushed. Seeing the headdress makes me think of Jeremy, and the guilt rises to my throat, causing it to constrict as I stop myself from crying.

Should I tell him? As their father, isn't it only right for him to know?

I still feel bad for kicking him out. But I had to cut him off if he is going to place my daughters in the line of fire between my poor excuses for parents. We'll have to leave Seahollow quickly. They won't be able to find us if we leave fast enough.

I start pacing the suite, guilt, anxiety, and emotional pain warring inside me. How would I feel if I had a child I didn't know about, and they died before I got a chance to know them? I would never forgive the person who didn't tell me. I don't want to be that person.

Maybe that's how Jeremy feels about keeping our secret from my father. Perhaps it has been eating him up inside.

I know I've felt the nagging guilt. How could I repeatedly have sex with this man and not tell him he knocked me up six years ago? I feel like some sort of psychopath, a narcissist at the very least.

It's just that I've never been able to express to him what, exactly, scared me off from going home to my parents ever again. Jeremy Steele is such a fundamentally strong, tough, successful man. He doesn't know anything about being weak, letting other people turn you into something pitifully small.

Should I call him?

I enter the living room and pick up the business card from the end table. I sit and stare at it for a long time with my phone

in hand.

Have I never told Jeremy for selfish reasons? Did I want the girls all to myself? Or is the only reason I'm considering calling him now because I don't want to go through the pain of possibly losing a child alone?

I must have dozed off because it is almost four when I wake up. Something in my dreams has sorted out my unconscious troubles. I have to make the call to Jeremy. I know that now.

I pick up the phone off the floor where it must have fallen while I was sleeping. I grab the card with its sleek lettering and start entering the number.

I'm shaking. The stress is getting to me, and I feel panicky. I debate hanging up, but it's too late.

"Jeremy," I hear him answer after a ring.

"It's me," I say, throat tight with fear.

"Melissa? Is this you? Why do you sound so strange? Is everything alright?"

I interrupt him without ceremony.

"Remember six years ago, when you and I slept together?"

"How could I forget?" he says, and I can tell he has a smile on his lips by the sound of his voice.

"Well, you impregnated me that night."

There's a stunned pause, then a sharp, indrawn breath.

"Did you have an abortion?" He sounds choked up himself now.

"Um . . . no. I had twins."

There is now complete, utter, dumbfounded silence on his end. I hold my breath, waiting for him to scream at me.

"They're girls named Pat and Pam. I call them my Horror Twins. And well, today, I got a call from my friend Eric, who is watching over them, and there is something wrong with

Pam. I don't know why I'm telling you this now, but I figure you deserve to know."

All I can hear is heavy breathing for fifteen seconds, and when I don't hear an answer, I hang up.

I'm done. Whatever he does, however he chooses to react, it's out of my hands. I've done my part, so I can go to my baby's side now.

With that, I go and grab my suitcase from the hall. I look around the suite where I spent a fantastic time with Jeremy and throw down a fifty-dollar bill for the maid. I figure after cleaning up this mess, she will have deserved it.

When I get to the lobby, there is a cab waiting. I practically leap into the vehicle and ask the driver to get to the airport as fast as possible for a good tip.

When I arrive, the bustle makes me a little more anxious. I want to be home, crying and holding my babies. But instead, I'm here with no patience and no anxiety medications. Not that I have any in the first place. I just wish I could have the option right now.

It's not long before I hear we can enter the boarding area. I practically push people over in my attempt to get to the head of the line. If possible, I want to be the first on and off the plane, and I'm not afraid to knock over an elderly person to do it.

After what seems like a lifetime, I enter the plane. My seat is in the back and is the dreaded place near the toilets. I grit my teeth together but am at least glad the flight isn't too long. I should be in the arms of my children soon.

After this, I doubt I'd leave them to a babysitter's care ever again. I love Eric and all, but he doesn't handle anxiety very well. Though I'm grateful he is doing all he can for Pam and Pat.

I still can't believe I told Jeremy about the twins. What will he do? File for custody of them? Or would we become your generic family with a white picket fence and a dog named

Rover? No, I will have to uproot the girls and move somewhere unexpected and remote. Canada, maybe.

Either way, significant changes are coming. I just pray it doesn't involve the loss of the eldest twin. My firstborn child by eight minutes.

I wonder if Jeremy is still sitting there stunned, or if he's progressed to cursing my name. I expect him to do both.

Would he want to be a part of their lives? How could he when he has to travel constantly for his work? Do I want an absent father in their lives like I had growing up?

The flight attendant starts their safety protocol spiel, and I stop listening and lean back, hoping to catch some sleep before I land. I have to switch planes in New York, which gives me an hour to rest.

I close my eyes and drift off into oblivion. I'll need all my strength for my kids at the other end.

Stay strong, my babies. Mom's coming. She's coming as fast as she can.

Jeremy

I 'm shocked stupid for a few minutes, listening to Melissa's confession. I'm even glad when she hangs up because I'm ready to explode.

She sure knows how to keep her secrets. I sit for a minute, worried I may pass out. I'm a father and have been for years. How could she do this to me?

Did she ever plan on telling me? Or was this crisis a manipulative way to get some money out of me? I'm going to demand a paternity test, that is for sure.

But if they are mine and the dates line up, I will be a father to my children whether she likes it or not. For now, I have to get to Seahollow.

I call the airport and find out that there are no flights out of the Big Easy for a day. That isn't going to work for me. I want to beat Melissa there.

If it's going to take calling in a favor, fine. I whip out my phone and call Terry.

One ring. "Terry here."

"Terry, I need a private plane."

"The usual man?"

"You betcha."

“He’s going to kill you someday with that thing.”

“He only almost ran into flying geese. You can’t blame migratory patterns on the poor guy.” I take a breath.

“On the serious side, Terry, I have just been told I’m a father of twin girls. They’re between five and six. I need presents, tablets, e-readers, whatever the newest gaming systems are. These girls are going to be spoiled like I never was.”

“Sounds like they have a great dad,” Terry murmurs. “When do you need the stuff by?”

“By the time the plane lands. Please time it well. I’m a bit in a rush. I need to make it there before Melissa Caldwell. I won’t let that woman rob me of one more minute of my twins’ lives.”

“Very noble, sir. But may I suggest a bit of tact? There are usually reasons women keep things like this secret. When you talk to her, hear her out and then make your decisions. How are you feeling about all of this?”

“Excited, confused, enraged.” I run my hand through my hair disgustedly.

“Normal emotions. Journal on your way to Seahollow. Get it out so that you can speak knowing you have thought about positively dealing with the issue.”

“I didn’t realize I hired you as a therapist, Terry.”

“I’m the complete package deal. We have to be on the plane in thirty minutes. Pack quickly, and I’ll be there with the presents to pick you up in twenty.”

“What would I do without you, Terry?”

“You don’t want to find out, trust me,” Terry says in a slightly sinister tone, and I wonder what other types of jobs he has in mind.

There’s another call I have to make. It’s years overdue and far too soon at the same time, but I’m just in the right mood for some explosive action at the moment.

“Hi?” a low voice answers.

“Brian, it’s Jeremy,” I say. “I know it’s been a while since we last spoke, but there’s something you need to know.”

“Okay,” he says cautiously. “Are you feeling alright? You sound weird.”

“I *feel* weird,” I say grimly. “Listen. I know where Melissa is.”

“What did you just say?”

I can’t blame him for sounding shocked, or disbelieving. I would, too, in his place.

“She’s living in Seahollow. It’s a small town on the coast of Maine,” I say rapidly. “I just met her in New Orleans, but she’s taking a plane back there right now, to where she lives. She’s been there for six plus years.”

Then I take a deep breath. “I know that because I saw her there, less than a year after she went missing.”

“*What?*” Brian’s voice is like a gunshot. “You knew? You’ve known all these years where she is? What are you saying, that you deliberately lied to me?”

“Brian, hear me out,” I say quickly. *God give me courage.* “Six years ago, when I met her, she was already an adult. She didn’t want to go home. I couldn’t have forced her to, not against her will.

“Especially not after,” I swallow uneasily, the words sticking in my throat, “especially not after I slept with her. She begged me not to tell you, and I was too ashamed of myself to ever say anything about it.”

“Have you gone crazy?” Brian says hoarsely. “You thought, *you* actually thought there could be any reason at all in the world not to tell me my daughter was still alive?”

“Brian, it’s worse than you know,” I say, my voice thick with regret. “I made her pregnant. She never told me until just now, but I’m a father, too. And you might want to sit down for this next part.

“She had twins. They’re in Seahollow. Melissa just called me to say that one of them is sick and in the hospital. And I know it’s years too late, for you and me both, but this time I had to tell you. Whatever Melissa feels about you, you deserve to know that she’s okay, and that your grandchildren are okay too. So that’s why I called you.”

There’s a long silence. I can hear Brian thinking, breathing shallowly.

“So that’s why you slowly stopped calling,” he says eventually. “Back then, I just assumed you were tired of hearing me talk about my grief, but it was your guilt. Because you knew how I’d feel about it all.”

I’m sorry, old friend, I think.

“I know my apologizing is not going to fix anything for you,” I say quietly, “but I just wanted you to know. I’m heading over there now as fast as I can to see my daughters. The house is called Blaine’s House of Horrors, up on the hill over Seahollow, and there’s only one hospital in town. I’m sorry, Brian, I’m sorry for everything, but I have to go see my kids. I hope I see you there too.”

I have no doubt I will, either. But right now I have to race against time to get there.

I hang up and start by grabbing my suits. Then I look at them and realize I don’t want to come off as a suit-wearing business monkey when I meet my girls. I want a softer and more personal look.

So instead, I grab Polo shirts, jeans, khakis, swimming trunks, and everything else I may need. Lastly, I grab my computer and tablet, which go with me everywhere.

I love my tablet for making layouts for the galleries. My laptop holds all my art connections and local and global auctions.

After finishing the Toronto opening, I was going to take an extended vacation. I have worked tirelessly for Kenshin for years. I know he won’t begrudge me some time off.

My phone buzzes. I check the room one last time but don't see anything left behind. I look at the phone, hoping it's Melissa calling back, but it's only Terry telling me he's waiting.

I rush to the lobby, carrying all my own luggage, much to the staff's shock, and jump into the car. It's only a short drive to the private airstrip, and we arrive there with time to spare.

Terry shows me everything he bought, which even includes princess dresses. After he shows me, he wraps each present. I can't wait to get going, so I start packaging some, too. He seems a bit miffed because I'm not letting him wrap all the presents, but that's my prerogative when it comes to my children.

"Terry, how would you break it to your children why you haven't been in their lives until now?"

"I'd tell them the truth. You work all over the world, and their mom decided to keep it a secret for their safety."

It's close enough to the truth, so I decide that's what I will say. I don't want them to blame Melissa, even though she deserves it. Fully.

How I feel about Melissa now differs from what I felt last night. I feel cheated and confused about how she could even be with me, all while knowing she was keeping such a huge secret from me.

What about her morals? Does she even have any? Or does she just enjoy fucking around with people?

Soon, I say goodbye to Terry. He takes care of everything while I'm gone. I trust the man with my life.

"I'll send pictures of them," I say to him, giving him a half-hug. He returns the favor with an encouraging nod.

Judging from when I last spoke to Melissa, she was probably on a seven-hour flight to Bangor. Then, an hour's drive to Seahollow.

I can land this plane in the town within five hours. I'll make it to my daughters before she will, and if she won't let

me see them, I have a list of lawyers ready to work with me.

We have to stop once to refuel, but the process is quicker than I imagined. Soon, we're in the air again, and I view the surrounding countryside. I reach into my laptop case and feel something that shouldn't be there.

I pull it out, and it's a notepad with gel markers like I'm a little kid. *Nice one, Terry.* The first page simply says, *Work your shit out first.*

Despite being stressed, I decide to do what he says, and before I know it, I fill a large portion of the notebook. Not all of it is complimentary, but I see a pattern, and it's mostly the fact that Melissa doesn't trust me to be there or keep her secrets. This really pisses me off, because I was the one who kept her secret from her family this whole time. *Ungrateful little bitch,* I think savagely.

I will call Brian as soon as I get a chance. It's time to rip the Band-Aid off and deal with the consequences. I'm good at dealing with crises. In my line of work, something always goes wrong, and that's why I'm the go-to guy and manager.

Filling the notebook has helped with some things, like what I would say to Melissa (not in front of our daughters) and what I would say to the girls (not in front of their mom).

I have learned that the basis of my fear is rejection, yes, but if I have to, I will fight for sole custody, and I know I'd win, by hook or by crook. Except I don't really want it to come to that.

Secretly, I want to be with Melissa. She's exquisite, intriguing, and timeless. She makes love like a dream, especially for someone who hasn't had sex in years.

I hear over the headphones that we're about to land. A Land Rover is sitting by the runway. The youthful looking driver helps load my luggage into the vehicle and then asks where I'm heading.

"The Seahollow Health Care Center. The faster you get me there, the bigger the tip."

"Can I speed and break laws?"

“Sure, buddy. I’ll pay for your lawyer.”

The kid gives me a wide grin and smashes the pedal to the floor. We’re swerving onto the main road, and he’s passing cars left and right as we go. We pull up into a flat-level building with an *Emergency* sign overhead.

“What’s your name?” I ask the driver.

“Dustin,” he says almost shyly.

“If you could drop off my luggage at the motel, that would really help. And if you can help me get these presents upstairs first, I’ll double your tip.”

“What’s my tip now?”

“A hundred bucks.”

“Excellent. Consider it done, sir.”

“Keep your phone close. I think I might hire you as my go-to man here in Seahollow.”

“That’s awesome. Here’s my number.” Tony passes me a card for a computer repair shop.

“You run this?”

“Yep, since I was nineteen.”

“I like an industrious worker. Do a good job, and there’ll be great things in your future, I’m sure.”

I’m blabbering at this point, anxious to get away. Finally, with bags of presents under my arms, I enter the hospital.

The nurse smiles widely at me. I introduce myself, and she smiles politely in return.

“Which patient are you looking for, Mr. Steele?”

“Pam Caldwell, please.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Steele, but only family can see her now. She’s still not in a stable condition, nor ready to accept gifts.”

“But I *am* her family. I’m her father.” The nurse’s eyes bug out of her head. This is a complication she isn’t ready for.

I decide to get mean, and really mean at that. Business monkey style.

“If you don’t take me to her right now, I will do everything I can to ensure you are demoted. What room is she in?”

“124, but—” Her voice fades as I brush by her rudely, with the born arrogance of a trust-fund brat-type. That should hold her for a while.

“Thanks,” I call over my shoulder, already searching for my child.

I register that she is in a kids’ ward, and children with hungry eyes stare at me as I walk past their rooms carrying an armload of toys. I suddenly feel guilty and decide to buy all these kids something, too. But first, I have to win over my first-born daughter, Pam.

I count the numbers as I rush down the hall. She’s on the far right, and my heart catches when I look into the room. There lies the most beautiful little girl I have ever seen, who seems to be wasting away in front of my eyes.

She looks pale, which makes her black hair and eyes stand out prominently. I know with just one glance that she’s mine. She kind of looks like me when I was young.

I hear a sleepy voice behind me. “Are you the specialist?”

“No,” I say to the strange young man in a clipped voice. “Are you the babysitter? Hi. I’m the father who was never told about my twins.”

The man blinks in delayed shock. “Where’s Melissa? Isn’t she here with you?” he asks in a quiet voice. I think I’m intimidating him, so I smile and sit on a chair, depositing the presents on the floor.

“I believe she took a plane. It is a seven-hour flight if she’s lucky. Plus, she has to drive here, giving me enough time to spend with my daughter without her influence. So. Do *you* know why she kept them from me?”

The man hesitates. “She told me once that she didn’t want you to waste your life for one night of pleasure. And she wants

her babies to be hers. She doesn't want to have to share them in some joint custody arrangement."

I nod angrily. At least this guy is honest, though I don't love the fact that he knows more about my kids than I do. It's his sympathetic look that is the final straw for me.

"I deserved a say in the matter!" I'm almost yelling and lower my voice immediately when he flinches. In the bed, a small body stirs uneasily. I give the huddled shape a wary glance.

"I'm sorry, my anger is not directed at you." I change the subject. "What do they think the illness is? Can she recover from it?"

"They believe there's something wrong with the pancreas. It's inflamed, causing Pam's stomach to become rigid and painful. It can cause scarring on the pancreas and affect her. From what I gather, it can turn into diabetes, and she'll have to deal with the condition for the rest of her life."

"So it won't kill her?"

"Not unless there are further complications. We'll have to wait and see. They're giving Pam an MRI and a CT scan. We should know more before their mother arrives."

Eric eyes me out of the corner of his eye, looking concerned. "Are you going to be able to keep it together? I don't want any drama between Melissa and you. And the girls are innocent, so neither of you should be using them as pawns."

"I'm just excited I finally get to meet my children. That is all."

"I don't blame you."

"What are the chances she's going to wake up anytime soon?"

"Doubtful. She just got a dose of pain medication. She'll be out for hours, why?"

"I want to meet Patricia."

“She’s at the House of Horrors having a nap. Tony’s watching her. Go have a chat. She needs to be woken anyway.”

Eric rushes me off with an all too enthusiastic, “Oh, but take the presents for Pat!”

I go through the pile and find six good-sized gifts.

I head to the house and debate what I will say to the child. *My child. My second-born, and likely the last.*

The gloomy bell rings, and I hear footsteps. The door cracks open, and I see a good-looking young man. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, my name is Jeremy Steele, and I’m Patricia’s father. May I come in?”

The boy’s eyes bug out. Hesitantly, very hesitantly, he lets me in. “Don’t touch anything.”

“Okay.”

“Pat!” Tony calls up the stairs. When she doesn’t respond, he goes upstairs.

“She’s sleeping like the dead,” he comes back to report.

“Where is Melissa?” I ask next.

“Oh, I figured she would have come with you.”

I push my fingertips together. “I did too, but she hung up before I could make the offer.”

I hear keys in the front door. I turn to see who it is and find Melissa looking wan and tired. “Tony, I need the car keys. What the fuck are you doing here, Jeremy?”

“I’m here to see my children.”

“Not today.”

“Yes, today, or I will bring holy fire down from the sky, and my lawyers are the best attack, defense, and brute force anyone could ever use.”

Her eyes narrow, but I don’t flinch. I want her to know how serious I am about this matter.

“Threatening me, are you, now?”

“No, simply stating a fact.” I sigh deeply. “I’ll go to the hospital until your perception and attitude toward me change. But you’re never keeping my kids away from me again.”

I turn toward the door, half expecting an object to fly at me, but instead I say something I know will hurt her.

“Your family knows and are on their way here. It’s going to be a big family reunion. I can’t wait to attend, can you?”

Melissa looks like she could chew through a railroad tie. She is red, super tense, and barely controlling her anger.

“I’ll see you at the hospital.” And I walk out.

Take that, Melissa, I think savagely. Two families reunited in one day, how’s that for an encore?

Melissa

When Jeremy walks out of the house, I begin to feel like I can breathe again. He's a walking volcano right now, and I find his ability to express how he feels surprisingly reassuring.

Jeremy is a born problem solver, and judging by the success of the galleries, he has had to be. But how is he going to fit my children into his life?

Will he be taking them everywhere? Or will he leave them here with me and bring lots of presents? Would we be dating? Or would he be going back to supermodels?

I'm so confused. What should I do? No, wait. Why am I even thinking about any of this particular piece of drama right now?

Jeremy can wait. First, I go up and check on Pat. She's sleeping peacefully for now, but I must wake her or she won't sleep through the night.

"Princess Patricia," I call softly. One eye peeps open and peers at me, then she sits up, opens both her eyes, and starts bawling into my chest. I just hold her and let her cry. She must be scared sleeping up here without Pam. They've always shared a room.

"We're going back to the hospital, baby girl. Let's get you hosed down and dressed so the doctor doesn't think I'm

raising a heathen,” I say in the most tender tone I can produce. Poor girl, she must be so scared right now.

She giggles and runs toward the bathroom. The shower takes no time at all. I hop in and wash her hair for her and then wash mine.

I take my time choosing what to wear. I settle on a long felted black skirt and a lace top that is a little risqué. One wrong move, and I could be exposed. But the idea doesn't faze me. I need to feel confident today. Or maybe I just want to look irresistible for Jeremy. I don't know my own mind, clearly.

But honestly, I'm fearful about how he will treat me and what he will say about our future. Things don't look bright, just like the gray sky outdoors.

I grab my umbrella from the closet, plus my purse. I strap Pat into her car seat and leave Tony in charge. Tony usually works at the house to help out at the tours, just like Eric and I always have, but all my employees are locals and friends, so not one of them would dream of withholding their help while my children need me.

“I'll be back this evening for supper. If you wouldn't mind cooking for us, I can send you some money for the ingredients—and your time, of course.”

“Yeah, for sure, Melly.”

I leave and drive us to the center. When we get there, I see Eric having a smoke outside. I tell Pat to wait in the car.

“Since when did you start smoking again, Eric?” I'm disappointed but not surprised. His face looks pinched and pale.

“About fifteen minutes ago. Jeremy wanted some alone time with Pam, so he gave me a smoke and sent me out here. Last I saw, they were looking through the presents, and Pam is so excited to meet her father.

“Oh, and she asked him where he had been, and he said work and that he never knew they were born 'cause he lost track of their mom.” He takes another drag of the cigarette.

“It was a better excuse than saying *your mom kept you from me*, so he gets bonus points in my book,” Eric continues, finally grimacing at the taste and throwing the cigarette to the ground. I grit my teeth at that, willing myself to stay calm.

“Yes, I suppose it was. Jeremy and I almost got into a spat. We managed to cool down some. And then—”

My cell starts ringing. My private cell phone. My hands begin to shake.

“Nobody ever calls this line for a good reason. What if she died? Eric, I can’t. I just can’t. Answer it for me?”

I throw the phone into his hands. He answers it. “Hello? No, this is a friend. Her daughter is sick right now, and she can’t come to the phone.”

Suddenly, I hear a screaming voice on the other end of the phone. I recognize that scream. I sure heard it enough growing up.

“Just hang up the phone,” I tell Eric. “She’s the last person I want to talk to.”

It is Talissa, which means that Jeremy really did tell my family where I am and how to reach me. *The fucking bastard.*

“Go inside and see about all these gifts he brought.” Eric yawns dramatically. “I haven’t slept. I’m probably going to crash in your spare room.”

“Okay, Tony’s around if you need anything. I’m taking Pat to the ward.”

We hug, and Eric leaves with a cheery wave to Pat. I extract my younger daughter and we go looking for Pam.

We find her in the private children’s ward. When I open the door, I see Pam sitting up and not looking to be in a lot of pain. The color has returned to her cheeks as well. Jeremy hovers over her, strained and taut in every muscle. I rush to her and hug her fiercely.

The doctor arrives shortly afterward.

“I’m sorry for the bad news, but Pam has a genetic disease called chronic pancreatitis that will affect her for the rest of her life. The great thing is that the disease is manageable through treatments and lifestyle changes.”

“So she isn’t going to die?” Jeremy asks.

“No, but she may get diabetes, and many factors must be considered when managing the disease. She may not grow properly and will likely remain smaller than others her age. Since her body lacks a particular enzyme responsible for breaking down glucose so our bodies can use it as energy, her body will not accept food as efficiently. There are medications, but I’d like to start her on a low-fat diet first.”

“Is there anything we can do?” I feel so useless right now.

“Just stay positive. Pam will be sick quite often and may need regular treatments. I’m going to give her some more pain medication. Her pancreas is quite swollen, and we need to monitor her sugar levels. You should go home and get some rest while you can.”

Jeremy and I exchange glances, and I know all I can do right now is to go home and tuck Pat back into bed. I reluctantly release Pam after a kiss on her forehead and a heartfelt promise to come see her tomorrow.

“Can I follow you home?” he asks quietly.

I round on him. “Did you call my mother?”

“No, I called your father.”

“Thanks, you piece of shit,” I snarl. “Now I have to change my numbers and move out of state. Thank you for stepping in and ruining my life once again.”

“Stop being so overdramatic. You sound exactly like Talissa.”

I want to slap his face, poke his eyes out, and preferably end by disemboweling him for that comment. But I must preserve my calm, so I refrain.

“I’m going to leave. Do what you want.”

Once we're home again and settled down, I walk up the stairs and down the hall to Pat's room. She's reading a book on unicorns. She looks up with a smile as I perch on the end of her bed. "Hi, Mama. Is Pam okay right now, do you think?"

"She's improving, sweetheart. You heard what the doctor said. Pam will be coming home soon, I promise."

"Is Daddy going to be staying around?"

I think of her precious *Daddy*, currently lurking down the driveway just in case Pat wants to see him. Will he be staying around, though? Great question.

"I can't answer that, sweetheart. It's up to your father."

"Well, I hope so. Daddy gets us great gifts."

I can't help but laugh at her obvious ploy. Kids will do almost anything for a present, but I'm yet to hear genuine longing in her voice.

"You can ask him in the morning, Pat."

"Okay, Mama. I'm tired. Time for sleepies." And she rolls over and is dead to the world in under two minutes.

I get off the bed, feeling so confused. How am I supposed to deal with Jeremy? I can't bear to think about it, so I push him out of my thoughts and am about to go crash in my room.

Until I hear someone in the living room. I enter and see Jeremy standing there as if he owns the place.

Or no. As if he's on the point of falling asleep on his feet.

His tired eyes meet mine, and I relent momentarily. He probably didn't have time to get a hotel room figured out.

I roll my eyes. "Okay, Jeremy. You win. You can stay in one of the guest rooms or on the couch. It doesn't matter to me. Just keep your dick in your pants, that's all I ask."

His eyebrows shoot up in outrage, but I'm already done. I start up the stairs and hear him follow me. He isn't giving up on me, and his tenacity is an effective tool for hassling random people, I'm sure.

The trouble is, I'm not a random person. I'm the mother of his children, and that changes everything.

Sure, I had lied by omission to him. Once. But back then, I didn't really know him from a hole in the ground, any more than I knew myself.

Everything's different now. To start with, I have kids to take care of.

I put aside all thoughts of Jeremy and crawl into bed with all my jewelry on, only to wake up half an hour later to remove it. That's when I notice Jeremy sitting on the edge of my bed. I blink, bleary-eyed with sleep.

"I'm not mad," he says quietly, almost as if he's talking to himself. "I can't blame you, and it's not like I reached out. And I'm sorry I interfered and got your parents involved. I just figured they have a right to know if their grandbabies are going to be okay, that you're okay, that they even have grandbabies. They have the right."

I slump back against my pillows. "You're a dick, Jeremy. You must have known I can't handle this pressure right now."

"I'm sorry," he says, and I see a flicker of true remorse in his face. "Maybe I didn't fully think it through. I don't always think straight where you're concerned in the first place."

He eyes me warily. "Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

I close my eyes wearily. I'm so tired, so burdened down with worry. I haven't felt this alone since Gordon died.

"Maybe," I mumble, hating myself for my weakness. "Um. Will you hold me for a while? I don't think I can handle sex or anything, but I just need a hug. I think."

"Sure," he says at once, leaning on his side.

I smile just before he dives in for a kiss.

And this is no simple peck on the cheek, either. It's a full-on assault on all my senses, storming every last barrier I have. I have the alarming feeling that he thinks he needs to lay siege to me to win or something.

I know I can't handle any more of this man's affections. He is too intense and so brutal while doing so. To me, it's all getting too overwhelming. But also, in just the right way, just like every other time.

Because I know Jeremy fits the bill. If there's any ideal of a perfect man in my head, he's put it there. At the same time, I have never known what to expect from him. All I can do is submit and be conquered. I sink into his kiss with a breathless sense of inevitability.

Soon, he is making love to me. It goes from a kiss to a caress and then a touch that burns me up.

He's lying on top of me, and while I don't resist, I'm also too tired to take any active part here. The comforting weight of him warms me to the bones, makes me want to drift off to sleep in his arms.

But then I feel Jeremy slip a finger down the length of my torso, down below the waistband of my panties, and begin to slowly stroke my clit. He does that for a while, making different patterns and going at different speeds. I squirm helplessly.

Jeremy has me on the brink a few times but stops whenever I'm almost there. He does this again and again and again until I'm wide awake, thrumming with pleasure and calling out his name.

And that's when he says it. "I love you, Melissa."

My head falls back. I feel the blood draining from my face, maybe from somewhere in my veins cut deep and wide.

"Please don't go there," I whisper. "You know that we are bound by the children we made together. That's bad enough. Sex will just make things more confusing."

"Melissa, listen," says Jeremy, propping himself up on one arm.

"No, you listen. Let's try to be friends first. I don't feel comfortable with anything else right now, and I need to put my girls first."

“I’m doing that too,” he snaps, suddenly furious. “What the fuck do you think I’m doing here? I came for my kids, the ones you kept from me all these years.”

“They’re not here,” I point out. “One’s in her room and the other is alone in a hospital bed, and there is no reason, no reason at all, for you to get into bed with me and tell me you love me, Jeremy. It’s incredibly unfair. You keep throwing things at me, and I don’t know how to handle everything all at the same time, so for once in your life, can you please just fucking *stop?*”

We stare at each other silently for a long moment. Weirdly, I’m not angry anymore. I feel like all the poison has just drained out of me.

“I remember the first time I saw you,” whispers Jeremy. “I think my obsession with you started then. You looked like a warrior queen with the heart of an angel and blood around your neck. That was a real Fabergé piece, wasn’t it?”

“Was it?” I shrug. “I thought Gordon brought it out from his trunk of odds and ends. He never mentioned it.”

“Can you show it to me?” says Jeremy, still in that solemn whisper. I can tell he’s just trying to distract me, but I get up to look for the ruby locket anyway. *Better than staying in bed with him, that’s for sure.*

“There’s a story about lockets like these,” I idly mention to him. “Something about keepsakes and remembrances, but also that an object familiar to you will carry your essence. And if you give it away, through it, someone else might learn all about the real you.”

“That sounds like witchcraft. What did you want to learn about me, Melissa?”

I shrug, holding out the locket. “Give me a lock of your hair, maybe? Then I can finally figure you out.”

Jeremy smiles, carefully examining the antique pendant. “You do know how much this thing is worth, right?”

“No.”

“I’d say it would go for half a million dollars at auction. I believe it might have been in Napoleon’s collection at some point.”

“Oh, my goodness,” I say with exaggerated gratitude. “I’ll wear it all the time then. Thank you *so much* for the heads up.”

Jeremy cocks his head with a twinkle in his eye. “Next question. May I make love to you?”

I point at the door. “Get out.”

He listens to me, for a change. But then again, a lot has changed between us.

Maybe we really do need to learn each other by heart if we’re both going to be in the Horror Twins’ lives. But not tonight. I’m wiped out.

Tonight, we are out of time, or so it appears. Today was a long day, anyway. It’s probably best that we both get some rest.

And tomorrow is a different place and time, like a new day washed clean by the rain. Here’s hoping.

At the very least, here’s hoping Jeremy decides to stick around this time.

Jeremy

I wake up to the sound of Melissa breathing deeply beside me. Her dark head is lying on my chest, with her hair fanned across my torso.

I snuck back here last night after she fell asleep. I had a vague idea she might need me. For example, what if she had a nightmare or something and woke up crying?

I'm resolved to be here for Melissa and for my girls. The trouble is, I still don't know what to think of her. So many secrets. Could I forgive her for this one?

Hiding my children from me was awful, but what would I have done in her place? I'm unsure. All I know is that I want to get as much time with my beautiful daughters as possible to make up for the past.

I detach myself slowly from Melissa's grip. She rolls over, muttering, "It's too early. Go back to bed."

But I have had enough sleep and want to be there for Pam and Pat. Melissa now comes second, in a way.

My phone rings. I see it is Terry. I get up and leave the bedroom. "Jeremy," I say.

"Hey, Boss Man, you got a lot of art pieces coming to your home. What do you want me to do with them?"

“Secure them in the eastern wing. That has the most security in place. Make sure you have all the papers for the pieces and handle them with care. I believe there’s a new Sassuloliis in there. Do not fuck this up, Terry. He’s going to be displayed in all the galleries. I waited a long time to get this one.”

“Got it, Boss. And what about Falon?”

“She left me. Or I left her, it doesn’t matter. Let her know I’m through and am unavailable.”

“Ouch,” Terry says. I can hear the grimace in his voice. “Thanks for letting me do your dirty work.”

“It’s why I pay you so well.”

“I expect a bonus for juggling your women.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Sure. I’m going to see my baby girl in the hospital today, okay? Please don’t forward any calls. I’m taking this week off just for them.”

“Understood.”

“Thanks, Terry. You’re the best.”

“Don’t I know it,” he says, just before hanging up.

I think I hear Melissa waking up, so I use the extra time to pretend I have a lover or possibly a fiancée in the city. It’s kind of pathetic, but I don’t want to tell her I don’t want to get intimate with her, physically or emotionally, because of the lies. Something in me has hardened and grown bitter overnight. How can I forgive her?

Yes, I can definitely hear her moving around, so I act for all my life’s worth. “Yeah, baby. It’ll only be a few days, and then I’m coming home. I’m glad you like the earrings. Anything for my babe.”

I hear Melissa’s breath catch and know I hit her where it hurts. *Good*. It’s not like she wants me to love her or anything like that, right?

I go to the other room where my bags are unpacked. I use the adjacent bathroom to shower and get dressed but leave the

day-old growth of my beard since Pam mentioned she finds it funny. Satisfied with my appearance, I grab the keys to my rental and head to the town's health center. I go in and let the nurses know that I'm here to see Pam.

"Perfect timing," says the same nurse from yesterday. "I'm about to wake Pam for her morning medication and food. You know, I was surprised yesterday when you showed up, but I see it now. I see how much she looks like you. I can see her mother in her, too, but with you, it's really far more apparent. Right down to the hairline."

I smile and nod uncomfortably, not really knowing what to say to this flow of voluble chatter. Thankfully, no response seems to be required.

"Come along, come along," says the nurse, who then practically glides to Pam's room. My child looks like Snow White after she ate the apple. Pale skin, hair like ebony, red lips, and a deep slumber.

"Have they been giving her something to sleep?" I ask.

"Yes," the nurse says. "Though it should have worn off by now. She's just so exhausted. That little body isn't made to take so much pain and stress. She's a trooper."

I'm oddly proud to hear the nurse say that. I pull up a chair beside the bed and reach out and brush some hair from Pam's face. "I don't think I have ever seen anything more beautiful."

"The mother and the other twin are quite beautiful too," says the nurse. I think she might be fishing for details. Likely, for the town gossip circles already on the buzz.

"Well, do what you have to do, and then please leave. I'd like to spend some time with Pam," I say, a touch curtly.

"Gotcha." The nurse changes the almost empty IV bag, empties a syringe into the tube in Pam's dainty arm, and checks her overnight diaper. And then she goes out of the room, returning with a tray of soft food that has all been mashed up.

"I'll be back with the feeding tube if you can't get her to eat half—no, a third—of her meal."

I nod. “Thank you.”

“She should wake up any time now,” the nurse says as she closes the door behind her.

It isn’t long till I see Pam stir. Her beautiful coal-colored eyes are penetrating, and she gazes at me intently.

“Daddy?” She says this as if she’s testing out the word.

“Yes, baby girl, I’m here.”

“Where’s Mama and Pat?”

“They’re at home sleeping. They both had a long couple of days,” I tell her, trying to keep the exhaustion and bitterness out of my voice.

“But you did, too,” she says, very matter-of-factly. I wink at her, making her giggle.

“I’ll go have a nap somewhere when they show up.” I don’t want Pam worrying about me, especially since she has something so wrong with her that a bit of tiredness is nothing, comparatively.

I can see the heartfelt worry she has for me. She is supremely empathetic, I can tell. Luckily, I’ve had the foresight to bring her a little something to take her mind off things.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a sparkly stone I have secreted there.

“Here, this is for you.” I place it in her open palm.

She pulls it close to her face and gazes deeply into it. “What’s it called?” she asks, her child-like voice intrigued.

“Ah.” I fold my hands together solemnly. “A friend gave me that long ago, said I’ll need it to warn of danger and keep evil spirits away. He said he stole it from a monkey who stole it from a cobra who stole it from a phoenix. He said that one day, I’ll pass it along when I find someone who needs it more than me. So today, my child, you are that person. Take it, and guard it well. Abracadabra.” And I make vague passes in the air to end on a flourish.

Pam laughs weakly. It occurs to me that growing up the way she has, reared in a houseful of creepy horrors and magic tricks, nothing would impress her anymore. I'm touched that she likes me enough to pretend, however.

"What about Patricia?" And she still worries about others before herself. I can see a lot of Melissa in her, now that we've had a chance to talk. Maybe bond.

"Oh, don't worry about that," I say portentously. "She's got her own presents. When you get home, you can open the rest of yours. As well as the gifts you were given for both of you to use."

"Like what?"

"You'll have to get better as fast as possible to find out!" I notice she's becoming paler, and the machines start beeping. She looks around, panicking. I jump out of my seat, lean over the bed, and hold her.

"Everything will be okay, my sweet girl. Just relax. Those machines just let the nurses know you need something. It's likely food, since you haven't had a bite to eat."

The nurse barges in. "Her blood pressure is low." She looks at Pamela. "Did you have something to eat yet?"

Pam shakes her head guiltily. "Well, let's get to it," says the nurse briskly. I step in, willing to help in any way I can.

"Do you want me to help feed you?" I ask. Pam nods her head for *yes*.

"Mama used to feed me, but she said big girls feed themselves." She looks guilty. It is almost the same expression Melissa gets when *she* is guilty. Melissa just seems to be able to hide it more.

"Well, that may be true. Big girls do feed themselves. But not if they are sick. Then their daddies get to feed them."

Pam's eyes go wide, and she starts to smile again. She's so beautiful when she smiles.

"I've never had a daddy."

“I know, but I’m here now. That’s what counts. Now, what would you like to eat first for breakfast? Some scrambled eggs?”

She nods her head, and I scoop up a small amount. “We’ll take it easy. If your stomach starts hurting, let me know. Here comes the airplane.” I know it’s geeky, and she’s probably a little too old for the joke. But she peals bells of laughter, just like her mother does.

“No laughing, you might choke.” I pause the plane, and she settles down quickly and takes a bite.

“Do they have ketchup? I like my scrambled eggs with ketchup.”

“You know what? I like ketchup on my eggs, too, sweetheart. I’ll go look for some.”

As I exit the room, I run into Melissa and Patricia. Melissa looks miffed, but I don’t care. I kneel down and open my arms, and Pat runs right into them, squeezing me tight like I might disappear.

“Hey, sweetie.”

“Hey, Dad.” I can’t help but smile.

“I’m going to get Pam some ketchup for her breakfast. Would you like to come?”

“Jeremy,” Melissa sighs, “they are limiting her sugar intake. Ketchup is too sugary. And since when is she eating meals again? Is she ready?”

“The nurse brought her food, and it’s all mashed up. She left a tray there if she gets sick.”

Melissa turns away coldly and enters the room. Patricia wraps herself around my leg, so I swing my foot wide for her and follow Melissa into the room. Pat is squealing with joy.

“I’m sorry, honey. I’ve told your dad, no ketchup. Do you want me to help you eat again?”

Melissa seems slightly upset. I wonder why but realize she’s not my problem. The care of my children is, and she has

five years of absence she has to make up for. I'm the one calling the shots now. Or at least I would be, if Mother Hen Melissa wouldn't fuss around her chicks so much.

Pat's still wrapped around my leg, however, so I just sit in the chair and start feeding Pam. I pick up the fork and start making choo-choo train sounds now. The twins begin riotously laughing. I glance at Melissa and can't determine whether she is amused or jealous. Maybe it's a combination of both.

Well, sucks to be you and up yours, Melissa. Turns out, your kids actually like having a dad. Who would have thought it?

Someone knocks on the door, and all our heads swivel. It's the doctor, smiling widely.

"It's nice to see the whole family in good humor. I have some good news, too. If Pam can eat food for a day or two, she can go home and be seen as an outpatient if anything pops up."

Reading between the lines, I can tell Pam is not out of danger quite yet. But it's an optimistic prognosis, I'm guessing.

I look at Melissa, and she seems relieved. A hospital isn't the best place to heal, necessarily, for a child.

The doctor adds, "May I speak to the parents about some discharge information?"

"Certainly," said Melissa. I can tell she's about to take charge.

"Let me detach the monkey from my leg, and I'll be right there," I chip in.

Pat looks up at me. "I'm a howler monkey!" Then she releases my leg and starts hopping around the hospital room.

"Yes, you are, sweetheart," I say fondly. "This is America. You can be anything you want to be, as long as you put your mind to it."

Then I follow Melissa into the hall. We're joined by the doctor in short order.

“I’ll be straight with you, folks,” he says. “Pamela needs to be kept on a limited diet. Soft foods only for a while, and sugary foods should be avoided. Her pancreas is in rough shape. Too much movement may make her sore, so I will send her home with some pain meds and some medication for sleep. Keep playtime to a minimum. That means no roughhousing.” The doctor eyes me from the corner of his eye.

“I’ll take good care of her,” I say. Melissa’s head turns to me quickly with an open-mouthed look of outrage. She looks like she’s about to say something cutting but then turns to the doctor and smiles. Acidly.

“*We’ll* look after her.”

“Oh,” adds the doctor, “you’ll also have to check her blood sugar regularly. If it starts rising, she’ll need to come back in.”

Melissa and I both nod. The doctor continues, “The nurses will give you a quick lesson on Pamela’s nutritional needs and how to check her health overall. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No,” Melissa chips in. “Thank you for saving my daughter.”

“*Our* daughter,” I add, slightly unnecessarily. I don’t like how she’s singling herself out as a parent. I have just as many rights as she does, and if she keeps acting like they’re only *her* daughters, she is in for a rude awakening.

The doctor shakes our hands and then leaves. Melissa turns to me, arms crossed. Yep. Called it. She’s spoiling for a fight.

“Why did you leave this morning without us?”

“So I could have some alone time with my oldest daughter,” I say, crossing my arms.

She narrows her eyes at me.

“You had five years with them. I think it’s only right that I get my turn with my daughters, don’t you think?”

I pivot on my heel and walk back into the room to dual smiles from my twins. I can’t wait till we bring Pam home. I can see the separation is hard on them both.

Patricia attaches herself to my leg, and I finish helping Pamela eat. At this moment, I feel whole and happier than I've ever felt before. I just wish Melissa did too.

But from her frequently acerbic comments and the way she keeps tapping her foot on the linoleum floor, I'm beginning to suspect not.

Melissa

I can't help but feel as if Jeremy is going to steal my kids away. He has the money for lawyers and can provide them with a better life. Jeremy can also pay for their college and all their medical bills. He can take them on trips I have only ever dreamed about.

And watching how easily my twins fell in love with him has made me feel tight in my chest. All three are in their own little world, and I've been shut out.

I sit down in the other chair in the corner and watch them. Pat is so attached to him, it's as if he is her emotional support animal. Pam is shyer, but I can tell she's warming up to him.

But what is he planning on doing? That's the big question. Is he planning on staying at the Horror House? Does he want a relationship with me or just the twins?

Sure, we got a little bit intimate last night, but that was more out of a need for comfort, and I fell asleep before I realized he was going to sneak back in anyway.

Waking up this morning in a warm flush of arousal probably doesn't count for anything, either, not when he's in the next room making lovey-dovey noises to another woman mere hours after telling me he loves me. What a bloody hypocrite.

I stand up, and all three turn to me. The looks on their faces are practically identical. I think either I'm getting heartburn or my heart is actually breaking in three distinct pieces. Is there a medical diagnosis for that?

"I'm going out shopping, I think," I say neutrally. "Jeremy, you can hold down the fort?"

"Of course," he says. "I thought Eric got some food?"

"He did, but there is always something he forgot. Plus, we need to eat while Pam's here in the hospital. I was thinking about buying us some wraps and drinks. Also, Jeremy," I ask, "will you be staying at the hotel?"

"No," he said, eyeballing me, "I think I will stay at the House of Horrors with the twins. I've just given Pam a magical talisman. I believe that is enough to earn a room in the House."

The twins immediately start cheering. I guess the decision is made for me, then, though I have questions about this alleged talisman.

I kiss both the girls and leave the room. But I hear Jeremy get up to follow me. Even so, I'm unprepared for him to grab me by the upper arm and swing me to face him forcefully.

"We do not have to make this difficult, Melissa. I want to be with you all as a family. I want to stay with you in the House. I don't want to miss any more time." He is basically pleading in the end.

"No," I say and turn around to walk away again. Jeremy strides around me so that I'm facing him again, grabs me, and plants a firm kiss on my mouth.

What a bastard. What an utter bastard. What an utter, hypocritical, irresistible bastard.

I don't immediately return the kiss, but he pushes me up against the wall. To my shame, my arms are around him all too soon, and the kiss deepens. He feels so good in my arms.

"Okay, how about now?" he murmurs after a while. I pull away from him, infuriated.

“I’ll be back later,” I snap. “I’ll probably return to the house for a while so you can have some private time with the girls. Call me if you need anything. Also, Jeremy?”

“Yes?” No. He has no right, no right at all to look this smug.

“Don’t call me.”

His smile fades as I wheel away from him and stomp off. I do feel a little less pissed off as I leave, but not much.

I buy the wraps and drop them off to Jeremy and the girls, carefully avoiding direct eye contact with the man I have decided I loathe most in the entirety of the universe. Then I head home, dropping my ice queen act with a heavy sigh. My shoulders are so bowed down with all the stress, I’m in the worst possible mood for what I find waiting for me.

Pulling up, I see an expensive vehicle sitting in the driveway. *It must be one of Jeremy’s friends*, I think. I walk up to the front door and let myself in. Yet I only have to enter the foyer to hear a laugh that chills my bones.

Please, Eric, I think. Tell them I don’t live here.

It’s my mother.

I hear a rough voice.

That’s Dad.

Eric sounds a bit scared. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do. And fair enough, because neither do I. I’m literally frozen to the spot with horror.

“They’re at the hospital.” Eric squeaks, sounding unusually shrill. Ah, the inevitable aftereffect of letting Talissa in the house.

“As I expected. I told you, Brian. They wouldn’t be here when one of them was hospitalized. Let’s go. This should prove to be an interesting encounter,” my mother drawls.

I know she is dreaming of the dramatic entrance she could pull on my unsuspecting family. I have to stop it now.

“Talissa and Brian Caldwell, you are not welcome. Get out of my house,” I say as I walk aggressively into the guest waiting room off the hall. They’re both sitting down with a glass of wine in their hands.

“Eric, I can handle this. You can handle things in the kitchen for now. Oh, and Jeremy will be staying with us for a while.”

Eric bobs his head awkwardly and slips out. Meanwhile, I glance over to see their reaction to Jeremy’s being permitted to stay here.

Dad is just red in the face. Mom looks like the cat who caught the canary. I know she is now going to torture him with this information. I can tell by the smug look in her eyes.

“My darling,” says my mother, “you look pale. Is everything alright?”

“I’m not pale. I just like dressing in black. Now get the hell out.” I cross my arms and tap my foot.

“We drove a long way to see our grandbabies, Melissa,” says my mother with exactly the kind of cold superciliousness that has always infuriated me. “You have no right to keep us from them. We’ll take you to court to get our time with the children.”

I try to interrupt, but she isn’t having it.

“You’re so selfish, Melissa. You always have been and always will be. But keeping our grandchildren away from us is the worst thing you’ve ever done, aside from running away and worrying your parents nearly into the grave. I mean, we thought you were *dead*. We thought something *horrible* happened to you. Do you *know* what that does to a person? No, I didn’t think so. Selfish, Melissa. Your behavior has been just appalling throughout.”

She draws in a deep breath and places a hand dramatically in the general region where the human heart is supposed to reside, though in her case it probably doesn’t.

My mother and her spiels. After all these years, I can’t help but appreciate the sheer artistry involved.

I look at my father, but he will not meet my eyes. “Don’t *you* have something to say, Dad?”

He just shakes his head. Then he cocks his head, and I see his choker begin to rise.

“Wait. So. And Jeremy is the *father* of these twins? Boys or girls? How old? Wait, don’t tell me. It was probably around the time that Jeremy stopped communicating with me. So, they’re five?”

“That’s none of your business,” I say, willing myself not to give way. *And after all these years, not even a hello, how are you, Melly?* “Please leave. I don’t want to have to call the cops, but I will.”

“Well, we’ll let them know you have been wasting government funds while the police and everyone have been searching for you,” my mother practically screeches. I smile.

“Nice try, Mom. But I left because of this. Precisely this. *Your* manipulative ways and *his* coldness.” I’m pushing out my chin bravely, fueled by seven pent-up years of anger and sadness. “Now, please. Get. *Out.*”

Dad stands up and walks out with not a word nor a glance in my direction. But my mother isn’t done with me. How could she be? She only came all this way to get in the last word, after all.

She gets up, walks right up to me as if her size alone could intimidate me, and points a perfectly manicured fingernail into my face. “For the illegality of your actions, I bet we can get the children permanently. You’d better be watching out for yourself. Your bitchy attitude may just come back and bite you in the ass one day.”

“You don’t scare me, Mom.” I swipe her hand away from my face. I notice with interest how she flinches away from my touch.

“Dad, get her out of here before something bad happens that I really won’t regret.” I watch as my mother raises her head, turns away, and storms off as best as she can in three-inch pumps.

I yank at my hair and almost pull it out in my frustration. It's been near to a decade since my mother has seen me, more than that since she remembered I'm a human being, too, and all she can think about is causing a scene.

And she has the nerve to call *me* selfish. Good Lord.

My anger turns to tears. Was that it? No. I know my mother. She tends to make good on her threats. So, where does that leave me?

Between Jeremy and my parents, I now have three people contesting my custody of my daughters. Why, oh *why* did Jeremy have to call them? I could cheerfully strangle the man.

I run upstairs to my room and throw myself down on my bed in tears. I don't know what to do. How am I going to handle this?

I'm sure there are some laws put in place for grandparents' rights to see their children. And I know my parents can afford it and would actually try their best to take my babies away from me, especially if they can prove I'm an unfit mother.

If only Jeremy hadn't called them.

But I can't blame it all on Jeremy, now can I? I'm the one who told him. *Stupid, stupid Melly*. I now regret that wholeheartedly.

The bastard. Why did he interfere? Is he just so guilty about fucking his best friend's daughter, or was it a moment of undirected spite?

I want to scream, cry, and throw things. If only Gordon were still here to tell me what to do.

That's when I remember. This is *my* house, and I can damn well scream if I want to. It's just that I never have before.

Well, why not? The girls aren't here, and I don't have to care about anyone else's opinion anymore. Gordon is gone, Jeremy's a fucking snitch, and the two people whom I now realize I have secretly hoped still loved me all these years just flounced out the door. So what do I have to lose any longer?

I throw my head back and scream out all my frustrations to the world. It feels so good that I do it again. This is the House of Horrors. People expect to hear unearthly screams of unquiet spirits. I should really advertise my own screeching in the next round of ads.

“Melissa? Are you okay?” Whoops. I forgot about Eric. He sounds very worried.

“Yes, Eric,” I call back. “I’m fine.”

There is an unconvinced silence from wherever he is. I assume he’s avoiding my direct target range right now.

“Do you need anything? Like a drink?” he calls out eventually. Sounds like he’s hovering at the end of the corridor. I picture his apprehensive face and start feeling really guilty about scaring the bejeezus out of him.

“Yes, that would be wonderful, Eric. Rum and Coke, please.”

“Seriously? Cause I was thinking a lemonade would be good for this time of day.” Now *Eric* is dictating what I can do? Fuck my life.

“No! I mean, uh, no. I think after dealing with my parents, I need a real drink, Eric. Make it a double.”

I listen as his feet take off at a near run. I’ll have to buy him something nice. Maybe give him a raise. Since he moved into the House of Horrors, he has been a fantastic help.

I scream again, and this time, the tears pour freely down my cheeks. I sob quietly for a while, not noticing Eric’s return.

“Melissa, what’s wrong?” he asks, setting down a glass on my black nightstand.

“Everything. I think we’re going to have to run. I’ll leave the house to you and provide you with enough money to keep her going, all right? It’s what Gordon would have wanted.”

“No, Melissa. Firstly, Gordon wanted *you* to stick around, not me, so that’s absolutely not what you should do.

“Secondly, and to be brutally honest, Jeremy deserves to spend time with his daughters. And so do your parents. It’s only right,” says Eric calmly. Then he immediately ruins the effect by ducking down like I might hit him.

For a second, I consider doing it.

Instead, I say, “Thank you for the drink, Eric. I think I’ll chug it down and have a nap.”

“You’re welcome. If you need me, I’ll be down the hall cleaning Jeremy’s room.”

Shit. That was something I’m supposed to be doing, not foisting it off onto the poor kid.

“Eric, I’m giving you a raise,” I say as he leaves the room. He grins and closes the door.

I chug back my drink. I want to really feel the dulling effect. I’m an infrequent drunk, so one glass should do it. It’s been a while since I had a rum and Coke. They are always the best when I’m stressed.

The years I had helped Gordon run the House while raising my daughters were as stress-free as I ever wanted. It wasn’t until Jeremy was back in my life that I started feeling uneasy and worried.

I slam back the last of the drink, and then I realize that my parents would be going to the hospital next.

I smack myself in the forehead. How could I be so stupid? *Why, why, why? Why is all of this happening together right now?*

What would my mother do? Would my father punch out his best friend? Are they even friends anymore? Would they all be civil in front of my children?

And why the hell did I have that drink? They’d probably smell it on me and call me an alcoholic. Damn. I’m severely fucked.

I run to the bathroom and brush my teeth, floss, and use a liberal amount of mouthwash. Then I change clothes into something I’d feel more confident in.

I put on a pair of stretchy black jeans and a lace tank top with a snug fit, and I top it off with my short leather jacket. My mother is going to hate it. It's perfect. I feel like a badass bitch, which is exactly what I need right now.

Heading downstairs, I grab my purse and leave the House of Horrors, ready to do what needs to be done.

Jeremy

I 'm helping Pam eat her wrap. Pat is done with hers, and I have yet to start mine. We tend to take turns eating in this family unit, I have found.

We've also been playing checkers since breakfast while Pat chatters away about how they are starting school soon. I feel horrible that I'm so ignorant of so many things about their lives, but the twins are all too happy to explain everything to me. In fact, they are doing so repeatedly and non-stop.

“And Miss Linden is our teacher, she's Linden like the tree, not Lyndon like the vice president, and *she* says telling lies is wrong, but I *heard* her during recess, I lit'rally *heard* her telling Billy Bunslow he has a nice face, which he really doesn't. Dad, he's ugly like a fat potato that got boiled for too long, Dad, like one of those weird potatoes that just look like they weren't meant to come out of the ground *at all*, so anyway, that's how I know grown-ups *do* lie, grown-ups lie all the time because there's no way she thinks Billy has a nice face, right, Dad, so she must have been lying to be nice, don't you think so, Dad?”

Pat runs down to a breathless halt, seeking my confirmation of either Billy's ugliness or her teacher's morally untrustworthy nature, I'm not quite sure. But she sure can talk the hind leg off a donkey, and I tell her that.

“*Hind* leg?” she repeats doubtfully. “Why’s it the hind leg, Dad? What’s wrong with the front ones? Why can’t a donkey’s *front* legs be talked off? Aren’t they closer to the ears?”

I mean, the kid’s got something there, but I don’t think I can talk my way out of this one, either. I make a generic response and check the door for the thousandth time, hoping Melissa will come back. I think I might need to apologize to the mother of my children at some point.

Blaming Melissa was the easy way out, I know that now. She was only a kid herself back then, scared and lost.

But if only I had been a gentleman and checked up on her, I might have discovered I had children much earlier. I really regret that now, among other things.

Because then she wouldn’t have to raise a pair of hair-raisingly rambunctious girls all by herself, would she? I could have helped her, if only she’d trusted me enough. *That’s* what this is really about.

Though she still should have told me, and for that, I’m having a hard time forgiving her. And myself, and maybe just our mutual bad luck.

I want us all to be a big, happy family, but we have an obstacle or ten to overcome first.

“Dad, can I bring my lizard to the hospital tomorrow?” asks Pat, tugging on my sleeve. At least she’s moved on from my trouser leg by now.

“It’s not a real lizard,” Pam interjects softly.

“It’s my stuffy,” chirps Pat. “Mama gave it to me when I was still in her tummy. It’s my special lizard, Dad. Mama said I couldn’t bring him to see Pam, but I could if *you* say I can, Dad, couldn’t I?”

This is verging on outright mutiny, but I don’t want to disillusion my daughters by telling them there’s anything their Dad can’t do, so I temporize.

“Did she, now? Well, we will have to check with her again, first. But if she says yes this time, I don’t see a problem.”

Pat cheers as if she's won a World Cup and starts rolling around on the floor like a dog. I cringe, thinking about the germs.

"Patricia, get off the floor. Mama would be mad. That's why she doesn't want you to bring your lizard here. You'll get it dirty," Pam says sternly. She reminds me of a tiny version of her ticked-off mother sometimes.

I find it amusing that Pat is already trying to get around her mother's decisions. I look at where my younger girl is sitting on the floor.

"Pat, if your mother already said no, I think that means no. And your sister is right. The floors of a hospital can be really dirty. Sit in a chair or on the end of your sister's bed."

Pat has her pouty face on now but does as I say. I'm not a fan of disciplining children, I decide. But I can't override what Melissa says. As it is, I think I'm on her shit list. I don't want her to run away from me, but I *will* have access to my children, one way or another.

My biggest hope is that we can be a real family. I could take them to all of the different galleries I run, stay in the best hotels, and hire the best nannies and tutors to supervise their education.

But then I think, would Melissa want me to uproot her girls from their home? Would she give up running Blaine's House of Horrors? For some pretty strong reasons, I don't think she would.

I hear a commotion in the hall. The voice sounds familiar, but I ignore it and distract the girls with another game of checkers. The voice outside only grows louder, however.

Then suddenly, the door opens, and the source of the commotion now enters the room. And of course, it's Talissa Caldwell.

I groan internally. I guess I should have known.

She storms into the room, stops, and gives me a look like I'm an unwanted rat in her cellar.

But what I'm truly terrified of is the man following her.

Brian's eyes are filled with hate. I have never, ever seen him so out of control. You usually can't chip the ice off this man with a chisel and hammer. To see him now, it's like he's unhinged.

"How dare you!" Talissa screams at me.

"Do not do this in front of the kids, or I will have you removed," I say calmly, sneaking a furtive glance at her husband.

Talissa looks over her shoulder at Brian. Brian just shrugs and takes a seat in a seething parody of patience.

"Pamela and Patricia," I say, "these are your grandparents on your mother's side. Talissa and Brian Caldwell."

Brian's face softens, and he gets up to formally shake their hands, but Talissa only sighs and crosses her arms. *Stuck-up bitch*, I can't help thinking.

"My name is Brian, but you can call me Grandpa, or Pawpaw, or whatever you'd like."

The girls smile in shy delight. I wonder how they'll adjust to the sudden existence of grandparents they've never met before.

But I've underestimated my girls. I relax when Pam asks, "Can we call you Godzilla?"

Odd, that she should show her funny side to her grandfather exclusively. He gives her a thoughtful nod, taking in her request with an air of serious consideration.

I watch Brian break into a wide, all-embracing smile.

"Sure thing, hun, but I think that means I get to call you Mothra, don't I?"

The reference might pass a little over their heads, but the girls are clearly prepared to take their new grandpa to their hearts, and I'm not surprised. I think it has been a long time since anyone has seen that particular, quite endearing, smile.

My guilt deepens. I decide then and there that if Brian wants to take a shot at me, I'll let him. It's the least I can do for someone I cut out of my life because I screwed his daughter. He's pretty much earned the right.

Now Talissa speaks up, turning her nose up in the air. "You can call me Talissa. That's it."

The girls throw her a doubtful glance, then look at each other in visible confusion. I fume internally.

So. This vain and shallow bitch probably doesn't want to be reminded that she isn't a young woman any longer. Being a grandmother probably eats at her.

Suddenly, I can see why Melissa ran away all those years ago. Brian looks like he is closer to eighty than fifty. For some reason, I think it must be this loathsome woman's fault. That, and the loss of his daughter and friend could not have helped.

I feel mostly pity for him. And guilt. This endless, nagging guilt.

Pam is curled up in the bed and eyeing her grandmother. She looks scared. I think she can probably sense that Talissa isn't the hugging type. She isn't the grandmother type, either, being more reminiscent of a wicked witch in the woods who happens to shop at Prada.

I want to speak with Brian alone, but I don't dare leave the girls with that woman.

Chatty Patty is talking Brian's ear off about monsters. Brian's eyes light up as they speak. Pam reaches out a hand for me to hold. Talissa stands back and glares as if the girls have done her some great personal wrong.

Because Talissa is really never the type to take backstage. It doesn't matter if it's another woman, a kid, or a puppy. The woman is going to be jealous and let it show, no matter what.

So this is definitely why Melissa left her family. How else could a blossoming young woman ever survive, strangled by this sentient poisonous bindweed going by the name of Talissa?

Although I must admit, I have never seen Brian this animated, and I'm happy for him. It must have been rough these past five years after I had abandoned him.

Looking back, I wish I had been a braver man who'd made better choices in his life. Then I might have found my family all that much sooner.

Things are getting tense in here with Talissa lording over all of us. I'm about to offer her my seat when she swirls to look at me. "So, what's wrong with the sick one?"

Pam shies away nervously at the mere mention of her in her grandmother's mouth.

"The *sick one's* name is Pamela," I say through gritted teeth.

I don't like my daughter's reaction to her grandmother. Kids have another sense when they are young, I know that much. They can pick up on adult undercurrents on a nonverbal level to tell when a person is off.

And Pamela definitely thinks there's something off about this woman or she wouldn't be so uneasy. Even Pat's stopped talking for a change and is watching all the byplay with narrowed eyes.

"What's wrong with her? Why does she look so pale?" Talissa demands to know in a voice clearly indicating how irritating she finds the child. *And if that's your version of concern, lady, we don't want it.*

"She's ill, but let's discuss this outside. She needs her rest."

I want this woman away from my child, *now*. And then I have to apologize to Melissa, STAT.

I see now. I see it all. I've been an incredible idiot. Brian is tied to this woman purely out of guilt, I'm sure of it.

As if summoned from the air, Melissa enters the room. She looks hot as hell, and I instantly want to fuck her against the nearest wall.

No, first, I want to go on my knees and beg her forgiveness for escalating the situation with her parents, and *then*, if she doesn't murder me, maybe she'll consider it.

"Talissa," says my beautiful warrior queen Melissa in a tone dripping with ice. "I've already told the nurses to remove you from this hospital room.

"First, there are too many people, and my daughter is still seriously ill. And second, you're *not* welcome. Leave."

The nurses are right on her heels. "There *are* too many people here," agrees the head nurse of the children's ward. "I actually suggest that *all* of you leave for the evening. Pamela hasn't slept all day, and she needs rest and privacy. Please, we need you to respect our rules, folks."

I can tell Melissa didn't expect to be banished as well, but I'm just so happy she's arrived in time to back me up. I go and kiss Pam's forehead. She is feeling a little warm, and I pray it's not a fever again. The infection should have been gone by now, so I hope she's just worked up by meeting not only a father but also a pair of new grandparents.

Melissa kisses her daughter, too. "We'll be back first thing tomorrow, and hopefully, you'll be coming home."

Patricia hops down from where she is sitting and hugs Brian. He seems genuinely touched. "It's nice to meet you, Grandpa Godzilla."

"Nice to meet you, too, Mothra." Brian pats her gently on the back and then simply takes Pam's hand and kisses it. "Nice to meet you as well, Pamela."

"Bye, Grandpa," she whispers, to my surprise.

Talissa is already gone when I turn around. I don't know where she went, but I have a feeling we will all regret her presence enough later on. Brian looks at me stonily, worshipfully at his granddaughter, then walks out.

After Patricia says goodbye to her sister, we all leave. Pam looks like she is about to cry, but quickly, we are out of sight. At the hospital doors, Melissa's parents lie in wait.

Talissa launches into attack mode right away.

“How dare you humiliate us like that, Melissa Caldwell? Or is it Steele? Have you no sense of decency at all?”

Talissa smirks unpleasantly at me. I take a breath, about to rip into the selfish bitch, when I realize I have no right to speak on the matter. This is between Melissa and her parents.

“Oh, stop with this bullshit,” says Melissa wearily. “I’ve already decided you may stay with us for the twins’ sake, but I will not be subject to your rules, not on my own property. I’ll give you a wing to yourself. That way, no one has to listen to you two.”

Her mother’s face is comical. Her mouth drops open in surprise, and her eyes narrow with suspicion. She clearly expected—in fact, would have enjoyed—more of a fight.

But Brian scratches his grizzled chin for a second before he says, “Thank you. We appreciate the offer, and we’ll take you up on it. I want to spend time with Patricia tonight, if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine,” Melissa says. *The pressure has eased off*, I think appreciatively. Maybe even for me?

Then she eyes me speculatively. Nothing to say to me.

I’m not sure what to make of that, so I go grab my rental and head back to the House of Horrors. I wonder if she has assigned me a wing to myself, too. But I know two wings and the main building of the house are dedicated to the business. So I’m either spending the night in her bedroom or in another room in the same wing, which is good enough for me. At this point, I’ll sleep across her driveway if that’s all she gives me.

Though the thought of spending another night with her definitely does things, unspeakable things, to my groin area. I love what she is wearing. She looks like a woman who can handle herself and doesn’t need me at all. There is something sexy about that, oddly enough.

I arrive at the long, curving driveway of the haunted house. There is parking for guests to the right, and I pull in there. I

don't want to interfere with the business and risk Melissa's displeasure.

I see another car but recognize it as her parents'. And of course, they're pulled up right in front of the door.

And they wonder why she isn't happier to see them too, I'm sure.

Melissa pulls up in her jeep a few minutes later. She gets out and stands beside me with her hands firmly planted on her hips.

"If only they'd get their heads out of their asses, maybe they'd enjoy the fact that they're being reunited with us," she says as I climb out of the rental. "Your bags are here, right?"

"Right."

"I'm going to set up a separate wing for them." She has her jaw set stubbornly. She isn't looking forward to hosting them. Or being near them, or even thinking about them. This is testing her self-control to the limits, I can tell.

Patricia suddenly pops out of nowhere. I grin at her. "I was wondering where you were hiding, my cheeky little monkey."

"I fell asleep in the car," she murmurs, rubbing the sleep out of her black eyes. *My eyes.*

Every time I look at her, I get that same feeling of shock and am freshly amazed all over again. *My daughters. I have daughters. I'm never getting used to that,* I think.

I'm certainly never, ever going to take it for granted. And as I think the words into being, they have the quality of a sacred vow.

I kneel to face Pat.

"Why don't you go play with Grandpa Godzilla, sweetheart, and I'll come get you when it's time for a story before bed?" I say.

"You tell stories?" Pat exclaims, as if I've revealed a secret talent as a professional magician.

“You bet I do! Grand adventures, full of excitement. Stories about dragons and princesses saving their homes. You name it, I know a crazy legend about it.”

I notice Melissa has a slight smile on her face even as she pretends not to be watching us.

“Go see Grandpa Godzilla, and we’ll get you in a bit.”

Patricia runs off, jet hair flying. The little girl is fast. I think perhaps she gets that from her grandfather. Brian could run like the wind when he was young.

I turn to Melissa, smiling brightly. “You message Eric and get him to find your parents their room. You and I are about to go into the garden for some private time.”

She turns to me with a *what are you even thinking* look on her face.

“You can’t tell me you don’t want to escape for a bit, especially after seeing your parents.”

That *what are you thinking* look turns into a *well, that’s your fault* look in a heartbeat. But unusually for Melissa, she doesn’t say anything.

She just looks at her feet, shaking her head tiredly. I wait on tenterhooks, holding my breath.

So when her face turns up to me and there is a crooked smile on her lips, I correctly deduce that yet another miracle has happened here, yet another stroke of good fortune that I don’t deserve.

I take her hand, and we head around the house to a maze-like garden at the back filled with plants and statuary. She doesn’t know what she’s in for.

And as for me? I think maybe I need to fight this battle for the rest of my life.

Melissa

I have been planning on turning this maze into part of the house attraction for years. However, the upkeep is a little too outrageous when asking around about landscapers' rates.

Apparently, some believe in the stories about the house, and they know it is now a lucrative business, so they doubled their rates. So for the time being, I have to say no and focus my funds on obtaining other, more profitable pieces of ghoulish delight.

But maybe the key is to leave it as is, untouched and intrinsically special? I'll think more about that later. Right now, one of the most gorgeous men I have ever seen is leading me to the thicket in the back yard. With the maze in disrepair, no one visits the back yard much, but I can begin to see the possibilities here. It is a very secluded spot, after all.

I put all my doubts aside when Jeremy picks me up, and I wrap my legs around his. The boot heels I'm wearing are digging into his flesh, but he doesn't seem to mind. Jeremy begins undoing my coat buttons once we are out of sight of the windows. He takes it off, throwing it away in a vast gesture.

"That's my favorite coat, Jeremy. It had better stay in one piece," I chide him. Subtext: I haven't even decided whether I can forgive you or not.

“How about the rest of the outfit? Can I tear anything?” he asks like I’ve forbidden him to eat a candy treat.

I relent. I’m too worn out for anything else.

“No. Okay, you can tear my panties.”

His eyes acquire a hot gleam, but then his hot mouth is on mine, and I can’t think anymore. I feel punch-drunk and hypnotized.

His hand weaves its way into the dense mass of my hair, and he softly untangles it with his fingers. “I love your hair,” he whispered.

That’s not the same as saying you love me. Not that I believed him the first time.

I chortle to hide my anxiety. “Jeremy, it’s just hair. Same as yours.”

“But I don’t have your beautiful jade eyes, nor the rosiness of your lips.”

“What about the Horror Twins? Do you think they look like you?” I ask, curious as to what he actually thinks.

“I think they are the two most beautiful children in the world and that they are so lucky to have you as a mom.”

He couldn’t have phrased it any better. I blush under his praise but still wonder if I really deserve it. That is an altogether different question, and an answer I can really only give myself.

I’m down to my tank top, and he pulls down the front to expose my breasts. As always, I’m helpless to resist his touch. My dark temptation, Mr. Dracula, who saps my will and leaves me breathless. I stare blindly into the twilight sky, not wanting to think about all the complications anymore.

Jeremy leans down and sucks lightly on my nipples. He nips my tender skin, and the tiny hint of pain is exquisite. Nuzzling his face deep in my cleavage, I hear a muffled groan.

“Oh, God,” he rasps out. “The scent of you is mesmerizing. What are you wearing?”

Nothing? I don't know.

“Soap.” I laugh. I'm not wearing the spritz of scent I usually do. That means a mix of soap and the sweat of angst that being around my parents seems to cause. I wonder how bad I smell.

“I see that look on your face.” He is all serious again. “You smell like an angel and make love like a nymph. Please don't ever doubt that.”

I'm done talking. And I don't want to answer questions right now, unspoken or otherwise.

“Sit here.” I gesture to a nearby stone bench, decently hidden from the house. With a startled look, Jeremy sits, and I crawl between his legs on my knees.

“Actually, get up and pull your pants down,” I command. He stands, but it is like he doesn't know what to do. At least, not fast enough for me. With one hand, I open his button-fly jeans with a twist and a yank of my hands. Jeremy's bright red underwear catches me off guard.

“Red?”

“I wear all colors of the rainbow. One color for every day.”

“You are kidding, right?” I eyeball him. He shrugs.

“It's been this way since I was a child.”

Huh. You think you know a man.

I shrug, too, and then pull the bright red fabric down with my teeth. His cock is already straining against the material. I pull his cock out of his underwear and move all the clothing to his ankles. Then I take his throbbing length in my hand and suck him in long, slow movements.

I want to take my time with him. I tease the head of his cock with the bottom of my tongue and even nip under his penis with my teeth. He lets loose a guttural noise that I read as a signal to keep going.

He doesn't push my head on his cock but strokes my hair and tells me feverishly how good it feels when I twist at the

end of my stroke, just at the base of the head of his dick.

I lick all over his cock, but this time, I take in as much of him as possible. With how thick he is, that's not much. But his black eyes are like glowing coals, and he bucks his hips into my face. He's openly grunting now.

"Melissa," he gasps, "I need to be inside you right now."

And then he's taking control, pushing me down to tower over me. He stands, yanks down my stretchy jeans and panties to my ankles, and then bends me over the edge of the old bench.

We are outdoors and exposed in the chilly air. I remember us on the beach six years ago and how wild he made me feel. I think I'm never getting over this guy.

He's behind me now, sliding his dick up and down my soaking wet slit to lube it up, and before I know it, he's in me, balls deep. It's that easy for us.

"God, you are so tight. It's like the first time with you, every time," he says in an uncanny echo of my own thoughts, burying his face in my hair.

With three forceful thrusts of his groin against mine, I feel my wetness leaking out of me already. I squirm, silently begging for more.

I don't know whether to be delighted or scared at how fast the man could make me go over the edge. If he keeps it up, I might have to keep him forever.

"Keep going," I moan. "I'm just getting started."

"Me too." He picks me up and sits down on the edge of the fountain with me on his lap.

"Just sit like this for a second," he whispers. "Feel me inside you. Feel it as I stretch your pussy."

I love it when he gives me orders like this.

"Now, start rocking gently," he instructs in exactly the gravelly voice I love. "I want it to be agonizingly slow until you can't take it anymore and scream for me to fuck you."

I doubt I'll do that, but it feels so good to have the heat of his cock inside me, driving me mad. He rocks his hips forward, and his cock's whole length rubs against my G-spot. I'm so wet that it's slick.

I bounce my ass, and he grabs a cheek in each hand. Then he is controlling the motion of my body with my ass. He's making a slapping noise when our bodies connect, and as he lets my ass drop onto his groin, I can hear a low growl rising in his throat.

I love the feeling of him, and I'm in a rush for more. I reach between our bodies and strum my clit.

"That's so sexy," Jeremy comments. "Turn your body around, and I can do that for you so you can just focus on coming all over my cock."

Swiveling with him still inside me feels odd, and I can't help but giggle at the slight awkwardness.

"What is it?" he whispers in my ear. His hot breath tickles my cheek.

"That just felt . . . good in a weird way." I smile at him, and then he's in charge again, controlling my motions.

But I'm the one dressed like I'm meant to dominate. "Stop," I say.

He looks so concerned. "Did I hurt you? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is perfect. But I want you to lie down, and then I want to ride you."

He immediately understands and just gives me that Cheshire Cat grin as he picks me up and lays us down together on our sides. We make out for a few minutes, exploring each other's bodies with our hands. I can feel the precum bubbling up the length of his penis. I can probably make him come fast, but I want this to last as long as possible.

I pull my pants off, so I'm just wearing a half-on tank top and my low-cut boots. "You look so fucking hot like that," Jeremy says. "Ride me like the wind, my love."

I pause for a second in shock. He has never called me anything like that before.

Does it count? We're having hot sex. That's all this is supposed to be. Does anything he says mean anything, for real?

Against my will, a stray tear rolls down my cheek.

"Oh, no, please don't cry. What did I do wrong?" he asks in a panicky voice.

"Nothing," I say. "This just feels so right. It feels perfect. I want to stay like this forever."

"Me, too." He pulls me down into a hug. "But we have two beautiful twins to love and raise together. Anytime we're not in parent mood, we can switch to lover mood in the blink of an eye."

That sounds perfect. In fact, it sounds too good to be true. It sounds like the future, which I can't think about right now.

I wipe the silly tears away and then straddle him. I ignore the slightly questioning look in his eyes.

His cock is so thick. I position my body over him and then slowly lower myself. I can feel every muscle stretch to take him in, and it is such a satisfying high.

I rise again, then slowly lower myself once more. I can't help but moan, and he bucks his hips up to meet mine.

But then I want more. I want to crest. I want to scream. I want to forget *everything*.

I begin riding Jeremy's cock at a frantic pace. My ass slaps hard against his thighs. I can't stop myself, and the animal noises of my passion escape my lips.

I'm on the verge of orgasm, and I throw my head back and make a crooning sound I never knew I had in me. He's right there with me, our mutual overspill of joy wiping both of us clean.

Afterward, he sits up and hugs me. His warm mouth on mine makes me let loose a low moan. His mouth feels so

good. I sink into him, my preferred body pillow.

Jeremy kisses down my neck and along my collarbone. I let out a sigh of pleasure.

“Do you think we’re done?” Jeremy asks cryptically.

“I assume,” I start to say lazily, but he cuts me off.

“Never assume. We’ll go have a bath, and then I will fuck you until you cry for mercy, I promise.”

I give him a dry look. “As you command?”

He nods firmly. “You bet your fine ass. Now, get dressed. We don’t have much time before we should go get Patricia. Hopefully, your mother isn’t torturing your dad or Eric.”

I suddenly feel bad for counting on Eric so much. But I’m sure that he’ll be happy with his raise, which I mentally increase every time I remember to think of him. He deserves it.

“Is there a way to sneak in so no one can see us?” asks Jeremy after a slight pause. He’s getting dressed in a careful, measured way. I watch lazily, fully relaxed.

“Yes.” I yawn. “Through the broken window in the solarium and up the back stairs. No one ever goes that way.”

The stairs are treacherous, and the way up is cramped and dark. I feel terrible for every poor servant who has had to wrangle their way through that passage in their time.

We manage to make it to my bedroom totally unseen and enter the bathroom with the big clawfoot tub.

“Grab us some towels,” I say. “I’ll get the water the right temperature. It’s kind of tricky.”

I wait as the water heats up and then see him walking back to me. He is utter perfection. His abs are a firm plane without being an overly pretentious eight-pack. His chest is defined, and his body tapers down to his hips. His legs are thick with muscle.

I feel incredibly self-conscious. My body must look really flabby compared to his. Somehow, he catches the trend of my

thoughts.

“You are beautiful, beyond words, beyond a doubt,” he says as he strips my tank top and shoes off. I’m starting to suspect he is a mind reader. “I’ve thought so from the first second I ever saw you standing at the foot of the stairs in this house.”

He puts a towel on the floor by the tub and another beside it.

“Lie down.” He points. I do as he says, feeling a shiver of cool air brush by me. My skin breaks out in goosebumps as the chill hits me. Noticing this, Jeremy puts a towel on top of me as well before he proceeds to lay waste to the south.

As always, his nimble tongue gets a rise out of me in seconds. I arch my back. My pussy is still tender from all the attention it’s been getting, but I love getting used to it.

I never did have those crazy young years where I might have been dating and being promiscuous. The one man I have ever been with is right here with me, right now, lazily licking at my clit. I can feel the warmth spreading throughout my body, and I don’t think it has that much to do with whatever physical acts we perform, somehow.

The idea brings me a curious form of peace. Soon, I begin to move against his mouth. He creates a hard suction on my clit, and I start crying out in pleasure.

Then his fingers get involved, and then he is inside me with his fingers as hard and as fast as only he knows how. *This is it. This is what I live for.*

My legs start twitching, and I can barely utter any coherent words. “Oh-my-God!”

That is all I can manage before I scream involuntarily and my hips rise of their own accord. He pushes a hand on my pelvis to hold me still while he feasts on me, not letting me up until I’m limp and drained.

After that, I’m too weak to move.

“Slide into the tub,” he whispers. “I’m going to scrub you down.”

I sigh. “I think that’s the best thing I’ve heard all day.”

It ends up being the *second*-best thing I had done throughout today, I decide, as Jeremy carries me to bed for a nice, long nap.

The first one was deciding that I’m going to keep this man.

Jeremy

I wake up in a blissful daze next to the only woman I've ever truly loved. Just as I move in for a quick predawn snuggle, however, I'm interrupted by a dreadful sound.

It is a virago screeching somewhere in the depths of the house, rising in tone like Medusa setting her eyes on Perseus at long last.

Melissa's eyes snap open, too. She gives me a long, weary look.

"Talissa," we say together, like a mournful two-person Greek chorus. Though I'm sure if Brian were up here, he'd join in to complete our classical triad.

Actually, what the hell am I thinking? Bringing Brian into this is the worst possible idea. In fact, it might have been the root of our troubles to begin with.

"I'll go see what's happening," sighs Melissa, swinging herself out of bed. I prop myself up on one elbow and enjoy the view of her getting dressed.

The screeching resumes. We both wince, and I decide I might as well get dressed, too. Melissa might need support. Though at least she's forgotten to blame me for her parents' arrival for the time being.

"You know," she says as we trudge down the rickety old stairs, "If you didn't choose to get involved in my parental unit drama, we could have been sleeping in right now."

Ah. *Spoke too soon, I see.*

“I’m sorry,” I offer in a sincere apology. “I really did forget what an absolute nightmare your mom is. It’s so much easier dealing with Brian on his own.”

She throws me a jaded glance. “I didn’t get that option, though. It’s always been both of them or neither for me. Unlike you, I never got to be friends with my dad.”

I have a sick feeling in my throat, imagining Pat or Pam feeling like this about me one day. *No. Not gonna happen.* My kids are always going to be good pals with me and know they can count on me, no matter what.

When we get downstairs, Brian is nowhere to be seen. Talissa, however, stands there with an expression of incredulous disgust on her face, staring up at the mock-up of the undead bride in the rafters while Eric hovers uneasily nearby.

“Melissa, what on earth is *that?*” she demands in a shriek. Her fake blonde sophistication is noticeably ruffled this morning, and the puffiness of age under her jowls is more pronounced than ever.

I realize with a shudder that this is probably what Falon is going to look like in a few years and thank my lucky stars that I escaped in time.

“That’s a prop, Talissa,” says the natural beauty next to me, giving Eric a reassuring smile. “Hey, Eric. What’s going on?”

“What’s going *on,*” says Talissa with unnecessary emphasis, “is that this *boy* wants to starve me!”

“And I don’t blame him,” says Melissa sweetly. “Eric, what really happened?”

Eric looks heartened by her immediate support and rushes into awkward speech.

“So, um, I was making fried eggs for my breakfast, but I guess Mrs. Caldwell wanted a Spanish omelet, and I don’t really know how to make that, so I asked her if she knew, and

she said of course she didn't, and then I tried to look it up online, which only takes a few minutes, but the ingredients are tricky and I said I might need to drive into town to get everything, and—”

“And that's when she started screaming and saying you were trying to starve her, right?” I supply. Eric looks grateful that I saved him from saying the difficult part out loud.

“The very least you could do is hire decent help, Melissa,” says her mother, pinching her mouth into a thin, disapproving line. “After making us come all this way, and then stay at this ramshackle ruin of a house—”

“Feel free to move into a hotel,” Melissa cuts in. “Eric's not the domestic help, by the way. He's the lights and special effects tech for the horror tour. It's not his job to cook for you, even if he did offer to in a futile effort to be nice. Eric, you can go now. Finish your breakfast in the kitchen, okay?”

Eric flees all too gladly, leaving Talissa staring daggers at her unruly child.

“And what, exactly, do you expect me to do here, Melissa?” asks the older woman in a dangerously silky voice. “Should I eat the scraps from your garbage can?”

“You could give it a shot,” drawls Melissa. “Or you could suck it up and eat normal food with the rest of us. Again, there are some quite nice hotels in town, some of which will let you throw a tantrum on the house. Feel free to walk out if you can't keep your voice down in my house, Talissa.”

“Your house,” says Talissa, still in that unnaturally soft voice. Her eyes grow unblinking and venomous. “And how, exactly, did you come by this house?”

Melissa strides toward the kitchen, and I follow in her footsteps.

“I inherited it.” She offers her mom a final parting shot. “From the only man who ever gave me a real home in my whole life.”

And as the kitchen doors swing shut behind us, I spot Brian standing at one of the side entrances, looking like he's

been punched in the gut. His face drains of color as I watch.

“I think your dad heard that,” I tell Melissa uneasily. “I didn’t know he was nearby.”

“He usually is,” she replies curtly. “But that doesn’t mean he wants to get involved. All those Christian family values tend to fly out the window once it comes to defending his only child.”

“Your mom’s pretty ungodly, however,” I point out. Melissa snorts humorlessly.

“Well, who stopped him from leaving her and taking me with him, rather than forcing me to leave on my own?” she bites out. I really have no answer to that.

I wonder what it’s like inside Brian’s head. Is he really as miserable and apathetic as he seems from the outside? Or is there a secret seed of rebellion in there, some pure instinct to look out for his own flesh and blood?

While I’m contemplating the startling vision of Brian one day developing a spine, Melissa has already made coffee, eggs, toast, and bacon. She stirs oatmeal efficiently with one hand while working on something on a laptop with the other. I’m reminded that she is both a businesswoman and a single mother and is so used to multitasking, she doesn’t think twice about it anymore.

“Should I go get Pat up?” I offer my help belatedly but am still rewarded with a sweetly absent smile.

“No, let the little monster sleep in,” says her loving mother with a sigh. “Thankfully, the girls are out of school for the fall break, so I don’t have to race around for the early morning run. Time enough for her to raise hell in a while.”

In a while turns out to be in an hour or so. I watch as Melissa wakes the kid up and gets her ready for the day. Meanwhile, the house hums and comes alive around us as employees keep dropping in, even on their day off.

I never really realized how much work it takes to keep this place running. There’s a whole ton of cleaning to be done, guest enquiries to be fielded, equipment to be repaired,

polished, and maintained, and all of this with a pair of active toddlers running underfoot all the time, wanting to help Mom.

Currently, Pat is full of wild suggestions and plans to welcome her twin home. Her ideas include an Apache ambush, a witches' circle plus chanting, with some howling at the moon thrown in. *You can really tell she has been raised correctly according to the traditional lore of horror*, I reflect.

Pam is due to be picked up in the evening, so meanwhile, Brian and I take over the task of managing Pat and trying to protect her from Talissa's spiteful tongue. We face resistance from Pat herself, who keeps inventing errands that will get rid of me so she can have Grandpa Godzilla to herself.

Or is she perhaps manipulating me into spending more time with her mom? I think she approves not only of my parenting style but also of the pairing bond between myself and Melissa. Maybe, in her own childish way, she's trying to be a matchmaker.

If that's so, how sweet of the kid. My heart melts in a fresh spurt of gratitude for these great girls I've been blessed with. All three of them, as a matter of fact.

The hours pass all too slowly until we can go to pick up Pam, who looks so much stronger and healthier than before. She and her sister chatter nineteen to the dozen in the back of the car. That's when they're not whispering together, sharing who knows what secrets, twin-style.

Dinner that night is a subdued affair, however. Brian is glum, Talissa's having a majestic fit of the sulks, and Melissa and I contribute the bare minimum to the conversation. The kids ate in their room, and Eric has escaped upstairs to his attic room. Melissa explains in a fit of nostalgia that it's the same one she used to have before she moved into the master suite on the second floor.

"Oh, when that ugly old man was still alive?" says her mother spitefully. "Really, Melissa, your taste in men is frankly execrable. But at least you tend to pick the wealthy ones."

Talissa darts me a poisonously triumphant glance, as if she thinks she's won a victory or something. Brian freezes and Melissa's face drains of color.

But I'm not a Caldwell, so I haven't had years to practice quiet endurance. Not of this type of bullshit, anyway.

Without hesitation, I pick up my glass of water and salute Melissa with a graceful nod. *This one's for you, my love.*

And then I chuck the contents of the glass right in Talissa's face.

Melissa

I jump to my feet, staring at Jeremy.

“Did you really just do that?” I ask, my voice cracking. Talissa is crouched in her chair, dripping wet with fizzy water. I can’t believe this is happening.

Jeremy returns my stare with interest. “Of course I did. I know she’s your mom, but let’s face it, the woman’s a royal bitch. I wasn’t going to just let her talk to you like that.”

Talissa rises from her chair, half panting and half whimpering. She points an accusatory finger at me.

“You did this,” she bites out. I look back at her, stunned. Somehow, this is my fault?

“You poisoned his mind against me,” continues Talissa, an ugly grimace contorting her face. “And your father’s, yes, your father’s. Don’t lie to me now, Melissa. All those years you spent undermining me, and you thought I wouldn’t realize? You insufferable, spoiled little bitch, you—I was glad when you left, do you know that? Your father went frantic, and I pretended to mourn you for his sake, but secretly, I hoped you would never come back!”

“I know that, Mom,” I say quietly. I don’t even realize I’m reverting to my childhood way of speaking now. It will only occur to me later that I haven’t called her that in years. “I’ve always known that.”

My dad gets up from his seat, pale and stiff as a corpse. *Ready to leave, as usual*, I think, hysterical grief bubbling up inside me. I'm grateful for Jeremy's supportive hand on my shoulder, however. *Yes. Thank you. Don't leave me now.*

"This is my fault," he says to me through gritted teeth, though he's still staring at Talissa with narrowed eyes. "I was stupid enough to think your parents deserved to know where you are, how you are. I didn't know what they're really like. I'm so sorry, Melissa. I've been so stupid. You knew better than me what kind of damage they could do to your life. Please, forgive me for bringing them here if you can."

I grip his hand tightly with both of mine. "It's okay. I never even explained it properly before. I suppose I couldn't figure out how. You couldn't have known."

He turns a tortured look on me. "I let that woman near our kids, Melissa. What's wrong with me?"

And then the dam bursts. My mother unleashes a torrent of vile hate, all the pent-up spite of decades.

She rants, among other things, about how being pregnant with me trapped her in a life of misery with my dad. About how pregnancy ruined her figure and an ugly child ruined her happiness. About her bitter regret for never having a son, about how much she blames me and my dad equally for not giving her the life she wanted, the one she always thought she deserved.

I stare at her, appalled. These are things I had only ever feared, suspected, sure, but never did I think she would actually say them out loud.

Talissa's face melts into a morass of bitter cracks and lines. "And him!" she screeches, pointing at Jeremy. "You had to steal him, too? Is there no end to your selfishness, Melissa? Do you realize how much better he could do, how many beautiful women he's had before you?"

For a sick moment, I wonder if she's implying she used to be one of them. Or does she mean I stole my dad's best friend

away for myself? I can't tell. I don't know if anything she says even matters anymore.

Jeremy's right. She can't be around our children. We should never have allowed it, either of us.

My thoughts fly to the two little girls upstairs. Jeremy gives me a commanding push toward the door.

"Go," he says. "I'll deal with this."

Somehow, I have no doubt that he will. He has a set look about his mouth, an intrinsic strength to him that my mother's parasitic spite simply cannot match.

I take a moment to compose myself in the hallway. *Oh, Gordon. Dear, kind, loving Gordon. If only you were here right now.*

I remember how I trudged up the hill to this house many years ago, full of aching heartbreak. I remember crying about wanting my parents to love me back, wanting me enough to keep me without having to be forced into it. Wanting a home with all the painful desperation of a lonely child's heart. Gordon made it all better for me, and I didn't even realize how much I needed him, depended on his support for everything until after I lost him.

That's the hell of it. Whatever my mother just said, I've always known. It still sits like a heavy stone in my gut, and I always carry it around with me without even knowing why.

Unless it's because it's the only thing she ever gave me, resentment and insecurity and pain, and for memory's sake, I have not been able to let it go.

Maybe it's the same thing as my wanting to scream for my dad to come take me home, or take me away as a child. Maybe that only happened because his silence was all I ever had of him.

Gordon. For a moment, I can almost feel his comforting presence flow through me, through the house. This is my home. He gave it to me, but only because I earned it. *Mine. Mine.*

That sense of belonging that I crave, reflecting outward to this house, to my children, to that man back in there, facing down my nightmares for me. *Mine*.

I take a deep breath, and the past flows through me and out of me. I'm done. I can't carry these old stones anymore.

I open my eyes, light-hearted and almost joyful now. Later on, I will remember this moment as one of my rare moments of fey foresight, the dangerous edge of mania that prophesizes disaster in the lives of mortals.

What else can it be, when my father comes down the stairs, his face white and in shock? The man's whole body looks helplessly bent and bowed, like he's taken too many blows already.

And his eyes. His pale green eyes, which once looked like mine, back when he was young. I've seen his eyes go distant and unseeing many, many times in my life.

But I've never seen them look so dead before.

"Melissa," he croaks, stretching out a hand. His fingers are painfully crooked, the skin mottled. I haven't seen that tremor before, either.

"It's okay, Dad." I almost float over to him, graceful and light on my feet like a fairy ballerina. Is this what being set free always feels like? I've been missing out.

"It's okay," I tell him again as his thick eyebrows draw together in sudden doubt. "You don't have to worry about her. Jeremy is handling it."

"I-I see," he says, still in that odd, whispery croak. I survey him with a bit of pity, but also a surprising amount of objective detachment.

"Dad, do you need to sit down?" I ask gently. Maybe the trip plus my mom's tantrum has been too much for him.

"Melissa," he tries again. I note with growing alarm that he can barely force the words out. "Melissa. Where-where are the girls? Are they with you?"

“They’re supposed to be in bed.” I frown. “They’re definitely not downstairs. I would have noticed by now.”

I’m not worried, not yet. The possibilities here haven’t even occurred to me. I’m still floating from before.

My father grips the banister railing. “You’re sure?”

“Are they not upstairs?” I ask impatiently. Eric comes galloping into view around the landing.

“I’ve checked the whole house.” He stares at me, his young face crumpled and afraid. “Every floor. Can’t find ‘em.”

I take a step back, then another.

No. No. *Gordon, you promised me. You said I’d always be safe here. This is supposed to be my real home, where I don’t have to be afraid anymore.*

Jeremy comes out of the kitchen, attracted by the noise of thudding footsteps. He takes in the tableau at one quick glance. Me absolutely motionless, Eric in a fearful frenzy, my father with his hand clutched to his heart.

“What is it?” asks Jeremy sharply. “What’s happening?”

I can’t say it. I won’t. If I do, then it might come true, and then I will fall apart.

It’s left to Eric to break the bad news. He looks Jeremy squarely, unhappily in the eyes, but under everyone’s gaze, he’s much calmer now.

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, sir,” he says, swallowing a knot in his throat. “The twins are gone.”

Jeremy

The news hits me like a thunderclap. For a moment, I can't breathe, can't think, can't function at all.

Only the sight of Melissa brings me back to my senses. She's drawn inward, gazing at some horror only she can see. I stride over to her and take her hand. I'm not sure it's enough to break her trance.

I just feel better when she's with me, that's all. She clings to me with unreserved trust, coming into my arms gladly. I meet Brian's eyes over her head and spare a moment to feel sorry for the man. I think he must have had to do this alone, once.

"What are we going to do, Jeremy?" says Melissa, her voice uncharacteristically confused and uncertain. "Eric says he's checked everywhere, but I—"

"We call the police, first of all," I say authoritatively, snapping everyone's attention toward me. "I'll do that. Eric, search the house again, top to bottom, floor by floor. Melissa and I will take the grounds. Brian, can you stay here and wait for the police to come?"

He nods wordlessly. In his silently suffering eyes, I see all the pain of having been here before. I recognize how Melissa's disappearance has broken his spirit in a way that has never

really healed. He looks defeated already, prepared to deal with years of loss.

Well, I'm not. I haven't been silent, nor blind, nor broken by a spiteful woman for most of my life. I have to believe it will turn out better for me. I have to hold on to that thought.

I steer Melissa outdoors, already on the phone to the 911 operator. I describe our girls, Pam's recent hospitalization, and the fact that they live in a relatively remote area with lots of ground cover to hide under.

The woman on the other end is brisk but unhelpful, in my considered opinion. One shouldn't have to wait for twenty-four hours to report a missing child, firstly, and my suggestions, or rather my demands for a helicopter search and rescue team, are somewhat rudely turned down.

"Keep looking," she advises. "They're at the age where they're getting adventurous enough to explore. I'm sending a squad car out."

No. Not good enough.

I consider calling Terry, boss fixer that he is, but he's too far away to help. I recall just in time that I do have one local resource, however. I pull out that driver kid's business card.

Dusty Ross, Super Intelligent Web Design. Let's hope the super intelligent part is true.

Meanwhile, Melissa is marshaling her own resources in true boss lady style. Instead of setting out on foot across the grounds, she is quickly sectioning the countryside surrounding the house. One by one, she calls people who know her and the twins. One by one, they start showing up.

By the time the squad car reaches us, we have a veritable army of volunteer searchers spreading out from the house. Melissa's employees, friends, Gordon's old friends, the parents of kids from the twins' kindergarten class—it seems the whole town of Seahollow has turned out for my girls.

Despite my inherent panic, I feel a deep sense of gratitude to these people and huge pride in my newfound family as well. Melissa is right. This is her real home. Her people, her tribe. In

a way, her true family began here. When she's in trouble, they come running. What more could one possibly ask?

Meanwhile, Eric and Dusty have taken over two ends of the search, indoors and outdoors, and are coordinating everyone new who's showing up. Brian is staunchly acting as liaison between us and the police officers, while Talissa has retreated to her room, claiming a stress breakdown, yet with a bottle of red wine clutched in her taloned hand.

Melissa and I stay at the center of things, trying to keep ourselves together and in the eye of the storm. If anyone has news of the girls, they should know exactly where to find us. People know Pam is sick. I've already organized a helicopter on standby, just in case she needs to be airlifted to the hospital.

Maybe they'll both need that. Maybe I'll officially go insane if I keep thinking along these lines.

Melissa looks at me, grave and stern and impossibly beautiful to my eyes. In a quick flash of whatever kind of telepathy binds true spirits together, she squeezes my hand tightly whenever I start thinking about everything terrible that might have happened.

"They're called the Horror Twins for a reason, my love," she tells me. It's the first time she's ever called me that. "They're reckless and they're disobedient, but they're not stupid. I hope they're lost by accident, because if they've been taken hostage, the kidnappers are going to show up any second now, trying to pay us to take them back."

"They're not that bad," I protest weakly, but I laugh a little all the same. It's true. Our girls are smart, strong and brave. Woe betide anyone standing in the way of their having a thoroughly good time.

I hope it's that. I pray it's that.

The dark hours of night turn all too quickly to dawn. A blazing shot of pink streaks through the sky, turning the valley below into a jewel inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The twins are still nowhere in sight.

People are flagging now. Brian sits, slumped and tired, on the front steps of the house, Tony hovering worriedly nearby. Melissa is as energetic as ever, but these new worry lines will live at the corners of her eyes for the rest of her life, I think. Same as mine.

At some point, I hear a whistle shrieking. I don't make much of it. A lot of the Seahollow volunteers brought their own whistles and torches, and that high pitch has recurred all night.

Melissa and I are standing alone at the ornate but ruined ironwork gates leading up to the house when it happens. It's the best place to watch the sunrise, she tells me, and even though my heart sinks further down with every hour the girls are gone, the rising sun above the tinted purple clematis hills gives me a fresh sense of hope, illogical though it may sound.

It's a secluded spot, far from the scene of action, so it takes a while for the noise to reach us. It's a low roaring at first, traveling up to us from the graveled ground.

Melissa's head whips around. I turn more slowly, unwilling to believe. Hope is too fragile to let go of, too transient to last sometimes.

The roaring intensifies, booming out from the house. A dozen more whistles start shrilling, then more and more, in a widening circle around the house.

Without letting go of my hand, Melissa breaks into a run.

It takes me a moment, then we match each other's pace, hurling ourselves pell-mell toward the source of the sound. One of the police officers raises his hand toward us, but we can't hear anything he says over the roaring.

Random threads of sound resolve into words. "Here! They're here! Somebody get their parents, right now!!"

I see Eric, frantically waving and pointing from his perch on top of the banisters. There's a slow moving crowd milling around the broken pieces of a once-impressive sarcophagus in the back.

Brian is there, pale and with burning eyes. He points wordlessly at the remains of the ancient Egyptian specimen, the mummy known to all and sundry as Undead Brian.

And there are my daughters, happy to be the center of attention, celebrating like everyone else, just as if they didn't cause untold fear to their parents for the duration of the night.

Pat and Pam, the Horror Twins, wave ebulliently at us. Melissa isn't tall enough to see over everyone's heads, but she can hear just fine.

"Mom! Dad!" they yell out. "We're fine! We're alive! We're not undead, just a bit tired! Were you scared, Mom? We weren't scared. We were totally fine the whole time."

Melissa comes into their line of sight, and suddenly, their incoherent burbling dries up. They stare at her apprehensively.

"Do you mean to tell me," she croaks out, reminding me irresistibly of her own father last night, "that the two of you were in the sarcophagus *the whole night?*"

This is Melissa in ultimate Mom Threat Mode, radiating so much menace that the assembled volunteers have also gone pale and started backing away.

"Sorry, Mom," says Pam quietly.

"Sorry, Mom," echoes her twin. "We were just trying to help."

"You were trying to *WHAT?!*"

Pam gulps. Pat, always the ringleader, takes over the explanation.

"We thought it would *help*," she says, looking down. "We weren't sure if you and Dad were going to stay together this time, and we thought, what if he loses track of you again, then *I* thought, what if you *both* lose track of *us* first, because Pam heard Grandpa Godzilla and Talissa fighting about *you* vanishing one time, Mom, and that's why they came here together to Seahollow to meet us, because they wanted to find *you* again, Mom, so then we both thought, well, if we both went missing, that's twice as good, because we're twins, so

you'd have to look for the both of us, but also if you both went looking for us together, then *you* could do that together, and then you would be really happy, and then you would stick together, and then we could all be together and not worry about losing each other ever again, right? Right? So that's why we hid in the mummy box all night, right? To *help* you."

It's lucky I'm here, because I think Melissa is about to pass out. There's a peculiar mixture of rage and relief here which could end with her either hugging the twins tearfully or killing them. I think everyone watching realizes it could go either way at this point.

"Right, Mom?" says Pat again. She and Pam both look at us anxiously.

Melissa stares at them. Then she looks at me.

Then without saying another word, she marches over and hugs her dad.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I hear her sobbing into his chest. "I'm so, so sorry, Dad. I didn't realize. Please forgive me, Dad."

It's left to me to scoop up the twins. I want to get them into bed, pronto, but I also think, for their own safety, someone needs to make them stop talking.

Well, mostly Pat. Chatty Patty, my clever child. *Maybe you and your sister were right.*

Meanwhile, Eric, Tony and Dusty start herding all the volunteers out of the house and into the solarium for an early improvised breakfast. I keep my girls attached firmly to my side while I thank everyone and accept their congratulations. I know they mean it, too. They all looked for my girls through the night.

After a while, Melissa emerges, wan but clear-eyed, on the front steps of the house. I look up at her from the middle of the driveway, and our girls do the same.

Her true home, and now mine. Us and the girls, and yes, Eric and Tony and Brian and Dusty and even Gordon's ghost,

chuckling approvingly from somewhere within the old, creaking walls.

The sun starts to climb in the sky, and the old house on the hill basks in its golden warmth. I take my girls and go to meet the love of my life.

EPILOGUE

Melissa

Six Weeks Later

I anxiously adjust the cheesecloth veils on the twins. It's almost time for today's tour, and I want them looking their best.

"Close your eyes, Pam," says Jeremy reprovingly. "You want people to think you're dead, don't you?"

The twins both nod enthusiastically, nearly dislodging the dead flower buds in their hair. *Just the thing for the creepy horror twins to really get involved in the horror house tours*, I think approvingly. But more importantly, it keeps them active, under my eye, and too busy to play any more alarming pranks on their unsuspecting parents.

"Gordon would have loved this," I say wistfully to Jeremy. "He loved that movie, *The Shining* so much, and he always planned on doing a really antique version of the creepy sisters in the hotel. He just never had time to get around to it."

Jeremy takes my left hand and kisses the palm, lightly touching the ruby engagement ring adorning it. "I think if there is an afterlife, he must know about it and be happy. Otherwise he'd probably be haunting us right now."

Us. My heart still stops when he says it.

After the twins staged their vanishing act, Jeremy and I came to the simultaneous realization that whatever went wrong between us once, the future was only going to be whatever we choose to make of it. And neither of us ever had any real doubt that we wanted to love the twins and be there for them.

The only trouble was us. And yet if I hadn't had him with me through that whole, terrifying night, I wouldn't have survived.

By the time dawn came and we were standing hand in hand by the gates, I knew. I *knew* there was a reason why I always end up with this man.

Because it's meant to be.

I didn't know he believed it too, not until he came walking up to me, face lit up by the morning sunlight and one of the kids hanging off each of his arms. His face was full of love and joy and wonder that he ever found his way back to me.

It took him less than a day to propose, and less than a week to uproot his home office in New Orleans and transplant his life, lock, stock and barrel, to our house on the hill. I still have no idea how he forces himself to deal with all the chaos involved in the day-to-day running of Blaine's House of Horrors, nor how he can deal with all the chaos created by the twins every day, but he does it.

He proposed on his knees in our secret spot in the garden, bringing out a beautiful antique ruby ring that is almost a perfect match for the jewel in the pendant Gordon once gave me. *Ruby for remembrance*, I think, and passion and longing and pain. All the things that love is.

The plan is to get married somewhere between Halloween and Christmas, once the busy season is over. The details aren't relevant to me, except I know I want to have it on the beach where Jeremy and I first kissed. And of course the twins will be included in the ceremony, and in our vows. In their minds, they engineered our reconciliation, so it's only fair.

My dad and Jeremy had a long talk as well, man to man. There are years of history between them that I was never a part of, and then years where my secrets drove them apart. Having them both back, here and now, still feels like a miracle. All the guilt and the fear from the past is washed away by the fact that we all have a second chance to make things right.

Brian, who I'm only now starting to call Dad again, seems to have moved in here permanently. I'm glad for both his sake and mine. We're both different people now, and ever since Talissa decided to move back to Springfield and play queen of the manor in her elegant but cold house there, I'd rather have him here in Seahollow where I have a chance to reconnect with him. In particular, I'm enjoying watching him grow more besotted with the twins every day.

Maybe it took fearing for my kids' lives to make me understand what I once put him through, but I feel much closer to him now. He is present and willing, in fact eager to make up for the years we missed out on. Nobody heals overnight, but we're both making an effort to reach out nowadays, and that's good enough for me.

So Grandpa Godzilla is a fixture now, and more than willing to take over watching the kids while I run my business and Jeremy gets used to his senior partnership with Kenshin Takahashi. They've hired a junior member of the firm to take over all the global jetsetting to different galleries and warehouses across the world.

Jeremy pretends that he's happy to have given up on that part of the business, but I've caught him looking up international travel itineraries for families more than once. I shudder to think of taking the girls abroad, but if Jeremy wants to unleash their capacity for inflicting terror on other countries, that's up to him. I refuse to be involved and will temporarily disappear under a false name if I have to.

But all of that is in the future, and right now I should be focusing on the tour prep. We've got almost thirty people coming in the first group, which means we'll be rushed off our feet. Eric, Tony and I have everything under control,

hopefully, unless the girls decide to go off-script. This tendency to improvise must be checked, I think distractedly.

And the goddamn phone keeps ringing. I've had several missed calls from Talissa since the crack of dawn, but I cannot and will not endure her drama any longer. That time of my life is the ugly past, where I still worried about her hurting me. Now she's become a nuisance of a person I once used to know.

Jeremy raises a quizzical eyebrow. I reflect once again how fortunate it is that he has such a strong resemblance to the classic Dracula figure, with his dark brows and distinctively peaked hairline. I have to convince him to dress up as the iconic vampire in the bedroom, one of these days. Literally, he is the man of my dreams.

"Aren't you going to get that?" he asks, nodding at the phone in my hand. I jerk myself out of my fantasy and shake my head.

"It's only Talissa," I say airily. "She keeps calling me non-stop, ever since Dad blocked her number. It's like she thinks she can use me to get to him, for some reason. Or possibly to yell at me for keeping him away. Whatever." I shrug and put my phone away in a concealed pocket in my antique butler's costume.

"Oh, I think it's more than that," says Jeremy quietly, pulling me out of earshot of the twins. "I heard a rumor that she's bankrupt. Apparently she went through your dad's money, then her parents' money, and then started a fundraiser online, pretending that she needed donations to keep looking for you.

"Well, she didn't report the fact that you'd resurfaced, but I did." He smiles smugly. "I reported her kickstarter page for fraud, and then I made a call to her bank manager. Your mom's going to have a really hard time keeping her lifestyle afloat, now that she's broke and has debt collection agencies camping out on her doorstep."

I think about that for a minute. Talissa Caldwell, permanent queen bee of Springfield, exposed as a thief and a liar for everyone to see?

I let a wide smile stretch across my face. *Happy, happy day.*

“Oh, no,” I say, grinning madly. “How tragic. I don’t know whether to laugh or get a restraining order, though. Do you think she might try to come back here and leech off of us?”

“Way ahead of you,” says my brilliant, supportive, and ruthless future husband. “I had Kenshin make a few calls to his friends in banking, and apparently he pulled enough strings to get her credit card blocked. She can’t even book a flight to get here, so you’ll have to enjoy your revenge at a distance, sweetheart.”

I laugh this time, hugging him. “Perfect. Just perfect. I love how you think of everything. You’re always ten steps ahead of me.”

He stares down at me, his dark eyes suddenly intent. “I don’t want to be. I don’t want to be anywhere except right next to you, at every step, every day. I don’t know if I always tell you that enough.”

“You do,” I say, twining my arms around his neck. “You tell me everyday. And after all the time we’ve lost, I can’t hear it enough, you know. I hope I get to be next to you for the rest of my life, Jeremy.”

He lowers his head, his lips almost touching mine. “Yes. Forever. I’m never letting you go again.”

My lips part. “Kiss me,” I whisper, and the man of my dreams is just about to oblige me when there are two dramatic thumps from the broad staircase.

“Ew! Mom! Dad! Why do you have to be so gross all the time?” yells Pat.

“Yeah, stop with the kissing!” says Pam disgustedly. “We’re supposed to be dead people right now, remember? Dead people don’t kiss, do they? And besides, the visitors are almost here.”

I look up in alarm. “Oh, so they are. Okay, girls, ready? Eric! Tony!” I call up the stairs. “Is everyone in position?”

Jeremy snatches a swift kiss from my mouth, full of promise for later. “Good luck, sweetheart,” he says softly, then raising his voice a little, “And good luck, kids! Behave for your mom, okay?”

“Okay, Dad,” they say cheerfully, the little liars. I smile at them lovingly anyway, and then acknowledge the ready signals from my assistants up in the gallery with a quick thumbs-up.

My daughters’ first horror tour. *How quickly they grow up.*

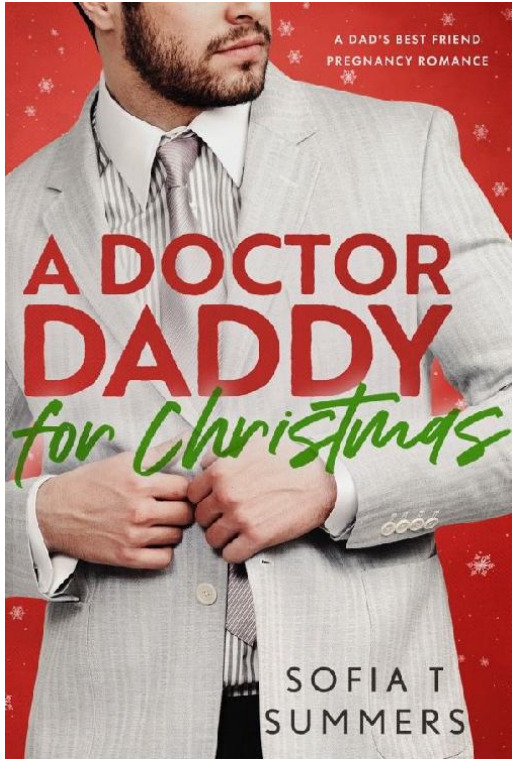
The guests are almost at the door. I hurry to take up my position just behind the Dixon pulley rope, putting on Gordon’s moldy old top hat at the last minute. I’m playing the undead butler today, while the girls take my usual place at the foot of the stairs.

The antique brass doorknocker booms out. I wait until Jeremy goes up the stairs and out of sight before I pull the lever that makes the doors seem like they swung open on their own.

Just outside, a group of kids go, “Ooooooh. Creepy!”

Showtime.

Loved this holiday romance? [Check out my latest holiday romance - A Doctor Daddy for Christmas, here.](#)



A DAD'S BEST FRIEND
PREGNANCY ROMANCE

A DOCTOR DADDY *for Christmas*

SOFIA T.
SUMMERS

CHRISTMAS IN THE CABIN (PREVIEW)

Description

There were secrets pride urged me to keep.

Nick never learned about his daughter, *our* daughter,
And I kept my word that my father would never know what
we did.

Their friendship didn't need to be shattered like all my hopes.
**Now, fate is calling me back home for an extended holiday
season.**

There will be no quick getaway this time.

People say that time heals all wounds, but what can an all-
consuming kiss do?

Everything always looks better under the glow of holiday
lights,

But will the harsh light of reality be the end of everything I
once craved from Nick?

This Christmas, will I finally stop running?

PROLOGUE

Darcy

Over and over, I turned the key in the ignition. Every time I thought the engine might rumble to life, it failed me again, and all my hopefulness dwindled into helplessness. Stuck on the side of the mountain, I had another thirty minutes to get to my dad's place, but my Mustang wasn't going to make it. My dear Shelby was beautiful, but she couldn't fight the snow and ice piling up in this wild storm. She could only sit there and maybe keep me warm.

Looking at the gas gauge, I realized that wouldn't be much longer, either. The little red hand sat around the one-quarter mark. I didn't know if that was enough to keep the heat running all night long. If the gas could somehow make it to morning, I imagined the car's battery might not.

No bars on my cell phone. No chance of driving out of this ditch. Plus, I was a little too far out of the small mountain town to walk back for salvation.

"Merry freakin' Christmas to me," I muttered.

The cheerful music on the radio sounded like it was mocking me. With a huff, I pulled the key from the little slot. The speakers went dead. The heat stopped blowing from the vents, but there was enough heat in the car to keep me warm. I had my mittens and my hat . . .

I was definitely going to die. *Froze to death in her car*, the obituary would say. I could already see the local news's headlines.

"Black Sheep?"

The voice made me jump. Turning my head, a familiar pair of blue eyes met mine. I couldn't believe it.

"Nick?" I called through the icy window. "Is that you?"

I didn't need to ask. I had memorized every strand of his sandy blond hair and the crooked bridge of his nose. It was the

only imperfection on his otherwise perfect face. The smile he offered always looked wry, even when he was being earnest.

With that same grin, he exclaimed, “Funny running into you out here!”

“No, it isn’t!” I protested. “I’m stuck.”

“Then, get out of the car!”

I scoffed. “You just want me to abandon my car?”

“It’s not going anywhere!”

As I glanced through the windshield, snowflakes fatter than goose feathers were starting to cover my car. He was right. This was my one chance at a Christmas miracle.

I had to take it.

Bracing myself for the cold, I grabbed my purse from the front seat before rushing to the trunk. I shuddered against the wind, trying to unlock it with my mitten-clad hands. God, I didn’t want to take them off. My fingers would be purple in seconds.

“Give me the keys,” Nick insisted.

I looked over to his shoulder and then up at his face. His red knit cap had his blond hair pushed down across his intent gaze. He was used to the cold, making it easier to retrieve my suitcase and throw it in the backseat of his old blue Chevrolet. Shivering again, I didn’t protest.

“I guess I should thank you,” I said as Nick slid into the cab beside me. “I would probably have died out here.”

“Oh, you’re tougher than that, but why were you driving that thing in a snowstorm? What happened to your hatchback, and shouldn’t you have some boyfriend with you? Bill mentioned you were seeing someone.”

“I sold it when I left for Costa Rica. I didn’t need two cars, especially when I was going to be out of the country.”

“Is that where you’ve been?” he wondered while shifting into drive.

“Costa Rica was in the spring and South America this summer. I did a Schengen visa in Europe this fall. I got back from Copenhagen last week. That’s where I left the boyfriend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be. I’m certainly not.”

We had only ever been a traveling fling. He wanted to head east to New Zealand. I wanted to head home for the holidays. As fun as the guy was, there was no point in pretending we were a great love affair.

Nick laughed, flashing that teasing grin. “Did you visit that Red-Light District?”

“You’re thinking of Amsterdam, and do you think I’m the kind of person to visit brothels and sex shops?”

“No, Black Sheep, you’ve never been that kind of girl.”

“Darcy.” I sighed. “Why can’t you ever call me Darcy?”

He chuckled again, turning around the switchback edge of the mountain. It didn’t matter that we could barely see. Nick knew these roads like the back of his hand. He probably had every inch of Banner Elk and the surrounding mountains memorized. I just had to settle into my seat and try to keep calm.

It was never easy being around him, especially in close quarters.

“What?” he teased. “You don’t like your old nickname?”

“It was fine back in the day, but I’m twenty-five now.”

“How about Darlin’ Darcy Rose?” Nick persisted with his game. “I can’t call you that anymore either?”

I shifted in my seat, averting my eyes. “I would prefer you didn’t.”

“Fine, Darcy it is then.”

“Thank you.” I paused, glancing out the window. “So . . . why were you in town, anyway?”

“I was picking up my mail before the post office closed. I needed some odds and ends from the store. You know, the usual.”

Nick turned right when he should have turned left.

“This isn’t the way to my dad’s.”

He shook his head. “Oh, I’m not taking you out to your dad’s.”

“What?” I turned to watch the road’s fork vanish from view. “Nick, he doesn’t know where I am! My phone wasn’t working back there! Just let me out. I’ve got bars now. I can call him.”

“You want me to leave you out on the side of a road . . . on Christmas Eve . . . in the dark . . . in a snowstorm?”

As he laughed, I remembered hoping to be home in time for Christmas Eve dinner, but I figured that was a pipe dream.

“I’m sure Dad could come get me.”

“Visibility is getting worse by the minute. You really want your father out in this?”

“No,” I mumbled begrudgingly.

Nick flashed a triumphant grin. “That’s what I thought. Now, my cabin is only ten minutes from here. You can spend the night with me, and I’ll take you over to your dad’s house in the morning. You’ll be there just in time to dump out your stocking and eat your special Christmas breakfast. I promise.”

“Fine. It’s not like I have much of a choice, anyway.”

“No, you don’t.”

Surrendering, I crossed my arms over my chest and wondered, “When did you even get this cabin?”

“I got rid of my grandparents’ old trailer. I used the land to build this place last year.”

“I guess I have been away for a while, then.”

The truck rumbled. The road shifted from smooth asphalt to uneven gravel. Nick slowed to a crawling pace as we passed

through trees and caught glimpses of Christmas lights glowing in the night. At the far end, we rounded a patch of woods and came into a clearing where a log cabin sat with a green metal roof, a big stone chimney, and a carport on the side.

The little cabin looked like a haven in the dark, gray night. The winds whipped around us. I hated to open the truck door, but I told myself it was safer inside. Everything would be better if I just got inside the house, so in a rush, Nick grabbed my suitcase from the back and led me through the side door. The mudroom had hooks on the walls and a place for our boots. Passing by the washer and dryer, we stepped into the kitchen that felt undeniably warm.

It wasn't just the temperature. The place was just so *cozy*. I recognized half of the furniture from his grandparents' place, like the old kitchen table and the China hutch complete with blue Wedgwood plates. Even the olive-green cabinets had their charm, but I couldn't rest easily in the space.

Nick's hair still fell across his eyes. His cheeks were pink from the winter's icy cold. I had run all over the world, but I couldn't escape him, not here, not in this storm.

"I got a lasagna at the store," he declared while setting down his paper grocery bag. "I was planning to bake it for dinner. That okay?"

"I'm good with lasagna," I assured him.

"Good. You can take the bed upstairs. I'll sleep on the couch."

My shoulders slumped. I had to protest.

"No, Nick, I can't put you out."

"It's no big deal," he insisted while unpacking his groceries. "I fall asleep on the couch all the time watching television. Just go upstairs. You can put your stuff down and get comfortable."

"Okay, okay."

I didn't need many directions. There was only a loft over the back of the house. Walking past the bathroom and behind

the couch, I caught sight of the little Christmas tree covered in colorful lights and old ornaments sitting just beside the fireplace. The bedroom overlooked the living room with its large bed and simple furnishings. Nick had never been the kind of man to need much, but he did have a few things around from his past. I was pretty sure the patchwork quilt was something his Grandma Peggy had made.

Not dwelling on the man's bed, I got myself out of my cold jeans and sweater, trading them for leggings and my oversized Duke sweatshirt. It was big enough that it didn't matter if I wore a bra. My chest just looked like a heap of heathered gray cotton. With my wild thicket of dark hair pulled up into a bun, I decided there was nothing attractive about this outfit.

Nick Wallace would never want me anyway, cute pajamas or otherwise.

After calling Dad to explain, I followed my nose back downstairs to the kitchen. Nick might not have been trying, but I hated how good he looked with his flannel's sleeves rolled up to his elbows. I could see the tattoos scattered across his right arm, including the bright petals of a blooming red rose.

His backside in those jeans didn't help, either.

"Need any help?" I asked while forcing my voice not to crack.

He slid the lasagna into the oven, and the heavy metal door creaked shut. Nick set a timer.

"You could cut up some lettuce."

I tried to joke. "I didn't know you ate salad. I always took you for a meat and potatoes man."

Fortunately, he chuckled. "I don't mind eating a few green leaves every so often. Besides, I'm not a teenager anymore. I can't just eat crap and expect to fit in my pants."

"Yeah, I know that feeling."

Nick definitely wasn't a teenager. He was in his late thirties and about fourteen years too old for me, but that didn't

change how my heart fluttered when he got close. It didn't change how I leaned into the smell of the clean scents of aftershave and pine tar soap. I swallowed hard.

"You got anything to drink?" I asked while working hard to chop up the romaine.

"I, um, have some sweet tea and some beer."

"You got anything stronger?"

"Whiskey?"

"Sounds great," I replied with a forced smile. "Let's put a little tea in that and call it a cocktail."

"All right," Nick agreed. "What's botherin' you, then?"

"Bothering me?"

"You always get jittery when something's bothering you, and I've never known you to drink anything stronger than a shandy."

"Well, I'm not that girl anymore. I enjoy plenty of cocktails now, especially margaritas and palomas."

"That doesn't mean something's not botherin' you."

I grumbled to myself. Of course, Nick had to be the guy who gave me my first drink. Shaking my head, I forced away the unhelpful thought. I couldn't just melt into a puddle on his kitchen floor.

"I just feel bad about not getting home tonight," I lied.

"Don't worry too much," Nick tried to assure me. "I'm sure your Uncle Mickey and Aunt Erin are keepin' your dad company tonight."

"Yeah, they're probably playing card games and listening to Dad's old Christmas cassettes."

I could see it all in my mind's eye, letting my muscles and my worries ease themselves. Everything felt easier by the time we sat down to dinner. I was already working on my second spiked sweet tea, and Nick was nursing a beer. Our little salad and take-and-bake lasagna tasted pretty good.

“Merry Christmas Eve, Darcy,” he offered, clinking his bottle to my glass.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” I repeated before gulping back more of my tea.

“So, it’s only seven thirty. What do you want to do?”

I wanted to bury myself under his quilt and forget where I was.

“We could watch a movie,” I suggested instead. “Or . . . we could play a card game, or um, you got checkers?”

“I’ve got a deck of cards, no checkers.”

“Well then, I guess this night is ruined.”

Nick rolled his eyes and offered that wry grin. “Sure, it is, Black Sheep.”

I rolled my eyes at the old nickname but said nothing. He was letting me sleep in his bed for the night. He was feeding me dinner. I couldn’t complain. I just needed a third sweet tea to get over it.

With *It’s A Wonderful Life* playing in the background, Nick and I found ourselves playing our fourth game of Go Fish on the plush brown couch. We played by the light of the Christmas tree and the fire burning in the heavy stone fireplace while a red plaid blanket covered my lap. On the little screen in the corner, George and Mary were finally getting hitched.

“You got any threes?” I asked Nick.

“Go Fish.”

I reached over to the coffee table, a slab of heavy wood straight from the trunk. The bark still ran along the rough edges, but I didn’t focus on the piece of furniture. My tipsy head was too excited.

“I fished my wish!” I exclaimed too giddily, laying down a book of threes. “Now, do you have any queens?”

“Here,” Nick surrendered.

Handing over his two queens, it was only a matter of seconds before I was declared the winner, but we only could play the same game for so long before the fun faded.

“I think that’s enough Go Fish,” Nick declared, gathering the cards.

“What now, then?”

His head turned toward the television. “We could just watch the movie.”

As I settled myself down, George Bailey’s honeymoon began. Rain poured down outside his house like the snow falling down outside. I watched as his new wife smiled at him. My body curled tighter against the end of the couch.

“You know, I ran into Kevin Booth when I was at the grocery store,” Nick remarked. “He asked about you, wanted to know if I knew where you were.”

Kevin Booth took me to my senior prom. We were together for less than a month, and he was my only foray into dating in high school.

“Why would he ask about me?”

Nick shrugged. “Maybe he’s still into you. Why? You don’t like him anymore? I thought he was your first crush. I’ve certainly never heard of you dating anyone else.”

George and Mary were heading to bed. They looked so happy together.

“He wasn’t my first crush,” I blurted out.

“Then, who was?”

“Nobody you know.”

“I’ve served beer to just about everyone within fifty miles of here,” he remarked in disbelief. “I’m sure I know him.”

“No, you really don’t.”

He prodded my shoulder. “Come on, don’t lie to me.”

“*Nick.*”

“Is it really that big of a deal? It’s ancient history.”

No, it damn well wasn't.

"I thought we were gonna watch this movie."

"We will," he said with a chuckle, "right after you tell me who you liked instead of Kevin."

I knew exactly what I was doing, but I'd had too much whiskey to care.

"You, okay?" I huffed before taking a gulp of my drink.

There was no sense of shame as I turned to meet Nick's surprised eyes. It was the most serious I'd ever seen on him. His Southern lilt grew thicker with the rasp of his voice.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I liked you, Nick. You were always the good-looking bartender at my dad's bar, and well, you were always nice to me. That didn't help. I was eighteen and foolish. Honestly, what did you expect?"

Apparently, whiskey was a truth serum for me. I used my last scrap of good sense to decide to never drink it again.

"You think I'm . . . *good-lookin*?"

God, Nick's baritone voice sounded like whiskey tasted—strong, dark, and damn intoxicating.

"Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"No," he said. "You're just Black Sheep."

"You also called me 'Darling Darcy Rose'."

"It's just a nickname," he insisted, quickly at a loss for words. "You were always hanging around the bar. You were Bill's daughter. It didn't mean . . . I never . . . I—I think you've had too much to drink."

"No, I haven't. I could touch my toes right now. I could do it and sing a whole song in French."

"Darcy, you don't—"

I cut him off by trying to stand, but I hadn't prepared for getting caught up in the blanket. I wasn't ready for anything. All too quickly, I stumbled and found myself falling into

Nick's capable arms. His face was inches from mine, and my hand managed to press into his strong thigh. My fingers were inches from the bulge in his dark jeans.

Was it always that big or is he just happy to see me?

"I really shouldn't be taking advantage of you," I mumbled. "You've had two beers tonight."

"Three," Nick amended.

"I'm not drunk, but you probably are. I should, uh, just go to bed."

"Yes, you should."

And yet, my whole body was frozen in place. The heat rising up my spine should have me thawed out, but I couldn't move away. I was trapped in the steely-blue cage that was Nick's gaze. I could see the chiseled lines of his face and smell the scent of aftershave looming on his neck.

Back in the kitchen, a cuckoo clock chimed midnight.

"Merry Christmas, Nick," I offered softly.

His chest rose and fell with labored breath. "Why did you say those things?"

"Because you asked."

"What, would you do anything I asked of you?"

"Maybe."

He exhaled heavily. "*Darcy . . .*"

Nick muttered my name like a curse, but he didn't push me away. Nothing could stop our lips from meeting. It felt as inevitable as the snowstorm outside. One kiss became two, and two turned into more. Growing dizzy and light, my head fell against the throw pillows. I could feel Nick's calloused hands sliding under my sweatshirt and cupping my breasts. I didn't stop myself from moaning into his mouth.

It was everything I'd always wanted. All those years of pining finally culminated in this.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he muttered, his kisses wandering down to my throat.

I could feel his bulge growing hard against my thigh. No matter what he said, I could feel how Nick wanted me, even if I didn’t totally believe it. It was right there in his hungry kiss and roving hands, but it still didn’t feel real.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

“Hell, Darcy.”

The scene became a mixture of golden, dim light and cold shadows. The fire began to die out as our clothes became a pile on the floor. Every time Nick exposed a new piece of me, his mouth devoured the skin. His broad frame consumed mine, and I was nothing but happily helpless under him.

I had found my haven in the snow. He was six-foot-four and smelled like winter and smoke. My fingers could run freely through his hair and down his tanned chest, and I didn’t think to hide. It was never like me to shy away. I could only let my legs spread wider as Nick’s hand began to feel me out. He found me dripping wet, ready, and willing. His two fingers traced my folds with slow intention.

“You shouldn’t be this beautiful,” Nick growled. “I shouldn’t want you like this.”

I pleaded in a whisper, “Let me have you this once. It’ll only be one time.”

His lips crashed against mine again, and our bodies connected. I felt every inch of him push into me. As I shut my eyes, my head fell back. My hips knew how to move. My hands knew to anchor themselves against his shoulders. Every piece of me began to move on instinct while pleasure built up inside me. It grew like a fire, sparking and flourishing into a raging swell of flames in my heart.

That’s what we were—shadows and skin, bone and smoke. Nick rocked me into the deepest climax I’d ever known, and he left nothing but the bones on my skin. Breathless and gasping, I inhaled the scent of the wood fire as my eyes opened. Shadows grew over us together.

I never made it to bed that night. In the morning, the sunrise woke me. Squinting my eyes, I took in a deep breath scented with pine soap, salt on skin, and the ashes of a cold hearth. The world outside looked white, and I was pinned between the back of the couch and Nick's naked frame. His tattooed arm fastened me against him over our blanket.

"Darcy?" I heard Nick grumble as he opened his eyes. "Dammit. Damn it all."

His swears sounded nothing like the night before. There was no wry smile on his face or touch of affection. In a rush, I felt him pull away from me before finding his boxers and jeans. The world quickly grew cold. I wrapped the blanket around me to keep warm, but it wasn't enough.

"I shouldn't've let this happen," he muttered in a rush. "We'd both been drinking. I should've known better. God, what would Bill think? After all he's done for me, I wouldn't blame him for shootin' me dead."

The fire had gone out. My heart froze over.

"You're right," I declared quickly, unable to listen to any more of Nick's muttering. "We had both been drinking. It was stupid, and nobody will ever know, especially Dad."

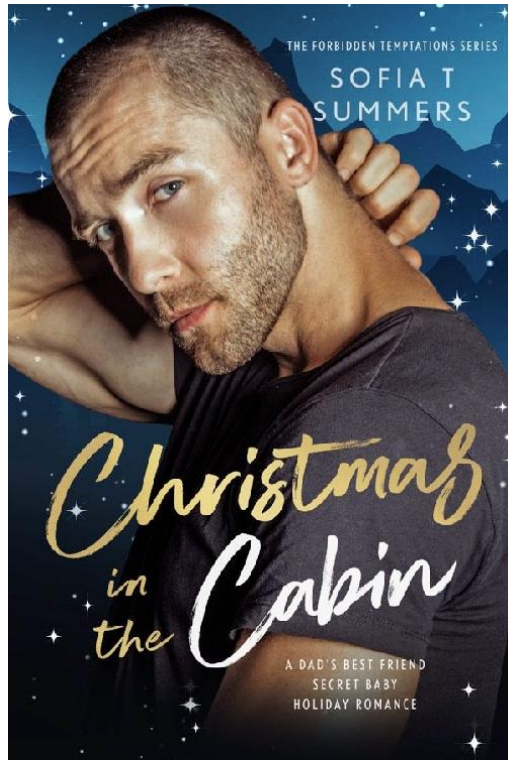
Buttoning his jeans, Nick looked at me with apologetic eyes. "Darcy . . ."

No warmth lingered in the sound.

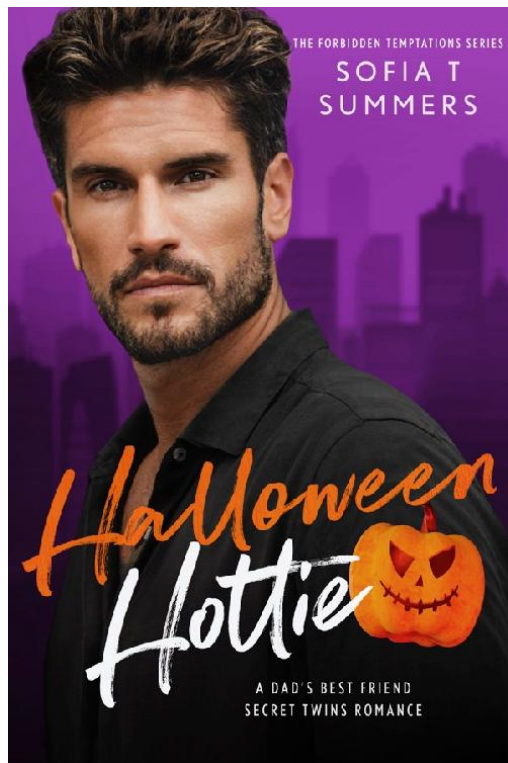
"It's fine," I insisted, standing with the blanket. "I'm gonna get dressed so you can take me home."

Not waiting for more, I hurried upstairs and promised that nobody would know how my heart broke that Christmas morning, especially Nick Wallace.

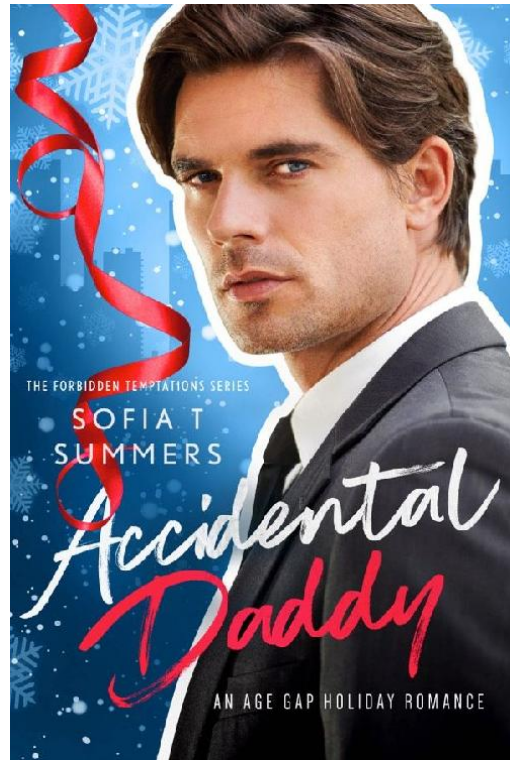
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