



IT'S COPY

CASSIE MINT

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I Spy

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One

Lenore



I was sent to work in my uncle's office as punishment. That's all you really need to know about this eighth floor nightmare: to my family, this is as good as time served.

Oh, from the outside, this building is pretty. Romantic, even. It's all carved pale stone and ivy; wrought iron balconies and sparkling glass windows. Historic. A fancy address, because the Hattworths are successful, even if we are criminally boring.

Once you get inside, though... yeah, it's as beige as you'd expect from my blustering uncle. He runs a stationery company, for god's sake—the most boring entry in our family's portfolio. Riding up the floors each morning on the ancient elevator, watching identical beige rooms drift past through the glass, I can *feel* my life force draining away.

It's cruel and unusual punishment, my being sent here. Meant to stamp out the last flickers of my spirit.

Because there's no color in this office. No signs of life. Sad, thirsty house plants wilt in their pots, their leaves curling

and browned, while a laminated poster hangs crooked by the staff break room on the third floor, showing the correct way to align your desk chair for lumbar support.

The employees are all dead-eyed and sharp-tongued, bickering among themselves about vacation days and email chains.

Prison. That's what this is.

All for a tiny misunderstanding.

My saving grace—the only thing keeping me sane while I serve out my sentence—is the scaffolding clinging to the building. Or rather, the *men* on the scaffolding, sweating and working and laughing out there, their voices seeping through the glass.

They heave building supplies up and down those eight floors like they're lifting nothing more than feather pillows. They make rowdy jokes, and they eat their lunches out of tin boxes and paper bags, like they're dock workers from the fifties. It's awesome. Compared to this sad, hushed office, they're out there in vivid technicolor.

But I know, I know. I sound like a perv, staring at them like this. Believe me, as I settle behind the assistant's desk outside my uncle's office on the top floor, I *feel* like a grade A perv. My eyes are glued to the office windows, watching the men out there for signs of a dark blond head. I barely blink as I log on to the computer by feel, fingertips jabbing at the clunky keyboard.

See, I'm perving alright, but it's not *all* of them that do it for me. I'm not an equal opportunity creeper. There's one man in particular out there who makes me squirm on my creaky desk chair.

One man I desperately want to see again.

Eight floors is a long way up. I shouldn't want to distract him, shouldn't want to distract *any* of them, and yet I can't blink, can't relax, can't even breathe right until I see him each day.

Dark blond hair and broad shoulders make their way up the scaffolding ladder, and I melt back with a relieved sigh. Today, he's in a thick navy work shirt, rolled to the elbows and streaked with brick dust, and dark, clinging jeans above tan work boots.

Good. It's cold out there, and whenever the subject of my obsession wears nothing but a t-shirt in the autumn chill, I get sympathy shivers behind this desk.

The man says something, his voice muffled by the thick glass. He's pointing at where the carved stonework meets the roof, two workers standing by his shoulder and nodding.

I swallow, but my throat is dry.

My computer pings, a hundred tedious emails already waiting in my inbox, but I ignore them all and keep staring straight ahead. The sky is blue today, the sun sparkling gold in the man's hair whenever he walks between shadows, pointing out other stuff to his workers.

Gabe.

That's his name. Gabriel Dempsey. The head of the building crew.

See, Uncle Roderick has been grumping and groaning over nothing, because I *have* learned something worthwhile during my time here. The man of my dreams is called Gabe.

Somehow, I always know ahead of time when Gabe is gonna look at me. My skin prickles under my clothes, and shivers race up my spine, and my breath catches when green eyes find mine.

Through the glass, out there where the wind tugs at his hair, Gabe smiles at me, slow and teasing.

He *knows* what that does to me. My cheeks are hot enough to cook an egg, and I fan myself weakly. Gabe winks.

Then he's back to business, bossing men around and gathering his own tools. He always works on the top level with me, working where the stonework is the most elaborate and delicate. Working where I can barely think straight, I'm so busy staring.

Sometimes, when Gabe wears a t-shirt, it rides up when he reaches overhead. Flashes me a strip of toned abs and his belt buckle. I don't like the thought of him getting cold out there, but I *do* like that. With his navy shirt tucked into his jeans like today, no such luck.

Gnawing on the end of a pencil, I drag my gaze back to this stupid computer screen. How can I care about purchase

orders when he's out there? Drilling? Hammering? *Sweating?*

I squeeze my thighs together, choking back a groan.

“Lenore.”

Ugh.

Pasting on a smile, I spin to face my uncle where he glowers from the office doorway. He's always been mean and bossy, for as long as I can remember—hitching up his belt in that self important way, droning on and on about office supplies and employee failures, because even though Uncle Roderick is in charge, nothing is ever *his* fault. God forbid.

And until my family decrees it otherwise, he's got me under his mean old thumb.

“Yes, uncle?” My words are sugar-sweet, my smile pleasant.

He scowls like I just crawled out of a sewer pipe. “I need that contract today. The one from Peterson & Co.” It's already on his desk, but whatever. I may be distracted to hell and back, but this job is not hard to do. “And you're working late tonight.”

I blink, my smile slipping. “But tonight's my sewing night, remember? I've got full access to the college workshop; I booked up the machines I need and ordered all the supplies.” Maybe for once, my uncle will see reason. “Our next show is in a month's time, and I'm working flat out to keep up already. I could do literally any other night this week, but—”

“No buts.” Uncle Roderick sniffs and hitches up his belt again. Ugh. What I’d give to punch him in his miserable gut. “While you’re working for me, this company is your priority. End of discussion. I spoke to your parents and they agree.”

Ass hats! What’s the point of offering to fund my fashion course if they won’t let me work on the assignments?

This is a control thing. It’s always about control with the Hattworths. It was all fine when my fashion dreams were harmless in their eyes—a suitably feminine hobby until I snared myself some rich banker for a husband. But then I made *that* mistake, and landed myself behind this desk, and now...

Hot tears burn behind my eyes, but I won’t let them fall. Not with Uncle Roderick here to witness them. Hell no.

“I’ll rearrange my sewing night,” I rasp, because what else can I do? I stupidly accepted my family’s offer of funding my course. Back then, I was even warmed by their offer—I figured they really loved me after all, and wanted me to be happy. Thought this could be a new start for us; a beautiful new relationship where they accept me for who I am.

God, I was dumb. Now, if I want to reach graduation, I need to dance on the Hattworth strings.

Lesson learned. *Nothing* in this life comes free, and once I’ve graduated, I won’t ever make that mistake again. My family can take their connections and their riches and their social climber aspirations, and shove them where the butler can’t dust.

When my uncle's door snaps shut behind me, I glance up. Gabe frowns at me through the window, strong arms folded over his chest. Those green eyes are heavy with concern.

Swallowing hard, I duck my head and get back to that inbox.

No time for distractions. Not here. Not now.

Two

Gabe



He's crushed her spirit. Again. Christ, I hate when he does that.

It happens every morning: the sweet, bubbly assistant settles down behind the desk, all pink-cheeked and smiling, wearing some crazy new dress in clashing colors or animal print or whatever. She's so out of place in that room, it's like seeing a parrot among pigeons. And when she catches my eye... fuck, she lights up like the Fourth of July. Grins wider, blushes harder, and squirms in that desk chair of hers, pressing her legs together beneath the table where I can see them.

Never seen anything like it. Never *felt* anything like it. Seeing this girl is like being struck by lightning, even on a clear, sunny day like today.

Then that boss fella comes stomping out of his office to grind her under his boot heel. Every morning I watch it happen. And every morning she *wilts*, fiddling with the ends of her dark hair. What does that jackass say to her anyway?

Whatever it is, once he's gone she hunches over her desk and types away at her keyboard, just as broken and bored as the rest of the workers in that building. Makes my chest ache to see it all over again.

And this morning is the same as yesterday, because I've got impossible daydreams running through my brain—things like my scuffed work boot kicking the window in, sparkling shards of glass dropping off me as I march across the room. Things like her relieved laugh as I sling that girl over my shoulder and steal her away for good, carrying her far across the city rooftops, wind streaming through her dark hair. Stuff like that.

It's wishful thinking. Complete bullshit. Obviously.

But fuck, I hate seeing her all slumped over like that.

Today's dress is teal colored, with criss-crossy straps and with a white t-shirt underneath. Bet if I so much as waved at that girl, I'd get grubby hand prints on that white top.

It's a good reminder, especially when the life has gone out of her like that: I'm not the knight she needs.

Stay. Away.

It's good advice for myself, but when she looks up, I'm still staring. Practically boring two eye holes in the thick pane of glass. Vibrating in the cold with sheer longing.

“Boss man?”

Sniffing hard, I turn to my second in command, Jimmy. When did he sneak up that ladder? How long has he been

standing there? “Yeah?”

“Everything good?” Jimmy leans around me, squinting into the building, and I fight the urge to move and block his view. I may trust this man, may love him like a grouchy older brother, but that doesn’t mean I want his eyes on *her*. “Those roof tiles have arrived. The boys are getting a train going up the levels, handing them up here.”

I grunt. “Good.”

I’m still antsy as I step to the edge, peering over the scaffolding rail—like there are hundreds of fire ants crawling under my skin. Jimmy sees it, but he says nothing. That’s why he’s my second—or part of it, anyway. He knows what’s relevant to the job, and when to back the hell off.

“We’ll, uh. We’ll get ‘em up here, then.”

He’s halfway back down the ladder before I remember to respond. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

Eight floors up. It’s not that much, in the scheme of things—we’ve all worked plenty higher. But it’s still funny leaning over the rail and seeing cars down there and the tops of trees. People walking dogs and pushing prams, all while the world tilts like I might topple forward—

“Nope.” Jerking my chin back, I stand up straight and tug on my safety line. My gut’s gone queasy. We all clip in up here, all take the right precautions, but I still get these moments of weakness—these flashes of sweaty palms and dry throat, even after a decade in this work.

What would the pretty assistant make of that? Would she still stare like I'm her personal hero? Or would she think I'm weak?

Doesn't matter. *Can't* matter.

Nice girls like that don't end up with guys from my side of the tracks.

* * *

By mid afternoon, she's perked up again. That's a daily thing, too. This girl is impossible to keep down, no matter what bullshit that boss keeps spewing in her ear each morning. By the time she's gone for lunch and bounced back to her desk, she's beaming again, shoulders loose as she tugs out her chair.

She sits down with a flounce, spreading that teal dress over her thighs. Legs cross, one ankle boot bobbing in the empty air beneath her desk, and pearly white teeth nibble on the chewed end of her pencil.

And she watches me. *Watches* me. We're not talking about stolen glimpses here—this girl is completely shameless about it. Like I'm her personal TV channel. Like she's about to grab a bowl of popcorn to snack on as her big, soulful eyes crawl over every inch of my body.

If anyone else stared at me like that, I'd get pissed off pretty quick. I'm not a critter in a zoo, you know? But when *she* does it, all flushed with innocent hunger, I find myself flexing my muscles instead. Pushing my hair back when it

drops over my forehead; swiping an arm across my sweaty brow and grinning when she squirms.

Fuck, she's so into this. Watching me. Letting me ham things up, performing for her, lifting heavy shit just so she'll press her lips together like she's fighting a moan.

I'm into it too. Hope she never, ever looks away.

“Who's that?”

Jimmy's voice is a bucket of cold water down my neck. I grimace, getting back to the guttering I'm fixing, and try to keep my voice level when I reply.

“Dunno. Hattworth's assistant, I guess.”

Jimmy whistles, and my jaw aches where I grit my molars too hard. “She's a piece, ain't she? Staring like that, like you're a popsicle on a hot summer's day. Damn. Better watch out, boss—rich girls like that ain't nothing but trouble.”

My hands pause, and I frown at the carved stonework. The whole reason our crew got called in here, the whole reason it's such a big job, is because of this stonework. The whole exterior of this building is protected, see. It's *historic*, and that means special tools, special processes, special skills. A long, expensive job.

Mr Hattworth in there just about blew a valve when he saw our quote. That's what it costs, though, and that's why every time he peers out at us, you can see him daydreaming about shoving us off the scaffolding.

Don't care about him, though.

“What do you mean, rich girls like that? She’s an assistant, that’s all.”

Jimmy shakes his head slowly, like he’s breaking terrible news at my bedside. “She’s Hattworth’s niece. Lenore.”

Lenore. Her name is pretty as hell, and I tuck that knowledge somewhere down in my rib cage. Even as my gut sinks.

She’s that jerk’s niece? That’s a blow, and no doubt about it.

But if Jimmy knows she’s off limits, why ask me about her? Why test me like that? Fuck.

When I round on him, the back of my neck is tight. I’ve never scrapped on a job before, but right now I’m as close as I’ve ever got to slinging a punch at work.

“So why are you sniffing after her, Jimmy? Why are you asking questions about Lenore at all?”

He rolls his rheumy eyes. Jimmy’s been doing this longer than any of the rest of us, and he’s got the stooped back to prove it. Won’t take an ounce of our nonsense either, even if I am the boss. “For you, you prick. You’re the one eye-fucking her through the glass like there’s no tomorrow.”

Ah. Yeah. Guilty as charged. And there’s no call to blow up at Jimmy, not really, so I roll my neck and get back to work. “Sorry,” I mutter. “Guess she’s rattled me.”

“No kidding.” He scratches the sandpaper stubble on his chin, and I know I’m gonna hate his next words before he even

says them. The breeze is cold today, its icy fingers slipping under our clothes.

“You know, Gabe... sometimes rich girls want to walk on the wild side. Just for a one-time thing, you know? They get their pretty clothes all creased and dirty with someone like us, and it’s like a vacation they go on so they can tell all their friends about it.”

My chest throbs, and sweat is cold on my skin. Chilling me to my bones.

But Lenore would never gossip about me like that. No way.

“So maybe you could do that for her,” Jimmy goes on. “You could scratch that itch, if you like. Let loose. Why not? Just as long as you don’t go... getting attached. Getting hurt. You hear me?”

As far as Jimmy goes, this is an epic speech. He doesn’t drop his wisdom very often, but when he does, it lands with a clang. My mouth twists, and I bite back all the acid words on my tongue, because they’re not meant for him. Not really.

It’s me I’m mad at. Me, for getting caught up in those pretty rich girl eyes and not knowing I was walking into a trap. My reflection in the window glass looks equal parts pissed off and bewildered. If we were doomed from the start, why did looking at her feel so right?

Knew I had to stay away. I’d already decided that, damn it.

Nothing’s changed. Now I’m just extra sure.

“It’s nothing,” I say gruffly, and bless this man, he nods like he believes me. “We were just staring at each other, like you said. Doesn’t mean anything. Not a big deal.”

Liar, a voice hisses in my brain. *It means a whole lot.*

And the whole time, my heart thumps out her name: *Lenore. Lenore. Lenore.*

“Better stop looking at her, then.” Jimmy leans next to my shoulder, prodding at the stonework below the guttering. “Damn, look at this stone. This is crumblier than a birthday cake.”

“Yeah.” We’ve got our work cut out for us still, and she’s gonna be in there the whole time. Watching.

Will it hurt her feelings if I stop playing along? Will she hate me for that?

Lenore.

Christ, what a mess I’ve made. But Jimmy’s right—I never should’ve looked at her at all.

Some things aren’t meant to be.

Three

Lenore



It's 3pm on Thursday afternoon and Gabe Dempsey has barely looked at me all week. Gone is the man who smirked at me through the window, his dimples so deep I could see them across the room. Gone is the man who held my gaze as he swigged from a stainless steel water bottle, his throat working as he drank, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and winked.

I'm empty. Hollow. Cold to the tips of my toes. Stumbling through day after endless day in this beige hellhole, now with only my fashion sketches in the first drawer of my desk to make me feel alive.

Of course, I can't let *Gabe* see that. Can't show how badly his sudden rejection has hurt me. If he doesn't want to play anymore, if he's pushing me away, just like my own freaking family does, then... fine. That's his call.

He probably doesn't even know my name. Doesn't know the first thing about me, and it's my own fault for getting so

weirdly attached to a handsome stranger. Who *does* that, anyway?

Whatever. One day soon I'll graduate and take off across the country, no more ties, no more stuffy family rules, and I'll start over somewhere completely fresh to build a life of my own. A life with color and music and friends and delicious food. A life where no one huffs at me if I eat something fattening, and where no one rolls their eyes when I walk in wearing a brand new dress I designed.

Had I started to picture Gabe Dempsey alongside me in that nightly fantasy?

Ugh. Yes.

But will I let this latest rejection break me?

No, sir. Even if my chest stings like crazy.

"I spy, with my little eye... something beginning with 'm'."

Rhonda from payroll leans her hip against the kitchen counter, dunking a chamomile tea bag in her steaming mug. Her purple hair has been straightened mercilessly into a jaw-length bob, and her false nails have spiky tips. She smirks out of the break room window, eyes sharp, as young, strong construction workers climb up and down the scaffolding out there.

God. My fingers itch to snatch the glasses off her nose and break them in two. I huff and hope to god I never looked like *that* when I was playing my don't-blink-first game with Gabe.

Like a hungry lion licking her chops. Hypocritical, I know, but I can't help it.

It felt different with Gabe. Special.

Mutual.

You know, until he stopped looking at me at all. Now I feel like a complete creep, my cheeks constantly hot with shame.

“M?” My brain is slow today, the gears rusty in my skull, but I force myself to play along as I peer out of the window. “Metal? Mallets? Uh. Men?”

Rhonda's smirk widens even further. “Man candy,” she says, dunking that tea bag over and over and over.

Gross. My chair scuffs back over the linoleum, and I snatch up my own lukewarm coffee. Better to hide on the top floor and look anywhere except the window, than sit here and listen to *this*. If she drools over Gabe like that, I'm gonna yank out my own hair.

I'm being unreasonable, I know. Rhonda's not really hurting anyone, and lord knows I can't talk, but...

I don't want her looking at Gabe like that. Like he's nothing but a piece of meat. It's driving me crazy.

And I'm so ashamed. As I trudge to the elevator, swilling my stale instant coffee in my mug, I wish I could go back and redo the last few weeks.

I shouldn't have stared at him like that. Shouldn't have magicked up some deep connection between us in my brain,

kidding myself that he liked me too.

Should have kept my head down, done my stupid work, and never looked out of the window.

Now I'm no better than Rhonda. Bleurgh.

The elevator doors slide open on the eighth floor, and I'm greeted by my makeshift prison cell. It's sparse and stifling hot, the heating always cranked on full, even on sunny days like today. It smells like the burning dust that cooks on the radiators. The same dried-out plants lie dead in their pots, a soulless landscape painting hangs on the wall, and a bluebottle hums and headbutts the ceiling.

"You and me both, pal," I mutter, shuffling to my desk. The chair squeals as I sit down, rocking madly on its broken wheel, and I've never felt less inspired in my life. Never felt so drab, so trapped, so hopeless. When will it end?

When my family decides I've atoned for my sins, I guess.

So: never.

As I bring up Uncle Roderick's schedule for next week on the monitor, I do *not* look out the window. I can take a freaking hint, and I'm already sick with all the shame sloshing around my belly. I'm never gonna stare at Gabe Dempsey again. I've learned my lesson.

So I've got no warning when the elevator pings, then grinds its doors open. No one ever comes up to this floor if they can help it, because, you know. Uncle Roderick is a petty blowhard.

Glancing up from my desk, all the air rushes from my body. The clock tick-tocks on the wall, and my pulse thrums in my wrists, and meanwhile, I've turned to stone, staring wide-eyed at the man strolling toward me.

"Hey, beautiful." He grins.

And... holy crap. I thought Gabe Dempsey was a powerful sight when he was *out there*, safely separated by stone walls and glass. In here, only a few steps away...

I can't breathe. Can't move. My tongue is glued to the roof of my mouth, and I'm squeezing my chewed-up pencil so hard the wood creaks.

His tan work boots thud against the floor, and Gabe pushes his windswept hair back as he approaches, though it immediately falls over his forehead again. There's a smear of dirt on his left cheekbone, and his red flannel shirt is clouded with dust. His green eyes root me to the spot easier than if he'd lassoed me and tied me to the chair.

"The boss wants a progress report. Is he ready for me?"

Right. Duh.

Gabe's here for work reasons, not to see *me*. It's stupid thoughts like that which got me so crushed in the first place. I duck my head and click around the screen, even though my vision's gone all blurry.

"Um," I say. "Let me just check."

I can do this. I can be normal with the man who broke my heart without ever saying a single word to me.

“Thanks, Lenore.”

Gabe Dempsey knows my name? How?

And if he knows my name, why did he call me *beautiful* just now? Is he messing with me? Or does he flirt with everyone?

A low voice floats through Uncle Roderick’s office door, finally registering with my frazzled brain. It’s half a conversation, and by the way he’s droning on in there, Uncle Roderick is warming up for a full lecture. The sound of his own voice is my uncle’s favorite thing in the whole world.

“Would you like to take a seat?” I say through numb lips. Can’t look at those steady green eyes, so I address Gabe’s shirt collar instead. One side’s gotten flipped up by the wind, and now that I’ve noticed it, I can’t look away. “He’s on the phone in there, and that could be a while. You’d better make yourself comfortable.”

There’s a long pause as Gabe Dempsey peers around the room, looking for the chair I’ve just stupidly offered. Nothing. Nada. There’s nowhere for him to sit at all, not unless he fancies hopping up on the ancient photocopier in the corner and making copies of his perfect butt.

My cheeks burn. “Oh.” Is this one of Uncle Roderick’s shitty power plays? Bet he read about it in some awful business book. *Assert dominance by hiding all the chairs!* “Sorry. You can take mine—”

I rocket to my feet, chair spinning out behind me, right as Gabe holds up a palm and says, “Forget it, gorgeous. It’s fine.”

Gorgeous. Beautiful. If he stays here much longer, what else might he call me?

At least we’re both standing now. Gabe Dempsey is taller than me, much taller, but he’s not looming like he was. Without thinking, I reach across the desk and flip his folded-up collar down, smoothing the warm fabric with my palm.

He’s so sturdy under those clothes. Like his chest is made of carved stonework too.

Oof. What am I doing?

I go to snatch my hand back, but Gabe catches my wrist. He waits for me to meet his gaze, then raises one eyebrow.

His smile is slow and teasing, like before. Like it was before he started acting like I don’t exist. My insides quiver, even as my heart gives a pang.

The callused pad of his thumb circles my pulse point. Green eyes bore into me, hungry and tense behind the smile, and I can’t bear how hot and cold this man blows. How impossible he is to follow.

“Why did you stop?” I blurt, flushing impossibly redder. “Why won’t you look at me anymore? Did I... did I do something wrong?”

All his humor drains away, and Gabe shakes his head slowly. He’s solemn now, dragging in a deep breath like he

needs to shore himself up, but he's still holding my wrist. Still tracing circles over my pulse point.

And something tugs low in my belly, because that's his *hand*. Big and warm and dry. Gabe Dempsey's flesh and blood hand, with nicks and scars and calluses, gripping my bare skin. Holding me carefully, like something precious.

My nipples harden beneath today's purple blouse. Standing this close together in this hot, airless room, I can smell the fresh air on his clothes. The brick dust and car exhaust from outside; the crisp October bonfire smell.

And beneath that... sweat. Soap. Male musk.

I swallow.

"You did nothing wrong." His voice is deep, with the faint accent that you hear in the city docks and the rowdiest bars. Gabe Dempsey was born in this city—born and bred, native in a way that I'll never be, even though I grew up here too. "Never think that, okay? I loved our game, Lenore. I just can't play anymore, that's all."

His mouth twists, and he frowns as he watches me, willing me to understand.

I *don't* understand, not at all, but I'm not about to force my attention on someone who doesn't want it. That's jerk behavior.

Gabe makes a low noise when I tug my wrist free—like I kicked him in the gut. I'm back to staring at his collar, though it's all fixed now.

“If you’d rather go back outside, Mr Dempsey, I could signal one of your men once my uncle is ready for you.”

Another grunt, and Gabe sounds *pained*, like this stiffness and distance between us feels all wrong to him too. As unnatural as a dog playing piano.

“Is that what you want, beautiful?” The question rasps out of his throat, even though unlike most of his workers, Gabe’s not a smoker. I noticed, obviously. I noticed everything about this man; studied him like it was my full time job. “Want me to go wait outside?”

My shrug is robotic. Gabe gusts out a long breath, then rounds the desk in three strides.

I blink up at him, startled, as he tucks my hair behind my ear, cupping my elbow with his other hand. And he’s closer now, close enough for me to feel the warmth of his body, close enough to make all the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end. He’s touching me.

And that pull between my legs is getting worse by the second; I’m *aching* down there. My body’s crying out for this man, even as my heart harrumphs and turns away.

He didn’t want you, idiot.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you before.” Gabe speaks quick and low, one eye on my uncle’s office door. His dark blonde hair is all messy from the wind. “I loved our game, okay? Loved having you watch me, baby. But girls like you and guys like me... we don’t match. Everyone knows that. And I couldn’t

stand being a one time thing for you; couldn't stand just being a game you play when you're bored."

I raise my chin, heart galloping, and even though there's no hope here—I want to set the record straight. Let it be known that *I* was all in, different backgrounds or no. I may be a Hattworth, but I've never been a snob.

"Who says it would be one time? Who says it was a game?" *Ass*, I add silently, but he definitely hears that too. Gabe's mouth tugs up at the corner, and he steps all the way in so that our bodies brush together.

"Oh?" He's less tense now, the stress bleeding from his frame. "So you're not trying to walk on the wild side?"

Um. No?

I've never walked on *any* side before, but I don't point that out. The last thing this man needs to hear right now is that I'm looking for him to swipe my v-card. He'd probably jump out of the window, James Bond style.

Instead, I wrinkle my nose up at him, tugging my elbow free. "You stopped playing, mister. You don't get to tap back in whenever you like."

"No?"

"Nope."

"That's harsh. What if I messed up?" Gabe ducks his head, running the cold tip of his nose along my jaw, laughing when I suck in a breath. "What if I want a do-over?"

“Th-that’s too bad.” My words are strict, but the way I’m melting against him, clutching two fists of his shirt, gives me away. My whole body’s on fire for him right now, quivering and cooking under my clothes—and I’m so glad he’s talking to me. So glad he’s looking at me again. The last few days have been the loneliest of my life. “You had your chance, but you didn’t want me.”

Gabe scoffs, nuzzling my earlobe. “Like *hell*—”

A few muffled steps is all our warning, then Uncle Roderick’s door slams open. We’ve already sprung apart, both red faced and breathing hard, but he doesn’t even notice how close we’re standing or how ruffled we are. He’s too busy waving his visitor inside, scowling down at his wristwatch like he’s too important to even look Gabe in the eye.

A thousand harsh words line up on my tongue, but I bite them back and sink back into my desk chair. Gabe Dempsey doesn’t need me to fight his battles—and definitely not against a complete dweeb like Uncle Roderick. It’s not even worth his time. He’s smarter, stronger, and more capable than my uncle will ever be, and *we* both know it. That’s what counts.

The builder turns back right before the office door closes, taunting me with a sexy grin.

I spend the next twenty minutes floating somewhere up near the ceiling.

Four

Gabe



The game is back on, but it's not like before. Lenore's cagey. She doubts me, and it's plain to see, because she'll get lost in the moment looking at me—then drag her eyes away and get back to her work. Never did that before.

That perfect girl thinks that I'm gonna turn cold on her again, refusing to look in her direction, and it keeps her from sinking all the way into our connection like she did last time.

Fuck, I hate that I let Jimmy's warning get in my head. Hate that I ruined this. Why didn't I trust that this is something special?

But I have to believe we can fix this if I'm gonna stay sane; have to think we'll get past this bump in the road. Lenore is cautious now. That's fine. That's smart.

All it means is that I need to work harder to get her comfortable with me again.

“Thank Christ for the weekend,” Jimmy grumbles beside me, scraping moss out of a stone rose's petals. “This week has sucked the life outta me. Did you know Brenda's on nights

again? We've barely seen each other. Honestly, I'm forgetting what she looks like."

As if. Jimmy's more devoted to his wife than any man I've ever known, and there's no way he'd forget Brenda. He keeps a picture of her folded in his top shirt pocket, the photo paper all droopy from where he's handled it so much.

Makes sense that he's agitating for Friday to be over already, if it means more time with his wife. Hell, all of our crew are chomping at the bit, ready to burst off site at the end of their shift and head straight to the bars, the greyhound tracks, the homes of their favorite girls and guys. Whatever their chosen ways to blow off steam, there's only a few hours left of the workweek standing in their way.

Me? I wish I could slow the clocks, even though it makes me selfish. Not sure I can stomach two whole days without Lenore.

It was different before, when I hadn't seen her up close. Sure, I missed her, my insides all buzzy with agitation until I laid eyes on her again—but it was more abstract. Like going crazy waiting for an episode of my favorite TV show.

This is torture. Now that I've seen her up close, touched her warm skin, heard her voice, breathed in her scent... I barely slept a wink last night. Just kept tossing and turning all night long, before giving up and jerking my cock raw to the memory of her. Over and over again, until my back was slick with sweat and my abs ached worse than the devil. My hand practically cramped into that telltale claw shape.

Yeah. I'm a mess.

But what does my girl do on the weekends? Where does she go when she's not here? She doesn't have a man—that much I'm sure of, because Lenore's not the type to let her eyes stray. That certainty is deep in my bones. But does she have friends? Hobbies? Hopes and dreams?

Can't believe I know so little about her.

Need to spend more time with my angel; need to get to know her properly. But it's easier said than done when I'm out here and she's in there, and there's more than some crumbly stonework and double glazed windows standing between us.

I can't exactly march through her uncle's business and ask for her number with him on the other side of that door. Not when that prick already gives her such a hard time.

“Boss,” Jimmy says, like he's been trying to get my attention for a while.

I shake myself. “Yeah?”

“That girl in there. Lenore.” My neck turns hot, but I keep my eyes fixed on the tools in my hands as he talks. “Something's changed. She's been looking at you again.”

I grunt and raise one shoulder in a shrug—because yeah, things have changed. Yesterday, I met my girl in person, and today I'm brand new.

“People look at people,” I say. “It happens.”

“Not like this.” Jimmy coughs, all blustery and strained, and shakes his head. Wish he’d quit those cigarettes, but if Brenda’s nagging falls on deaf ears, mine definitely won’t help. “I warned you, okay, boss? Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

A muscle tics in my jaw. “Yeah, I heard. Now drop it.”

And there’s no need to bite my second’s head off, no need for the way my muscles tense on my bones, because Jimmy’s just trying to look out for me. That’s all.

He’s got a son only a few years younger than me, and last year that son got turned inside out over some rich girl who dropped him like a hot potato. Broke the poor guy’s heart, and had him slumped over Jimmy and Brenda’s kitchen table for months, nursing the bottle. Took him forever to climb back out of that glass. I remember that drama.

Doesn’t mean I’m doomed to the same fate.

This is different. *Lenore’s* different.

I trust that now.

Jimmy huffs and stomps back to the scaffolding ladder, offended by my tone, and I curse under my breath as I keep working. It’s easy to ruffle that old man’s feathers, and hard to smooth them back down again. Still, I won’t hear any more talk like that about Lenore—not from my second in command, and not from anybody.

She’s not some nameless, faceless rich girl he can pin all his son’s troubles on.

She’s *mine*.

Still, he can't resist one final parting shot as he steps onto the ladder, scarred hands gripping the metal. "Hope you know what you're doing, boss."

* * *

I'm so wound up by goddamn Jimmy's goddamn lecture that I don't even notice the end of shift come and go. One moment I'm at the top of the scaffolding, surrounded by the ring of hammers on metal and the pound and scrape of stone—then I'm alone. Nothing but the moaning wind and the creak of the scaffolding for company.

The sky is lavender, blushing pink close to the horizon, and the puffs of cloud up there are tinted gold. I hardly ever work into the evenings, not unless we're falling behind, but tonight I sniff once and keep going.

What do I have to rush home for, exactly? A hot shower and clean clothes, sure. The food in the fridge, and a cold bottle of beer with beads of condensation clinging to the glass. Yeah. Maybe a decent game if I can scrounge one up on the sports channel.

That all sounds good, but it's nothing so urgent that I'm ready to leave right this second, not while I'm still tensed up and buzzing. Not when I've got buckets of agitation to sweat out.

Goddamn Jimmy.

It takes me an embarrassingly long time to realize I'm not alone after all. As I climb up and down the scaffolding levels,

fetching tools and shifting supplies, I pass level after level of dark, empty windows. The office crowd has shut up and gone home. But when I get back to the eighth floor, my scowl reflected in the glass—I freeze, staring past my own shocked image.

There's a lamp on in there, the glow spilling across the office floor. And *Lenore*—lying on her front, propped on her elbows, with her heels kicked up behind. She's chewing on her pencil, frowning down at the pages and pages of sketches she's got scattered across the carpet.

Swallowing hard, I squint through the shadowed office, looking for light seeping through her uncle's doorway.

Nothing. She's all alone.

We're all alone.

Fuck.

Somehow, somehow, despite being so sure about this girl, it never occurred to me that we'd ever be alone. That we could say whatever we wanted to each other without fear of interruption; *do* whatever we wanted to each other. Doesn't seem real.

Numb, I raise one fist and rap on the glass. Lenore startles so badly, she flings her pencil across the room, and when she gapes up at me, her mouth makes a perfect 'o'.

I grin.

She melts with relief, rolling her eyes.

She's so cute as she rolls onto her hands and knees, pushing to her feet. She goes to fetch her pencil, picking bits of fluff off the soggy end with a look of distaste before strolling back to her sketches.

Lenore kneels down again, sitting back on her heels. She places the pencil carefully on the nearest sketch, then watches me expectantly, her palms on her thighs.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I go and place my tools carefully in the box nailed to the workbench up here. Then I come and stand right by the glass, staring inside as daylight fades all around me.

It's cold tonight. Hell, it's cold every night with winter just around the corner, but the wind has real teeth when you're up this high. And I'm dressed only in a gray work shirt and jeans, my toes going numb in my tan boots, but I won't step away for anything. Not now.

Lenore presses her lips together. Even through the glass and across the room, I see every micro-movement. Every shiver and twitch. It's like I'm zoomed in on her, tuned to her frequency, as the rest of the world fades away.

Cars rumble past in the street, one driver leaning on their horn. Red leaves shiver on the trees below.

"Hey, baby." I say the words out loud like an idiot, but Lenore must lip read or something, because she beams at me.

"Hi," she mouths back.

She's dressed in a long sleeved dress today, made from a thick, clingy fabric that comes down to her mid-thigh. It's black and white, checkered like a chessboard. Her dark hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, and her thick eyeliner makes her look extra feline. Like Cleopatra.

She's gorgeous. So perfect it makes my insides sing. That girl is a walking work of art, and no one else seems to have noticed.

Well, people are idiots. Their loss.

My heart thunders as I spread one hand over the chilled glass. Can Lenore see how badly I want to touch her? How much I *need* her already, even though we only spoke for the first time yesterday?

If I climbed down the scaffolding and rode the elevator up through the office, would Lenore welcome me with open arms? Let me kiss her, touch her, rub all over her body until our scents mingled together?

Or would it break this delicate spell we've woven between us? I can't risk it.

"Stand up," I say, jerking my chin to illustrate. Maybe she can hear my voice, muffled by the glass, or maybe she just gets me. Either way, Lenore wobbles to her feet, smoothing her dress down her thighs.

She's wearing plain black flats with gold buckles on the toes. I nod at them and she kicks them off without hesitation, her bare feet so delicate on the ugly brown carpet.

Her eyes are bright with excitement, her cheeks flushed pink. That perfect chest rises and falls beneath her clingy dress, and Christ, I might not survive this. Might just die of a heart attack, right up here on the eighth floor, when all she's done is kick off her shoes.

“Spin,” I say, circling one finger in the air, and sure enough, Lenore turns for me on the spot. Nice and slow and teasing, watching me with those fever-bright eyes over her shoulder. Giving me a show; letting me see her from all angles.

My hand balls into a fist where it rests on the glass.

Her laugh is silent, but I *see* it. See her chest hitch and the sound burst past her lips. A chuckle rumbles out of me too, warming my chest on the way through.

When she turns all the way back to face me, I'm lost for a moment. Because what else can I ask of her? What else can I mime through the glass? A hundred things leap to mind, of course they do, but I'd never demand them of my angel. Not without warning; not after only one day. I'd rather cut off my own ear than scare this girl away.

But when I hesitate, when I take too long to give another order, Lenore goes rogue. She takes matters into her own mischievous hands, gathering the hem of her dress an inch higher. An inch higher. Then another inch, the fabric gathered slowly into her grip.

My tortured groan echoes across the rooftops.

Lenore smiles, and it's like being scorched by a ray of sunshine.

She drags the dress up slowly, slowly, the fabric brushing over every dip and curve of her body, and my heart stops beating when she tugs it over her head, then drops it into an unceremonious pile by her feet.

I don't hear the dress hit the floor, but I see the sketches lifted and tossed, fluttering away on invisible air currents. Bet that dress is warm to the touch. Bet it smells like her.

Lenore watches me, dressed in nothing but a yellow lace bra and matching panties. The lamplight paints her skin gold, casts strange shadows across one side of her body, and I can't look away. Can't even blink.

My heart lurches back to life, thudding painfully against my ribs. The icy wind tugs at my hair, flaps my shirt against my body, but I don't feel it anymore.

I'm burning up out here. Burning alive.

A single fingertip coasts across her collarbone, the nail painted emerald green. It swoops down, down, tracing a line across the center of Lenore's chest, and my neck is stiff as I wheel around, checking there are no nosy neighbors who can see my girl right now. No late office workers or bored renters in their apartments, staring at Lenore instead of their TV screens.

Nope. We're pretty high up here, and the nearest windows are all dark, or have their curtains drawn against the cold

evening. She's safe.

All mine.

I turn back to the window, cock pressing so hard against my fly that my zipper's gonna leave one long, slender bruise.

While I wasn't looking, Lenore lost the bra altogether. Now she's standing there, almost completely bare, with those puffy nipples and that creamy skin and that happy, blissed out smile—like this is a dream come true for her, too. Like she loves our shared moments as much as I do.

It's jarring how innocent she seems, even standing in a shadowed office in nothing but yellow lace panties. When she mouths my name, cupping her own breasts, she's so fucking sweet.

Her eyebrows pinch together as she rubs and squeezes. As she pinches and twists and kneads, working herself up for my eyes and my eyes alone, her thighs restless as they rub together.

My breath fogs the glass. If I get any closer, my nose is gonna squish to the side.

I rap harshly on the window.

“Show me,” I grit out, too low for her to hear. But Lenore knows what I want, and one palm trails southward over her taut stomach.

When she cups her own mound, I squeeze my length through my jeans. Not enough to get off—just enough to hold this raging hunger at bay. Just enough to see straight.

Lenore's eyes go round as she sees me touching myself.

Well, the feeling is mutual, because I can't look away. Can't breathe, can't swallow, can't even think. All I can do is watch, helpless and enthralled, palming my own bulge as Lenore slides her panties to the side and flashes me the tiniest glimpse of the new center of my world.

She's shaved. Tight and wet. Don't ask me how I know, but I *know*, surer than I know my own name. If I slid a single finger in there, she'd buck and moan, riding the ridges of my knuckles. She'd cling to my wrist and beg me for release.

And I'd give it to her, too, but not before I worked her into a sweaty, breathless heap. Not until she begged, tossing that silky dark hair everywhere, calling me by my name.

Lenore bites her lip against a smile, like she can see the overheated slideshow playing in my brain, and traces a circle over her clit. Her hips rock forward, chasing her own touch.

And hell. What I'd give to be in that room right now, hearing every shaky breath—every slick sound between her legs. What I'd give to slide those panties down her thighs, and drop to my knees in front of her, and lick her so deep her head spun.

She's going faster now, lips bitten, fingers busy between her legs. Her mouth drops open, and Lenore holds my gaze as she rubs and rubs and—

Her stomach tenses. Her eyes slam closed, leg muscles twitching, and though seeing her come like this is a miracle, a

perfect gift in a broken world, it takes everything in me not to pound on the glass and demand that she *look* at me again. That she lets me see her fall apart, with agonized pleasure washing through those big, brown eyes. With her eyes closed like this, I'm shut out in the cold.

Lenore comes back to herself slowly. She blinks around herself, dazed, at her clothes, her sketches... and me. Staring at her like a madman from the darkness outside, one hand gripped around my bulge like I want to tear it clean off.

Her eyes go wide.

Then she's scrambling for her clothes and running away, slamming the door to her uncle's office behind her. I call her name and knock on the glass, I wait and wait, but she doesn't come out again. It's just me out here and the icy gusts of wind.

Lenore wants me gone.

Such a giddy high, then this crashing low. A monster headache squeezes my temples, and I scrub one hand down my face.

I thought she liked it. Thought we both wanted this.

What have I done?

Five

Lenore



I spend the whole weekend crawling out of my skin. Jittery as hell, with a knee constantly bouncing or my lip chewed between my teeth. I just—I can't believe I did that. Can't believe that was even me back there, stripping off in my Uncle Roderick's office and touching myself for a builder to watch through the glass.

But not just any builder. Gabe.

The man who calls me *beautiful*. The man who makes my heart pinball around my chest with a single heated glance. The blue collar man of my dreams.

Still, it's like nothing I've ever done before, and I'm still half-convinced it was all a fever dream: that I fell asleep slumped at my desk, drooling on the scratched wood, and cooked up that crazy interaction in the depths of my sleeping lizard brain.

There's no other explanation. Right?

Except it happened. I know it did, because when I finally stumbled home to my studio apartment, my freaking dress was

on backward, and there was a sticky glaze on my inner thighs.

So: I stripped for Gabe.

Touched myself. Teased us both.

Did he like it? He *seemed* to like it... before I ran out like a lunatic, anyway. He pounded on the glass for what felt like hours, knocking and calling my name, his faint voice taut with worry out there. So even if he liked the initial show, he's surely gone off me after that meltdown.

Crap.

The whole weekend, I bargain with myself. Argue in my head. Tell myself things like: *If he ignores you again, you can change your name and move to Mexico. But you need to see him at least once first. Suck it up.*

But how can I ever go back there? How can I ever look Gabe in the eye again? Forget family punishments and timed served in the beige prison; if I see that man and he looks at me with pity, I'm going to howl like a banshee.

Back and forth it goes.

I can't wait to see him again; I hope Monday never comes.

That was the hottest thing ever; I must have looked like such a fool.

He didn't ask for my number, but he *did* pound on the glass and call for me until his voice went hoarse.

Hmm. It's a dilemma, alright.

I scrub every inch of my apartment until it sparkles and then rearrange my closet, but nothing takes my mind off Gabe. Not even sewing late into the night on Sunday, trying desperately to catch up with my college workload, doing what I can with hand-stitching and my cheap portable sewing machine.

Teasing eyes drift through my brain. Somehow, the buttons I'm adding to this A-line skirt change to be emerald green, just like Gabe's eyes. Even in my fashion designs, I'm not safe.

"Lord," I say at last, squinting up at the ceiling around midnight, the pinstripe waistcoat I'm working on draped over my lap. The only light in my apartment comes from a desk lamp, arranged on the bookshelf behind me to shine over my shoulder. My place is so small, it still lights up most of the room. "Please let tomorrow not suck. I'm counting on ya, big guy."

* * *

The building crew gets here an hour before the office workers, and instinct tells me Gabe is always the first. That's why I'm here at the ass crack of dawn on Monday morning, clutching a thermos of blackberry tea and hovering by the stone steps that lead up to our building. Counting backward from one hundred under my breath and trying not to panic.

Scrubby lawn fills the gap between the building and the sidewalk, dotted with a few gnarled trees. Their branches are half-bare, the final red and gold leaves clinging on for dear life, fluttered by the wind.

Pigeons peck in the grass, feathers puffed up against the cold. I blow on my tea, stomach churning, but it's too hot to sip. Too hot to do anything except grip my thermos like a lifeline.

Gabe is coming. He'll be here any moment.

But what if he doesn't come? What if he's so horrified by what I did that he refuses to step foot on this site ever again? Gah!

I'm saved from spiraling even deeper by the sight of Gabe rounding the corner, scuffed work boots thudding against the sidewalk.

His strong shoulders are hunched against the cold, a thick padded jacket zipped up to his chin. When he sees me, his eyebrows bounce up his forehead, and Gabe straightens, yanking his hands out of his pockets.

His steps slow as he comes closer. I fidget inside my blue pea coat, so nervous I can't speak.

Gabe looks tired. Dark shadows cling beneath his eyes, and his cheekbones are starker somehow than a few days ago. When he smiles at me, it's cautious.

“Hey, beautiful.”

My breath leaves me in a whoosh. I give him a wobbly smile back. “Hey.”

Nailed it so far. Who knows? Maybe this won't be the most awkward interaction of my whole life.

But Gabe comes to a stop in front of me, winces and says, “About Friday night...”

So that’s that. Kill me now. Bash my head in with a spade and bury me under that sycamore.

One look at my stricken expression and Gabe groans, digging the heel of one palm into his eye. He shakes his head, looking so miserable. “I shouldn’t have done it, baby. Shouldn’t have pressured you like that. You just looked so beautiful in there and it seemed like you were into it too, and... fuck, I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

He got carried away? Gabriel Dempsey got carried away?

I’m the one who sucked two fingers into her mouth then slid them inside her body, holding eye contact the whole time. I’m the one who came harder than a freight train.

My throat aches as I clear it. My tongue feels extra heavy as I force it to form words. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who’s sorry, okay? I shouldn’t have done that, and I definitely shouldn’t have freaked out after.”

Gabe looks so miserable standing there, the wind tugging his dark blond hair. His mouth has turned down at the corners, and his eyes seem one thousand years old.

“I liked it,” I offer, in case he got the wrong idea about that. “I... I *really* liked it.” It was the single hottest moment of my life so far—not that there’s a ton of competition. “But then

I remembered where I was, and that you weren't all that sure about me anyway, and I freaked out."

Ran away like my hair was on fire. Real classy.

"Not sure?" Gabe's frowning now, like he's pissed off—but not with me. With the world at large. "You think I'm not sure about you?"

Well. Yeah.

Fiddling with my coat sleeves, I squint over Gabe's shoulder at the early morning commuters hurrying past on the sidewalk. There aren't that many of them, and they're too far away to hear us talking, but still...

Will I ever be alone with this man? Truly alone, and in the same room? Seems like an impossible dream.

"It's not a criticism," I say carefully, picking my words, because it's totally fine that Gabe's not head-over-heels yet like I am. He barely knows me. "I just mean that—"

"You're wrong." Gabe steps closer and takes both my wrists in his hands. He places them firmly on his chest, like he's planting a tiny flag with my face on it. "I'm sure about you, Lenore. Dead sure."

He is? "You are?"

"Yes. And seeing you tease me like that on Friday night was the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen. Don't doubt that, baby. The only thing I didn't like—the *only* thing—was seeing you run away from me afterward all upset."

Is he real? I stare at this man, the early morning sunshine shining gold in his hair. As he speaks, his plush mouth draws my eye.

“Please don’t do that again, okay? Don’t run away from me, Lenore. I can’t bear it. Spent the whole weekend wanting to slam my head against a wall.”

My breathy laugh is snatched away by the wind. Gabe sags with relief, the gaunt look on his face fading away.

Already he looks healthier again. Happy and smiling; less tired. A broad-shouldered Adonis in worn jeans and tan boots, staring down at me like I’m the best thing he’s ever seen.

“So, will you give me your number?”

His question makes fireworks explode in my tummy. I nod and fumble Gabe’s phone when he passes it to me, already unlocked. It’s an older model, scratched and battered, and the thought flickers across my brain that no man my family picked out for me would ever have this phone. My Hattworth-approved suitors always have the latest iPhone, without a single scratch on it.

Just shows that the Hattworths don’t know shit. There are more important things in life than money and power—like the way Gabe grins at me when I send myself a text from his phone. It’s like the sun coming out six inches from my face. I’m warm down to my toes in their thick wool tights.

“Anyone here yet?” Gabe nods over my shoulder at the office building. I unlocked the front door, but that’s all. No one

else home.

“Nope.”

“Good.” With a quick glance over his shoulder at the thin crowds on the sidewalk, Gabe turns back around and cups the sides of my neck.

His fingers are cold. Shivers race down my spine, but the shock of cold isn't the only reason why. It's the hungry look on his face, the possessive glint in his eye, and the desperate way he kisses me square on the mouth.

My head tips back, bowed by the force of his kiss, and heat sears through my veins. There's a heavy throbbing low in my belly, and I grip his shirt and give as good as I get.

Lips. Teeth. Tongue.

Gabe holds nothing back. Not the pleased rumble in his chest when I kiss him back, nor the hard ridge pressing against my belly. He kisses me until my head spins, hot and hard and endless, and when we break apart panting, he grins.

I blink, unsteady on my feet.

The whole world looks brand new. The sun is brighter; the sky pinker than before. Even the frosty wind smells clean and fresh, like peppermint.

“Think about that kiss next time you doubt me, Lenore.” Gabe presses the pad of his thumb against my bottom lip, sliding it gently inside my mouth. He grunts when I suck, tongue swirling around his thick knuckle, and when he draws it back out, he swipes wetness over both my lips. “Think how

goddamn starving I am for you. How I'd do anything to get my hands on you again."

Hands. Mouth. I want *all* of him, and I want more than stolen moments next time.

"Text me," I say. "Prove it."

Gabe's smile is full apex predator. "I will. Keep your phone close, baby."

Six

Gabe



We don't allow phones up on the scaffolding. Nothing that could slip out of someone's pocket and hit a passerby on the ground; nothing to add more risk than necessary. So I'm not glued to my phone the way I want to be, texting Lenore every ten seconds, but I get to know her a little on my breaks. My thumbs cramp from texting her so much during those minutes, trying to cram time with Lenore into every possible second.

She's a fashion student. As soon as she tells me that, all the puzzle pieces click together: those sketches, her kooky dresses, the way she's like a vibrant peacock surrounded by gray doves. Lenore is so *alive*, brimming with warmth and passion, and clothes design makes perfect sense as her dream.

She likes rollerblading through the city parks in the summer, and knitting wonky hats and scarves in wintertime. Lenore's favorite food is Thai green curry, and her comfort movie is *Clueless*. She says the fashion in that movie is unmatched, even after all these years.

I'll have to coax her into watching it with me someday. Letting me draw her legs into my lap on the sofa, a bowl of popcorn wedged between us, so she can point out her favorite outfits on the screen.

Just the thought of that—of being so *domestic* with her—is like a roundhouse punch to my chest. Want that so goddamn badly.

Not just Lenore's naughty side—though I'm hungry for that too, especially since she teased me to hell and back on Friday. But her sleepy moments; her rushed mornings; her lazy weekends. Want to see if she gets hangry while I cook her dinner. Whether she'll steal bites of the ingredients while I stir.

On my lunch break, I pluck up the courage to ask why she's *here*. In this boring office with these boring people, instead of working on her designs. Fair enough if she needs the money, but isn't her family loaded?

Lenore sends back a grumpy emoji and a link to a local news article. It's coverage of a student fashion show—the college's summer catwalk where the students show off their best designs. I take a huge bite of cheese sandwich as I skim-read the article, searching for Lenore's name, and I find it in the caption for a photo.

Lenore Hattworth models her own lingerie design.

A lump of bread sticks in my throat.

“Easy, tiger,” Jimmy mutters as he walks past the bench where I walked out for my lunch, thumping on my back as I

cough into my fist. He's still acting pissy with me, but the old bastard cares.

I swallow, eyes tearing, and zoom in on the photo on my phone. Jimmy's footsteps fade as he walks away, a paper bag with his own lunch swinging by his side.

Shit. Why have I kept this ancient phone for so long? The screen is terrible, all cracked and blurry, and I never once cared about that until this minute. Lenore's long limbs are wasted on this screen; her taut stomach and perky tits deserve nothing less than high definition.

My phone buzzes in my hands. *My model dropped out at the last second so I filled in*, Lenore's text says. *This is my punishment. My family acts like I starred in a porno.*

Now there's an image I don't need right now. Swigging from the stainless steel bottle of water by my hip, I stare up at the clouds and will my body to calm the hell down.

You should warn a man before sending photos like that, I tell her. *Nearly had a heart attack over here.*

In a good way? :)

In a very fucking good way. Do you still have that lingerie? Would you wear it for me?

It's too much, too soon, but I can't help myself. Lenore sent me that article, knowing full well there's a photo of her in nothing but three wisps of white lace. I bite down on my fist as I wait for her reply, so riled up that I could sprint twenty blocks. Could swing from the scaffolding like Tarzan.

So you like it, then? she says.

Hell yeah.

I like all her clothes. Everything she's ever worn. As far as I'm concerned, if Lenore Hattworth touched it, it's pure gold.

Then I'll wear it for you. Extra points if you can take it off with your teeth. :)))

This woman will be the death of me.

* * *

Texting is one thing, but getting Lenore alone again is another. Turns out that she's already working all hours in the day, staying up late each night sewing, just trying to keep up with her college workload. Her family must know they've made her life a million times harder, especially with her winter show coming up, but I guess they don't care.

Assholes. Dangling my girl's education over her head like that, making her dance on their strings.

Well, it's bullshit. But I can't fix it for her, not unless Lenore brings it to me herself.

She lets me come over to her apartment on Wednesday night, on the strict instruction that she needs to *work*. No distractions allowed.

Fine by me. I bring take-out bags stuffed full of her favorite Thai food, snoop through her bookshelves after we've eaten, then keep her hydrated with glasses of water and mugs of blackberry tea as she works on her designs.

Lenore keeps smiling over at me sadly; keeps apologizing every time I get up to make her a new drink, but that's because she doesn't get it yet.

I don't need her to entertain me. Don't need her always *on*.

Hanging out in her presence is enough. It's a balm to my world-weary soul.

Besides, I like just being here, flipping through the paperbacks from her shelf. Like seeing where she lives, grinning up at the embroidered Turkish carpet she's got mounted above her bed. As she sews away, muttering under her breath, I run my fingertips over the retro bead curtain that separates her kitchen area from the rest of the living space, breathing in her spiced vanilla scent.

It's comfortable. Sure, my body's aching with how badly I want her, but I can tamp that down. And when I do, I get something even better—that warm, calm feeling that we belong. That I'm exactly where I need to be.

When Lenore starts to flag around 10pm, I get up and bake her chewy ginger cookies. Maybe a little sugar rush will help, and hey, these hands are good for more than laying roof tile.

"I'm sorry," she moans for the millionth time when I emerge from the kitchen, falling on the plate of warm cookies like a starving hyena. "You must be so bored, Gabe. I'm not always like this, I swear."

Can't help grinning as Lenore stuffs a whole cookie in her cheek like a hamster. She blinks up at me, bug-eyed, like she's

just remembered I can see her. “Shit,” Lenore says quietly, then tries to chew like a fancy lady with fancy manners. Too late for that.

I collapse onto the sofa next to her, biting into my own cookie. “I’m not bored. I like being around you, gorgeous, whatever you’re doing.”

Her cheeks turn pink, still stuffed full of ginger cookie, and I mentally pat myself on the back. It’s all true, obviously, but god, I love making Lenore blush. She reddens for me so easily.

“I’m basically done with this skirt,” she says, covering her mouth with one hand. “We could take a break together.”

“Oh yeah?” I’m already sliding to the floor, shuffling my knees across the rug. Elbowing her legs apart and settling in front of her, palms on her thighs.

Lenore stares at me, wide-eyed and trembling, and swallows down the last of her cookie with a gulp. Each breath stirs her chest beneath the green silk shirt she’s wearing, the buttons pulling across her perfect tits. Her sewing is gripped in her lap, forgotten.

“Want me to make you feel good, Lenore?”

She nods slowly. I nudge her knees wider with a grin.

And fuck, I love how she melts for me, sighing back into the sofa cushions. Love how her legs flop apart, flashing me a shameless peek at the triangle of white lace between her

thighs, and how that blush climbs up her throat, her lips already red and bitten.

Lenore tosses the bundled sewing aside. She grips my wrists, stroking both hands up my arms, all the way to the hard muscle of my shoulders. Her brown eyes are clear, hungry. Determined. Like she's relishing this as much as I am.

"Are these what I think they are?" I jerk my chin at that sliver of white lace beneath her skirt. She's wearing a black cord skirt that rumples up her thighs, and white ankle socks. This whole outfit is killing me.

"Uh-huh." Lenore presses her lips against a smile, lifting her hips so I can push her skirt all the way up. It bunches around her waist, thick and ungainly, and somehow that sight gets me hotter than if she'd stripped bare right away.

A full body shiver rolls through Lenore as I stroke my palms up her thighs.

My thumb flirts with the edge of those white lace panties, the ones from that photo. The ones from that fashion show where she walked the catwalk, looking like a sultry angel; the panties that she promised to wear for me, with extra points if I took them off with my teeth.

Well, Gabe Dempsey never backs down from a challenge.

I lean forward, floorboards creaking beneath my weight. Lenore whimpers as I gust out a hot breath against the wet patch already forming there, and Christ, I can *smell* her. Sweet

and salty, with her own special musk. The air is warmer here, humid between her thighs, and I never want to leave.

I lick her once, dragging the flat of my tongue across damp lace. Already, she tastes better than any cookie.

Lenore hiccups, squirming on the sofa cushions, her fingernails digging into my shoulders.

I focus on those ten points of mild pain as I lick her again. And I don't mind that she's clawing me like that, no way—I *like* it. It's cold, hard proof that Lenore's as messed up by this crazy connection between us as I am.

“Good girl,” I say, voice muffled by her panties. “That’s it. Let me have a taste.” When I suck her through the fabric, she *wails*, legs kicking up to rest over my shoulders. And those heels dig into my back, urging me on, as I bite down gingerly on the lace.

Don't want to rip her work. Don't want to hurt her either, so I'm extra careful as I tug with my teeth, sliding my hands under Lenore's ass to lift her from the sofa cushions. The panties come down her thighs easily enough, sticking to the wetness at her entrance for one long moment before finally peeling away.

I don't tug them down far. Don't have that kind of patience in me. As soon as they're midway down her thighs, lace stretched between her limbs, I dive back in for another taste of Lenore.

She's slicker than sin, so swollen and needy. Her tight little body *begs* for me as I growl, rubbing my whole damn face between her legs, nose nudging her clit as I lick inside her. Plunging my tongue in and out, showing what I want to do to her with other parts of my body.

It's so good. So much. I eat my girl like I'm a man on death row and she's my last meal. I *ravage* her, and Lenore clings to my shoulders the whole time, bucking and moaning, grinding against my face with abandon. The backs of her knees are sweating into my shirt.

So goddamn perfect.

So goddamn sweet.

Need to taste her like this every day of my life. Any morning I don't leave the house with Lenore's tang on my tongue is a waste of time. An abject failure.

Her phone rings, jammed somewhere deep in the sofa cushions. We both ignore it, too busy wrestling, my head crammed between soft thighs. Those ten pin pricks in my shoulders make my gut clench, and I shove one hand down to my lap, pressing down on my bulge *hard*.

"Leave it," Lenore gasps when her phone stops, then starts to ring again. "Oh my god, leave it."

No fear. I wouldn't stop now if a meteor struck. Wouldn't pause for breath even if I was bleeding out on the floor.

When she comes, her belly tenses, her whole body locking up. And it's just like she showed me last Friday night—eyelids

fluttering down, breath coming in short gasps, her hips rolling against my mouth, demanding every last scrap of sensation.

Lenore is a goddess. I'd live on my knees for her if I could, bringing her off like this every damn day.

She's flushed tomato-red when she finally nudges me away, groaning deep in her throat. I rock back on my heels, legs going numb beneath me, and grin at my girl.

She smiles back, oddly shy after what we just shared.

And when her phone starts up again, she rolls her eyes and digs between the sofa cushions, a frown creasing her forehead.

"One second," she whispers, before picking up and standing on wobbly feet. "Hello? Dad?" Lenore ducks into the kitchen, murmuring into the phone.

The Hattworths, then. Bitterness tastes sour in my mouth, and I press down harder on the rock-solid bulge under my jeans, willing it to go away. And you know, I feel like kind of an idiot, kneeling here for my girl on numb legs while she hides from me in the kitchen. While she tries not to let her dad hear me down the phone. Should shake these feelings off, but the longer she stays away, the more they settle in my gut.

My bones creak as I push to stand with a sigh.

And what would her family say if they knew about this? Their little Lenore dating a man with brick dust on his shirts. They'd be horrified, no doubt about it. Their snooty noses would all go straight in the air.

Does Lenore care about that? Care what her family thinks of me?

She's been in that kitchen a long time.

I wait five more minutes, but the phone call drags on. With each passing second, my heart sinks. She's not coming back out to me—not anytime soon.

Maybe I'm kidding myself here. Maybe she's still not sure.

I let myself back out into the frosty night air.

Seven

Lenore



I feel like the world's biggest jerk on Thursday morning, hurrying out of the elevator on the eighth floor, already short of breath. Gabe's out there on the scaffolding, working alone on the top level, and I fling my bag and coat at the desk without slowing down, then beeline over to the windows.

They're old and heavy, hardly ever opened, but with some sweating and cursing I push one open enough to talk.

Gabe crouches by the opening, one eyebrow raised. His boots are level with the window sill, half his body revealed and half behind glass.

"Morning, gorgeous."

If he's mad at me for taking that phone call, he doesn't show it. Even though it was horribly rude, and I've been kicking myself for it all night, hoping and praying that I haven't offended the one man whose opinion I care about.

"Hi. Listen, I'm so sorry about last night."

Gabe shrugs, but his smile is more cautious than yesterday's. Crap. "No worries, Lenore. You gotta do what

you gotta do.”

Except I *don't* need to answer my family's phone calls at all hours—that's the annoying thing. And that's what I was trying to explain to my dad last night in my kitchen, arguing round and round with him in circles, because as far as he's concerned, I'm still a wayward child.

Should have just hung up and gone back out to Gabe. Or, no—should never have picked up in the first place. Should have switched my phone off, tossed it on the coffee table, then coaxed this handsome builder into trading places.

Him on the sofa.

Me on my knees.

That's how last night *should* have gone.

Instead I let two decades of the Hattworth conditioning override all my natural instincts, and I let down my new favorite person in the whole world. My dad didn't even listen, anyway. He never does.

“I wish I could take it back.” My smile is wobbly. “Seems like I keep messing up with you.”

Gabe frowns, the cold wind out there flapping his black work shirt against his body. He shakes his head, green eyes fixed on mine. “Not possible, baby.” His words are muffled by the window pane. “It's okay if it takes us a minute to find our rhythm. We're brand new.”

Yeah, we are. And when he smiles at me again, broad and warm this time, the knot of tension loosens in my chest.

Screwing up my courage, I stick my hand through the open window. Gabe reaches down and takes it immediately, knotting our fingers together and giving them a gentle squeeze.

“We’re good,” he says.

No one ever reassures me like this. I could cry.

“Next time it’s your turn,” I promise. “That’s twice now that I’ve—um. You know. And you haven’t.”

“Haven’t what, exactly? Not sure I follow.” Gabe tilts his head out there, grinning. His eyes glitter, teasing me.

And I open my mouth to say god knows what, but Uncle Roderick’s office door slams open behind me.

“Three minutes late *again*, Lenore,” my uncle says. “It’s unacce—oh.”

The temperature plummets in our stuffy office. I turn my head slowly, stomach already cramping with nerves, but I don’t let go of Gabe’s hand. I’m clinging on like he’s my lifeline in a storm.

Uncle Roderick’s face is puce, his expression thunderous. His mean eyes flit between me and Gabe, me and Gabe, before landing on our joined hands.

My uncle sucks in a deep breath, chest lifting. Like he’s about to yell the roof down.

And all the while: “Shit.” Gabe curses quietly out on the scaffolding, then finally lets go of my hand to shove the

window open wider. He crawls through boots-first, grimacing as the back of his shirt drags over the scaffolding floor, then hops lightly onto the brown carpet beside me. Surprisingly agile with all that muscle.

I step close. So close our arms press together, then grab his perfect, callused hand once more.

Gabe leans down and murmurs my name, pressing a reassuring kiss to my temple. “However you want to handle this,” he says, so quiet only we can hear as my uncle bristles at that kiss. “That’s how we’ll handle this. Okay, gorgeous?”

Okay.

Yeah.

Handling this.

Oh my god. My family are gonna freak.

But... they freak about everything I do, no matter how small and harmless. They’re impossible to please. And even if I could ever make them happy, which I seriously doubt... would I give up Gabe Dempsey to do it?

No way, no how.

“Uncle Roderick,” I say, coughing to clear my tight throat. “You, um. You’ve met Gabe—”

“*Gabe.*” My uncle spits the name, his face getting redder by the second. He shakes his head slowly, breathing hard, then glares directly at me. Writes Gabe out of his universe, as easily as that. “*A builder.* Really, Lenore?”

Gabe stiffens beside me, and it's my turn to squeeze his hand. "Yes," I say, proud at how firm my voice is. "Really."

"But he's—"

"The best man I've ever met." My smile is strained, because out of all my relatives I could have had this showdown with, I would never have picked Uncle Roderick. He's always been such a jerk, and he never listens to a word I say. "I'm lucky to be with him."

Gabe makes a soft noise of disagreement, but now isn't the time for him to argue. Uncle Roderick already thinks I'm above my gorgeous builder, purely because of my last name. And they're both so wrong, it's laughable.

"Your parents will never agree to this—"

"Good thing I'm not asking." I raise my chin, and I hope to god I look braver than I feel right now. There's a line of sweat trickling down my spine beneath my fuzzy white sweater. "I'm twenty two years old, Uncle Roderick. I don't need a permission slip to date whoever I want. And I want Gabe."

I flash the man beside me a nervous smile. He stares back, green eyes boring into mine... and when we look at each other, I swear the rest of the world melts away.

All the bullshit and blustering. The beige walls and stale dusty smell of this room. The stifling heat and my ranting uncle, droning on and on, his words washing over us like a stream tumbling over a creek bed.

Who cares what he's saying? It's definitely nonsense.

And my family has controlled me for far too long.

“Your college course,” Gabe mutters, because of course he’s thinking ahead like I am. “We shouldn’t risk your education.”

Chewing my bottom lip, I stare up at the man I’d risk it all for in a heartbeat. The man I *am* risking it all for, right this second, as my uncle stomps around and dials my father on the phone, getting ready to gang up on me as a family. Same as always.

“I could get a part time job,” I whisper. “One that actually pays me, unlike this. And with my savings... maybe...”

“You’ll live with me,” Gabe murmurs back, squeezing my hand. “So you won’t have to worry about rent or food or whatever. And I can help you out too, with the tuition. Let me help you, baby.”

Oh, god. That’s so intense after only a few dates; so much pressure for a new relationship. Does Gabe really want me that badly? Could we really make that work?

Can I take this leap of faith? Holy hell.

His gaze burns into me—urging me to be brave.

“I’ll pay you back,” I say quietly, my tummy swooping beneath my sweater. “One day.”

And Gabe beams at me, the corners of his eyes crinkling, his shoulders melting with relief. Hadn’t realized how tense he was until right this second, as all that strain bleeds away. He looks like he just won the multi-million dollar jackpot.

“I know you will.” Gabe leans down and brushes a kiss against my temple. “When you’re a big time fashion designer, jet setting around the world. You’ll take me with you, right?”

My heart thumps extra hard. “Always.”

So that’s that. We both turn back to my uncle, his phone held aloft so my dad can lecture and threaten us via speaker phone. *Hattworth reputation, family name, irresponsible behavior*, yada yada. Gabe grins along until my dad says something about how they’ve already picked out a fiancée for me, then his frown slams back down.

“We’re leaving.” He tugs on my hand, pulling me toward where I flung my bag and coat. “Don’t listen to that bullshit, baby. Don’t let it get in your head.”

He actually sounds worried, too, like I might be tempted away by this mystery banker my parents picked out. As if.

“Bye, Uncle Roderick,” I call, giddy that we’re actually doing this. We’re walking away from my family—together. Shrugging off the straitjacket I’ve worn my whole life. “See ya never.”

My uncle splutters. Gabe jabs the elevator button, tugging me against his chest. He runs his hands up and down my arms, face buried in my hair.

“I like this sweater,” he says, voice muffled. “It’s fluffy.”

I laugh. The elevator pings.

It’s not the most dramatic getaway. We walk out hand in hand, unhurried, neither of us having raised our voices once,

and go around the building to the scaffolding where Gabe calls up to Jimmy to finish the job. Says he'll waive the rest of his fee if the older man will help us out.

It's hard to see the guy all the way up there, silhouetted against the bright sky, but I make out a thumbs up.

"Done," Gabe says happily. "This is a good Thursday morning."

* * *

We make it three steps inside Gabe's apartment before I'm climbing him like a love-struck monkey. He's so tall and strong and sturdy, and seriously, whatever soap he uses has a direct line between my legs. Gah.

A laugh rumbles out of him, vibrating through my whole body, and Gabe grips my ass to hitch me higher. My legs wrap around his waist, and the floorboards creak under our shared weight as he walks.

"This is the entryway," he says, nodding at a neat line of coat hooks beside us. The floorboards here are smooth oak, and a vivid abstract painting hangs on the wall. The light dangling above has an industrial-style brass cage.

It's gorgeous. It's all gorgeous. Not beige at all.

I don't care. Too busy kissing Gabe's perfect neck.

"There's a bathroom through that door. And through here is the living area, with the TV and sofas and breakfast bar and

all that stuff. I knocked this wall through when I first bought this place. Made it all open plan.”

“Uh-huh.” Rocking against the hard line in Gabe’s jeans, I suppress a shiver. It’s sweet of him to give me this tour, but I sure wish he’d give me something *else* right now. Something long and thick, something prodding me in the hip—

“Do you like the walls?”

Rubbing my nose against Gabe’s five o’clock shadow, I pause. Do I what?

“The walls.” He jiggles me in his arms. “The sage color. Do you like them? We can repaint if you prefer.”

My breath bursts out in a huff, and I lean back in the builder’s strong arms. He smiles down at me, eyes teasing, and god, I *knew* he must be messing with me. Who can think about wall paint at a time like this? Not me, that’s for sure.

“Gabriel Dempsey,” I say, mustering up all the leftover Hattworth arrogance I can possibly manage. “Put me down this instant and let me suck your cock.”

His grin widens. There are those freaking dimples! God, they should be illegal.

“Is this how it’s gonna be, then, gorgeous?” He sets me down carefully, like I’m delicate. Precious. It’s so different to the way he slung around those heavy tools and building supplies back on that scaffolding, sweat slick on his neck, muscles bulging beneath his work shirt. “You bossing me around?”

Ha. “Nope.” My fingernails scratch their way down Gabe’s body as I kneel at his feet, trailing over flannel shirt, leather belt, worn jeans. Distantly, I register a thick rug beneath my knees. “I want *you* to do the bossing. Want to be your good girl.”

His smile is calm, but the pleased shudder that rolls through his muscles gives him away. “Yeah? Then start right here, baby.”

His big hands tug his belt open easily, the buckle clicking. Leather slithers apart and Gabe thumbs open the top button of his jeans, then stands patiently with his hands on his hips. He’s so tall and broad up there, looming over me with that hungry look in his eye.

My lips press together. The bulge pressing against the fly of Gabe’s jeans is... impressive. Intimidating.

“Just... don’t judge me by my first attempt, okay?” The zipper sticks halfway down, and I tug it harder, trying to breathe past the sudden rush of nerves. I’m dizzy with them—dizzy with fear and excitement and the bone-deep relief that *yes*, this is finally happening. We’re together, with no one about to walk in on us. No one to tear us apart again.

And how many times have I pictured this exact thing? Kneeling for Gabe and using my mouth and hands for his pleasure. *Worshipping* him with all the fervor he deserves. So many times.

In my daydreams, though, I was good at it. Now, I’m kinda lost.

“First attempt,” Gabe says quietly. His hands stroke over my hair, petting, soothing. “At everything? All of it?”

“Yeah.” My lip hurts, I bite down on it so hard. “Is that okay?”

The breath heaves out of him on a laugh. “It’s more than okay, Lenore. Your first time? Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh. So... you’re *all* mine.”

And he doesn’t sound upset about my inexperience, or put off at all. No, Gabe seems extra eager as I draw his hard length out of his boxers, his hips already twitching toward my mouth. The first tiny lick I give the head draws a hiss between his teeth.

“Fuck,” he grits out, tendons bulging on his forearms. His arms are back at his sides, those strong hands balled into fists. The knuckles are bone-white. “Do that again.”

Another lick. Another hiss.

He tastes salty and warm. I like it.

My fingers feel clumsy as I wrap them around his girth, and my thumb and fingertips don’t touch. Heat pulses low in my belly, and I squirm against my heels. Seriously? I’m gonna fit *this* inside me? How?

“Tug it,” Gabe grits out. “Work your hand up and down. Yeah, just like that. Don’t be shy about squeezing it, baby. Ah

fuck, you feel good. Look at your pretty little hand on me. Can barely hold it, can you?”

Every filthy mutter from Gabe makes me feel so precious and pretty. Like confetti is showering me along with the builder’s low curses and grunts.

His boot scrapes against the floor. His legs go wider, stomach heaving, thigh muscles rigid beneath his jeans. I know because I touch *all* of him with my free hand, everything I can reach, stroking and exploring my new territory.

Gabe Dempsey is *mine*. I licked him, so he’s mine.

And I’m never gonna give him up. I’m gonna be his pretty good girl forever.

“What’s given you that wicked smile, huh, Lenore? Look at that. Look at your lips curving around me, baby. Shit. Yeah, suck me deeper. See how far you can go.”

Who needs experience with a man this chatty? Gabe is more than happy to boss me around, to tell me exactly what he likes, and me? Well, I’m desperate to deliver.

His weight is heavy on my tongue. Smooth and thick and *right*. I hum around it, hollowing my cheeks, and Gabe lets out a long, low groan. His fingers tighten in my hair.

And I’m not an idiot—I know what comes next, and I’m ready to swallow every drop—but Gabe pulls out so suddenly I tumble forward. Then he yanks me to my feet, too wound up to be gentle.

“Shit. Sorry, baby, I just—Christ, I need to get inside you. Can’t see straight, Lenore. Can’t fucking think. Take those pants off for me, will you?”

He’s dragging me by the elbow, backing up toward the sofa, walking awkwardly with his jeans undone.

I wait until he collapses back onto the cushions, green eyes so hazy, then I step between his spread knees. Kick my ballet flats off, one by one, and flick my own jeans button open. They’re clingy and black, high waisted with a big brass button, and Gabe watches hungrily as I peel them down my thighs.

“The thong, too. Get it all off, sweetheart.”

My heart hammers against my ribs as I obey. And god, I’m so slick and swollen down there already, I whimper as the fabric peels away. As it drops to my ankles, tangled and forgotten, and I kick it to one side.

Gabe is sprawled over his brown leather sofa, shirt half buttoned, cock out. His dark blond hair is messy, and his cheeks are pink—like he’s been slapped.

“Come here,” he says, so hoarse, and pats his own lap. I pause only to yank my fluffy sweater over my head—too freaking hot for that—and peel off my vest top and bra, flinging them blindly over my shoulder.

Then I climb onto Gabe Dempsey’s lap, wearing nothing but a smile.

Eight

Gabe



I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die. Lenore's climbing into my lap, completely goddamn bare, her dusky pink nipples hard and pointing at me like arrows. And she's so small and tight, her little curves just begging to be cupped and squeezed, and she's smiling at me like that, and *Christ*.

Nothing could have prepared me for this. I'm gonna explode.

Not just my cock—my brain and heart too. I'm gonna splatter the walls. Mind blown.

Because Lenore's weight is so perfect on my lap. Her scent is in my nose—not just her shampoo, but the spiced vanilla scent of her bare skin, too. The faint musk between her legs, her dampness already soaking through my jeans; her silky brown hair sliding over her shoulders...

It's all too much.

I don't deserve a fraction of this—but god help me, I'm taking it anyway. Keeping *her*. If I lost her now, I think I'd go insane.

Those idiot Hattworths didn't know what a prize Lenore is. They didn't see how lucky they were to have her in their lives, to have her loyalty and care, and now they've lost it.

Works for me.

“Did you really mean that stuff about me living here?” Lenore worries her bottom lip with her teeth again, nibbling it until it's swollen and red. “You don't have to do that for me, Gabe. I know it's a lot.”

She deserves all that care and more. This angel deserves the moon on a platter.

“I meant it.” My hands are too rough in her hair, tugging her face to mine, but Lenore doesn't seem to mind. She moans against my mouth, kissing me back. Kissing me hard. “Don't you go leaving me now, gorgeous.” I nip her bottom lip too, right where she's made it all puffy. “We agreed, okay? You're *mine*.”

Her pleased shiver raises goosebumps under my clothes. And this is so much, so intense, but it's right too—the best thing I've ever felt in my whole damn life.

I'm not like those idiot Hattworths. I know a great thing when I see it.

And what the two of us have here? It's more than great. It's... destiny, or some shit. Never believed in that stuff before, but I'm converted now.

“What if I'm a terrible roommate, though? What if I leave the cap off the toothpaste? What if I leave damp towels on the

floor?” She’s teasing, gripping my cock again and stroking it. As if it needs bringing back to life—I’m so hard my teeth ache.

And she’s not just a *roommate*, but I’ll let that slide. For now.

I shrug. “Then I guess I’ll have to redden your pretty ass. See if it blushes up like the rest of you.”

Lenore’s laugh is throaty, and she shifts up onto her knees. Lines me up with her center, and holy hell, the heat coming off of her. The slickness. The draw.

Everything in me screams to thrust up, to spear her in one go and claim her forever, and it’s only my last few brain cells that keep my ass glued to the sofa. Sweat breaks out on my spine from the effort of staying put.

I will not rush this. Will never hurt her.

“Note to self,” she says, working the first inch inside. “Leave my towel on the floor every day.”

If that means I can put her over my knee and work her into a moaning puddle? Sure. Sign me up.

“This is nuts,” I can’t help saying as Lenore sinks down on me, inch by agonizing inch. It takes all her concentration, all her effort, her hips screwing down on me as she works herself open. My hands grip her hips, fingers digging into her soft flesh, and I can feel my pulse thudding inside her. “The way I feel about you? It’s nuts.”

“Likewise.” She pauses and tips her head back, catching her breath. Then hums and sinks the last few inches with a breathy sigh, already slicker by the minute.

And... I’m in.

Lenore scrunches her eyes shut and wriggles her ass against my lap, like she wants to feel me press against every corner in there. Like she’s testing the newfound limits of her body. “I guess as long as we’re both feeling like this, it’s okay?”

Is that a shred of doubt in her husky voice? Hell no.

“It’s more than okay.” Unbidden, my hands start to rock her, rolling her back and forth over my lap. Her broken moan is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard, because yeah, first times might be uncomfortable sometimes, but you’d better believe *hers* is gonna make her toes curl. “It’s a goddamn miracle, baby. Us feeling like this? Finding each other? We must have been stupid good in another life.”

She’s smiling again, eyes still closed, pretty chest heaving. Her arms loop around my neck and she’s so pliable, so trusting, letting me use her like a pretty little doll.

Leaning forward, I latch onto the spot where her shoulder meets her neck, sucking hard. My heartbeat’s booming in my ears, blood roaring through my veins, and every nerve ending in my body is pinging.

“Try bouncing. Try grinding. See what feels good, baby, then take what you need. Ride your man.”

Lenore gives another blissful sigh—like I’m reciting poetry—then her ass starts bouncing in my lap. Then grinding. Then screwing in little circles. Those soulful brown eyes flutter open and she watches me; stares into my eyes like she’s being doing since the very first day we laid eyes on each other, as she rides my shaft like a champ.

Her channel squeezes me, grips me, milks me in the sweetest torture.

I grit my teeth and hold off the wave building inside me with all my might.

“So beautiful,” I rasp. “Fuck, Lenore. I’m yours. Don’t ruin me, baby. Don’t throw me away after this, ‘cause I won’t survive it.”

“Never,” she promises, insides clamping down on me like her body’s agreeing too. “This is it for us, Gabe Dempsey. You’re *mine*.”

And Lenore comes with my thumb on her clit and my fist in her hair. With her nipples brushing against my half-open work shirt, the fabric clouded with dust, my belt buckle clinking with every single roll of her hips.

I’m not the man her family wanted for her. But then, they didn’t know her. At all.

And I’m the man who thrusts deep inside her and *claims* her, spurt after endless spurt.

* * *

Five years later

It's dark backstage. It'll never stop shocking me how dark and dusty and echoing it is backstage at these shows, especially compared to the throbbing music and hot, sparkly lights out front.

The first time I came back here at one of Lenore's shows, it pissed me off. Thought someone was messing with her, making her hide behind these thick black curtains in the shadows because she was new and inexperienced, or whatever. I was ready to grab some collars, shake a better attitude into whoever needed it.

But nope. Turns out even the greatest designers deal with the same spiders when they put on their fashion shows. And Lenore doesn't care at all, not one bit, because she's too busy holding her breath and peeking through the curtain, not blinking, as her designs parade up and down the catwalk.

"They like that one," she murmurs, reaching back to tug on my sleeve. "Gabe, they really like that one."

"Good," I say gruffly, even though if I'm honest, half these designs are beyond me. A mini dress made of chain mail? What use would that be in battle? But I sure as shit believe that these designs are genius, even if I don't get 'em, because they came from Lenore Dempsey's brain.

"This is going so well," she whispers, like she can't believe her luck. Even though every show she's done so far

has gone down a storm, and there's a great turnout tonight for this: the first show ever where she's the only designer. The main attraction. It's been a long time coming, and Lenore would tell you it's still not a huge deal, but *I* know. I see how hard she works.

If I were any prouder, I'd explode.

Sliding one palm around my wife's body, I cup the hard curve of her stomach. It's still barely noticeable when she wears these draping blouses, but you can feel it alright. Her baby bump. Our child growing inside her.

Five years ago, when we first got together, we got Lenore on birth control pretty quick. She had a college course to finish, a career to launch, and you bet your ass I was never going to be the obstacle in her way.

But a year ago, Lenore stopped taking her pill. Said she was ready for our next step.

And peeking over her head at the bright lights out there... well, it's barely slowed her down at all.

"I'll have to work less soon," Lenore murmurs, like she's reading my mind. I shrug, crowding closer against her back, and press a kiss to the back of her head.

"You'll need to rest, sure. Your body will need to recover, and you'll want to get to know our baby. But then you'll be back at it, gorgeous, more inspired than ever. And I'll help you with whatever you need, you know that. We always figure it out."

Her head tips back against my shoulder. I kiss her neck, rubbing circles over her bump, and my lips curve when I feel her big sigh.

“So I can keep my career?” Lenore whispers. “You promise?”

“I promise.” Whatever it takes. Even if that means hiring help, or winding down my own business to change nappies at home. Whatever my girl needs, that’s what she’ll get. I’m not an idiot. There’s no greater calling in my life than making this woman smile.

Maybe she’ll want to work less. Maybe she won’t.

Either way, I’m here to make it happen.

And maybe Lenore would’ve had more resources if she’d married some banker the Hattworths picked out; maybe she could afford a fancier car or a butler or whatever.

But no stupid banker would put her first. And we’re wealthy as fuck when it comes to love.

“Baby?”

She hums. “Yeah?”

“Wear that chain mail dress for me later.”

* * *

Thanks for reading I Spy! I hope you loved it. :)

For more unlikely soulmates, check out [Dared By My Roommate](#). *He's the last guy on earth I'd expect to live with. But we're both desperate for a roommate—so how bad could it be?*

And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

Teaser: Dared By My Roommate

Today is move-in day for my new roommate, which means a sleepless night beforehand for me, then three feverish hours scrubbing the apartment until it shines. I want to make a good impression, right? I *know* I'm not what most people want in a roommate, but hey—I'm clean and tidy, and I'll do my half of taking out the trash.

Hopefully that's enough.

God, please let it be enough. I don't want to put out another room ad.

Back home, my family used to tease me for being such a lurker. Keeping to my own room; moving around quietly at night. They called me the family poltergeist.

And that's when they were being *nice* about it. My brother pointedly sent me an article once about a murderer who lived in his victims' walls.

I'm not sure who was more relieved when I finally moved out of my parents' house to live here in the city—me or them. Don't get me wrong, I love my family, but after spending twenty years in the same house...

It was a lot. We all needed some space.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket, and I pause in scrubbing the kitchen sink, breathing hard with strands of blonde hair stuck to my forehead. It takes me a second to fumble my pink rubber glove off, and then I'm frowning down at a text from an unknown number.

Delete. That's my first instinct. Delete, block, stick my phone on airplane mode. Never let the universe bother me again. Except my thumb freezes over the screen, thank god, and sweat slides down my spine.

Because it's my new roommate.

Duh.

Five minutes away. Lincoln.

I stare at the name, my pulse thudding in my ears. I've never lived with a man before. My dad and brothers don't count. When I got Lincoln's message about the room, I nearly turned him down right away, but something stopped me. An instinct. A strange urge—no, a *need* to meet him.

But I was tipsy, and riding the sugar high of three bowls of ice cream. Not making good decisions, clearly.

My thumb shakes as I type out a quick reply, adding a smiley face and then deleting it before hitting send. Shoving the phone back in my jeans pocket, I tug off the other rubber glove, then stash my cleaning supplies under the sink, letting out slow, measured breaths the whole time.

It's fine. It's *fine*. My parents have Lincoln's details—if anything weird happens, if my mangled body turns up in a

sewer, they'll know who did it. This is a smart, reasonable decision. I am being financially responsible.

Ugh.

My stomach lurches as I leave the sparkling kitchen, and I'm not sure if it's nerves about meeting Lincoln or the memory of that stupid ice cream.

* * *

Lincoln is gorgeous. Fuck my life. I stare at the man unloading his bags from the trunk of a cab onto the sidewalk, my face frozen in a mask of dismay. Thick, dark hair shifts in the breeze and hangs over his forehead; keen gray eyes flick to me then away as he goes to pay the cab driver.

A black t-shirt hugs his strong chest and toned shoulders, the dye faded from wear and multiple washes. Vivid tattoos spill out from his sleeves, wrapping around his muscled arms, and reach all the way down to his wrists.

A camera bag is slung around his neck, and his worn jeans hug his ass. His brown leather boots are those no-nonsense type, the sort that could grind me under his heel.

The cab pulls away, and Lincoln turns to face me. Oh, boy. Here we go.

I clear my throat and make sure my tongue is in my mouth.

“Hi.” I know from our brief text exchange that Lincoln just got back from a work trip to the Sahara, but from my hoarse voice, *I* sound like the one with the terrible thirst. I raise a

hand, my fingertips still puckered from three hours in rubber gloves. Gross. “I’m Jenny.”

“Good to meet you, Jenny.”

Yikes, his voice is deep. There’s a roughness to it, too, like the growl of a motor engine, but Lincoln’s mouth quirks up as he shoulders his bags and scoops a large box off the sidewalk. He walks closer, holding it up like he’s presenting an offering, gray eyes sparkling with humor.

Even when he’s smiling, his eyebrows are pinched in a slight frown.

“This is for you.”

The breeze cools my cheeks as I crane my head, reading the words on the side. Cars rumble past in the street. “It’s a microwave.”

“So it is.”

A brand new, *heavy* microwave in a bulky box, balanced on the palm of his hand, no less. I reach for it, ready to carry it up the stairs since he’s already laden with bags, but Lincoln holds it over my head as if it weighs nothing. Damn.

I gnaw on my lip, watching his bicep bulge, and god, what is wrong with me? It’s like I’ve never seen a grown man before.

“Nope, I got it. Lead the way, Jenny.”

Right. I spin on my heel, cheeks flushing, and jog up the steps to my—to *our* building. The front door is open, and

Lincoln's steps are deceptively quiet as he follows me across the empty lobby. Like he's in stealth mode. Feeling his eyes on my back, I kinda wish I dressed in something nicer than jeans and a thin cream sweater today.

"The elevator doesn't work." I throw the words over my shoulder, eyes skating over my new roommate then away. He's too much to look at. Talk about overwhelm. "Sorry. But I can help with your bags—"

"I've got it."

Our shoes smack against the stairs, and my breaths come embarrassingly fast. Am I unfit, or am I just panting over my gorgeous new roommate?

Hard to tell.

But he's so *much*. His presence fills the narrow stairway; even without looking back at him, I'm hyper aware of his every movement. The rustle of his clothes and the deep, steady pull of his breaths; the masculine scent that fills my nose with each inhale.

Lincoln's not gasping for air. He might as well be strolling empty-handed down a sidewalk.

"This is us." I fumble with the key, my grip sweaty and numb, but he says nothing. Just waits behind me, piled high with bags. "I, um. The apartment isn't much." The door swings open, and I lead my new roommate inside, nerves gnawing at my ribs. "You'll see now why it's so cheap."

Lincoln's rough chuckle makes my belly tighten as he trails me through the cramped living room. "Relax, Jenny. It's just a place to crash."

No it's not. Not to me.

See, *out there* everything is too loud and brash and bright and overwhelming. Danger lurks on every corner, and people are so freaking mean. The world outside that apartment door is a gauntlet to be run, but in here...

It's quiet. Safe. *Mine*.

Mine, and now Lincoln's. Part of me wants to double check that he read all the requirements on my listing—that he won't throw parties or smoke or whatever—but I know that's crazy. What am I gonna do, throw him out when he's already here? And besides, he brought the microwave. He clearly read the ad.

"I won't be here for long."

My feet catch on the threadbare rug and I stumble, catching my balance at the last second. Is it really that bad? I peer around us with panicked eyes. Will I need to put out another freaking listing?

The sofa is lumpy, yeah, and the cushions are sagging. There's an old coffee stain on one arm from before I moved in. The coffee table is scuffed, and there's barely room to walk around the furniture before you're bumping into walls, and the sounds of the street are always loud, even in the middle of the night.

The other rooms are no better, either. But what happened to this only being a place to crash?

I hug my waist, turning to Lincoln. He's unhooking the bags from his shoulders, lowering them to the rug with a grimace and a sigh. Guess they were heavy, after all. "Um. I cleaned earlier, but I could go over the apartment again..."

"That's not it." My new roommate taps the camera bag still slung around his neck. "I never stay in one place, Jenny. Not for long."

"Oh."

Why is my stomach sinking like that? It's a pain to find another roommate, sure, but it's not *that* big of a deal. But from the way my insides are squirming, you'd think I desperately want this man to stay.

Two seconds, he's been here, and it's like I'm gonna sit on the floor, hug his strong thigh, and beg him not to go. I really need to get more sleep.

"I'll give you plenty of notice, though." Lincoln's frowning at me, visibly concerned as he tugs off the camera bag and sets it on the coffee table. "And I'll help you find another roommate. Relax, sweetheart."

Relax?

Sweetheart?

I sway toward him, hugging my waist tighter, like I've been yanked by an invisible string, but I don't get this. I don't get *any* of this.

I don't like people. Period. And I definitely don't like being around strange men. They're harsh and unpredictable. Untrustworthy and crude.

"I *am* relaxed," I rasp.

Lincoln's mouth quirks up on one side. His gray eyes say: *liar*.

"Please give me a full month's notice," I say then, snippy as hell, because it's that or melt into a muddle of confused, sad goo on the floor. It takes effort, but I turn on my heel and march out of the living room, because hey, it's a tiny apartment. He doesn't really need a tour.

No, Lincoln doesn't need *anything* from me, and he'll be gone soon anyway, stranger or not.

Damn it.

* * *

Check out [Dared By My Roommate!](#)

xxx



Cassie Mint

About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT insta-love with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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