

A  
Slow Burn  
Marriage of  
Inconvenience

I Almost  
DID

EVANGELINE WILLIAMS

*I Almost Do*

TRUST & TEQUILA BOOK ONE



EVANGELINE WILLIAMS



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Published by Evangeline Williams

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Edited by Kristin Scarce and Jamee Thumm/ Hot Tree Editing

cover by Getcovers

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Epilogue

Afterword

Acknowledgments

For Kurt.

You taught me what a real happily ever after feels like.

For Kurt.

You taught me what a real happily ever after feels like.

*Content Notes*

INCLUDES SPOILERS

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This work of fiction contains adult themes and language that is disturbing to some readers. They are as follows:

\*Swearing \*On-page consensual sexual intimacy using graphic language  
\*Alcohol consumption and intoxication \*Emesis \*Terminal illness and on-page death of a parent due to cancer \*Grief/mourning \*Reference to domestic violence, murder of a parent, and child abuse \*Codependence, and mental health issues \*Sexual Assault/Sexual Violence (does not occur between main characters) \*Depiction of violence, blood, and injury \*Off-page kidnapping of a child \*Off-page gun violence \*First aid emergency/surgery/hospitalization



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# *Playlist*

# *Playlist*

Dear Reader,

Did you guess the chapter titles for this novel came directly from a playlist? Then you're absolutely right. Every chapter title is also a song from that playlist.

Music has always helped me connect to characters and emotion, and I was really excited about the songs I've included in this playlist. They provide the soundtrack to Clarissa and James's story as I wrote it.

Listening to the playlist is not a requirement to enjoy the novel. However, if you're like me and enjoy music as an additional emotional connection, you can access an expanded playlist directly by logging into your Spotify account and entering "I Almost Do" into the search feature. Or you can enter individual song titles/artists into whatever music streaming service you prefer. You can listen to the playlist songs at any time: before, during, or after reading.

Lyrics should not be taken literally. Instead, they're about emotion and mood. The playlist is a vibe. Enjoy.

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# Playlist

That's My Girl | Fifth Harmony

Cruel Summer | Taylor Swift

Hurricane | Tommee Profitt/Fleurie

Easy On Me | Adele

Stand by Me | Ben E. King

Raise Your Glass | P!nk

Kiss Me | Sixpence None The Richer

Say You Won't Let Go | James Arthur

How Do I Say Goodbye | Dean Lewis

Carry You | Ruelle/Fleurie

Safe Place | RuthAnne

When The Party's Over | Billie Eilish

Good as Hell | Lizzo

This Is Me Trying | Taylor Swift

Brave | Sara Bareilles

Fall Into Me | Forest Blakk

Dangerous Woman | Ariana Grande

Don't Blame Me | Taylor Swift

Say You Love Me | Jessie Ware

Lost Without You | Freya Ridings

Peer Pressure | James Bay/Julia Michaels

I See Red | MymTaleto

Waking Up Slow | Gabrielle Aplin

Falling Like the Stars | James Arthur

Incomplete | James Bay

Naked | James Arthur

If You Need Me | Julia Michaels

I Don't Want to Lose You | Luca Fogale

Only Love Can Hurt Like This | Paloma Faith

Hurts Like Hell | Fleurie/Tommee Profitt

If the World Was Ending | JP Saxe/Julia Michaels

I Will Be | Florence + The Machine

Roots | Grace Davies

River | Bishop Briggs

You Make My Dreams | Tim Halperin

Incomplete | James Bay

Naked | James Arthur

If You Need Me | Julia Michaels

I Don't Want to Lose You | Luca Fogale

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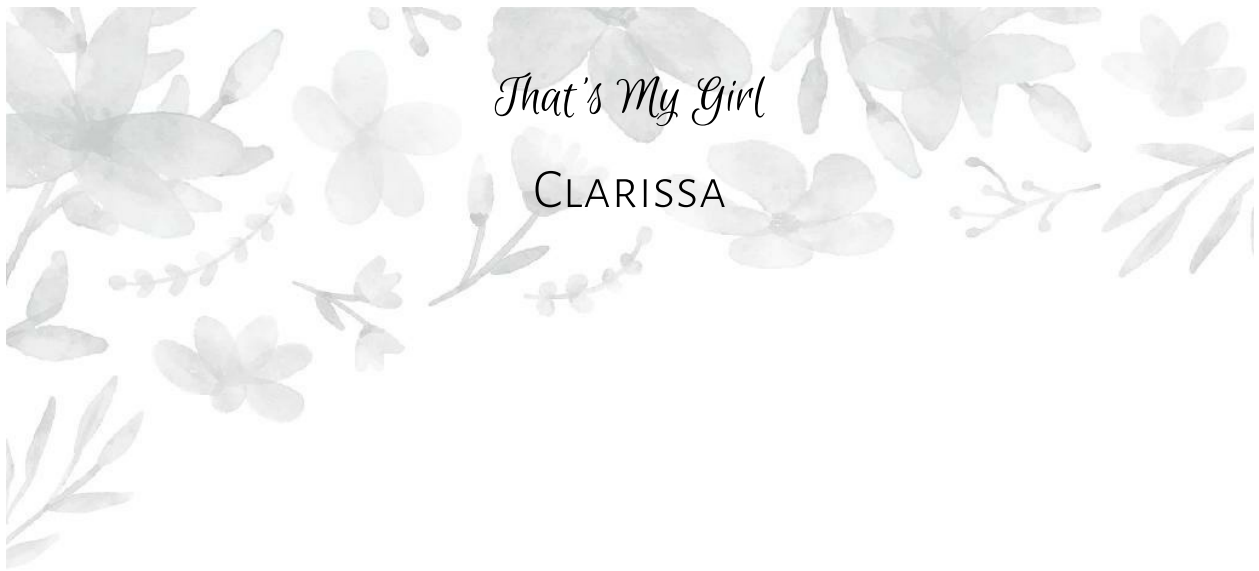
You Make My Dreams | Tim Halperin





*That's My Girl*

**CLARISSA**



*That's My Girl*

CLARISSA

## Present Day

In almost two and a half years of marriage, I've never been to my husband's apartment here in the city. And I have never been inside his office in the gleaming high-rise that boasts my maiden name in purple letters twenty feet tall.

I stand on the sidewalk, craning my neck to look up, and up. As if I somehow peer through concrete and steel to see what kind of receipt I might get. I rub sweaty palms on my pencil skirt and let the sea of pedestrians wash around me. I'm a boulder in a current, but I vibrate with a combination of nerves and hopeful excitement.

I wonder how he'll react when he sees the paperwork I've brought with me. I wonder if he'll smile and hold his arms out for a hug or if he'll give me that cold, hard stare he reserves for people he wants to step back in line.

Maybe he'll just give me that slow shake of his head and flat-out tell me no. James has never been afraid to let "No" act as a complete sentence.

Maybe he won't be here at all, off on one of his international business meetings.

Wouldn't that be a kick in the pants after all my planning? To have forgotten to confirm that he'd be here today?

I didn't try to go to his penthouse first. Security would never have let me in. They don't know me from Eve.

But I'm counting on some of the same security officers being here in my office from *before*. Before I married my dad's CFO. Before my father died. Back when I was a freckle-faced teenager who sprawled in her dad's

after school, doing homework, scrolling IG, and waiting until he was ready to take me home.

to my I've spent a lot of time waiting, but we're finally done.

James's I push through the revolving doors into the echoing space of the polished. Directly in front, beyond a wide expanse of marble floors, a double set of glass and steel looms. To the sides, groupings of modern furniture all hard lines and symmetry. The effect is softened by washes of warm light and living greenery. Soft music plays in the background. The air flows subtly expensive.

ation of I asked my father about that once. Why some buildings, like ours, are wonderful all the time. He told me small things matter. Visitors might actively notice the way The Harcourt Tower smells, but they often give me their subconscious feelings and impressions without even realizing it.

ea. For a while I thought there was a single employee traipsing from floor to floor, hiding until no one was watching, then stealth spritzing perfume like some kind of smell ninja.

business I was a little disappointed to learn the scent was pumped through the vents. Of course, I was six at the time. Now I'm an adult. And everything simply changed.

The structure of the building is the same, but the furniture, the curved front desk, the names on the sign next to the elevators, and yet the smell of the place are subtly different.

at the "Well, now! Here comes trouble!"

er died. Ah, yes, that old joke. I'd never been "trouble." Once upon a time I was the most docile, easy-to-please girl in the world. Until I wasn't.

I turn with a huge smile for my favorite security guard, Tony Moretti. His hair is now solidly gray, not the salt-and-pepper I remember.

ready to “Mr. Moretti, are you working hard or hardly working?”

His eyes twinkle. “You know how it is. Have to keep Eleanor in do  
oil paint.”

oyer. He takes me in with that Proud Papa grin and says, “You sure are  
taircasefor sore eyes. You haven’t been back in a long time.”

cluster, I give him a hug. “Too long. I don’t have a key card for the elev  
m lightnod at the gleaming silver doors. “Care to do the honors?”

smells He shoots a glance at the reception desk. I know what he’s thinki  
supposed to sign in. They’ll call up for permission and give me a ten  
s, smellkeyed ID.

ght not I bump him with my shoulder. “I want to surprise my husband.”

act on That’s the idea, anyway.

I see the quick calculations going on behind his eyes before he th  
floor tothe towel. I am Marcus Harcourt’s daughter and James Mellinger’s wi  
aroundall.

He swipes his card.

e vents. When I breeze past the outer executive offices and head strai  
ing hasJames’s door, Rebecca, visibly flustered, rises from behind her desk.

She’s one of his executive assistants. *The* executive assistant, if y  
e hugeher. She’s ruthlessly efficient, gorgeous, midthirties, and svelte, wi  
s, evenblonde hair that drops in a perfectly straight fall that could rival a ruler

She has a golden tan, as if she’s recently spent time in the sun. A  
freckle ever had the nerve to appear on her flawless face, she’d... Hor  
s, I washave no idea what she’d do. No freckle would ever have the audacity.

“Mrs. Mellinger, I thought you were—”

tti. His “In the Hamptons. I know. Surprise!” I say with a smile and waving

“I didn’t see you on the schedule—”

Her desk buzzes, and James's voice comes through loud and clear. "Did you make those calls to Lofton yet?"

She looks down, distracted, then presses a button on her desk. "It's the middle of the night in his time zone."

James grunts. "If he'd done his job yesterday, we wouldn't interrupt his beauty sleep now. Call him."

"Of course. Um, your wife is—"

I don't give her a chance to finish. In the time it took for the temporary conversation, I'd already slipped past her and pushed open James's door.

His chair is turned so he can admire the view from his enormous window tinted on the inside but mirrored from the outside. At the sound of the opening, he swivels back toward me in surprise.

"I see that," he says into his Bluetooth headset. "No interruption," he reaches for the headset, makes a show of removing it and turning it off.

He leans forward and laces his fingers together tightly on his desk to form a single fist. His knuckles are white.

No smile. No hug. My stomach lurches because this isn't the reception I expected. I thought he might be angry later, but not yet. Not before he asks me out.

I shut the door, then take off my jacket and lay it over the back of the chair.

Smoothing down my skirt, I fiddle nervously with my briefcase and peek at the manila folder inside.

I bought the briefcase specially for this occasion. Because briefcases are serious. Professional. *Competent*. It's still pretty and a bit feminine but *why not?* But it's also secure, because the last thing I need is the papers in this thing making it into the hands of the press before it's in my husband's hands.

I try to give James a tentative smile, but it stalls on my face at the hallway.

“Have expression on his. I wasn’t sure what to expect when I saw him for the first time in person in six months, but I know it wasn’t this nonreaction. Not yet. He stands, and the sight of him has my heart in my throat and my legs weak. And suddenly, I can’t believe I had the nerve to just show up here without calling ahead first. Without telling him about the lawyer. It seems like such a good idea when I planned this moment. I’d march in a parade as Babe Miss Independent. I’d show him how together I have my life. I don’t need him anymore.

But James isn’t giving me any reaction at all to go on. Is he pleased to see me, or would he just like to get this interruption over with so he can get back to the things he does in this fancy office, in the fancy building, with his father’s name lighting the New York City skyline? Did I misinterpret his letter?

James doesn’t smile. He just sends his burning blue gaze in a slow sweep from the top of my curly auburn head to my cute ruby ankle boots and back up again.

I should have worn black stilettos or at least a pair of pumps. But the gray pencil skirt, ivory button-down, and *briefcase* were as far as I was willing to go in my bid to convince my husband to take me seriously. I looked at those stupid stilettos and couldn’t do it. They were a bridge too far. Liking cute shoes that don’t hurt my feet doesn’t make me immature. It makes me fun and practical.

Looking at my husband, I’m struck again by just how utterly beautiful because James is. I don’t use that word lightly. He’s tall and fit, with a swimmer’s physique he keeps honed with hours spent in the pool. His hair is dark and wavy, just a touch of a wave to it. I drink him in like I’ve been in the desert, flat as a tall drink of water.

he first Like Rebecca, he has a bit of a tan right now too.

James is dressed in a bespoke suit that cost more than some people  
y kneesa car. His tie is off, though, and the top button of his shirt is unde  
like thismoves to sit on the edge of his desk and beckons me closer.

seemed My feet move before my brain gives them permission. And th  
ll Bossstanding in front of him, close enough that if he reaches out, he can tou

How IClose enough that I can smell the warm, familiar spice of his cologne  
enough to see the little dent in the center of his full lower lip.

l to see I stare at the tiny scar on his earlobe because that should be safe.  
go backlusts after earlobes. Except, apparently, me. *Damn it.* I want to touch h  
with myfingers practically vibrate with the need.

pret his The silence is stretching painfully between us. Involuntarily, I sneak  
at his eyes. He's watching my mouth. And there's something so tor  
w slideabout him that it hurts to look at.

nd back His lashes lift, and his gaze clashes with my own. He has on that  
expression he sometimes wears. His eyes burn like a blue flame,  
he slimmuscle twitches in his jaw.

; I was He looks so angry. But why? He doesn't even know I've been to a li  
sly. I'd James got a lot out of our arrangement in the end. He got a multi  
oo far. dollar corporation and a lot of money, at least. Though my father pr  
iture. It would have given him the company whether he married me or not. As  
once told me in biting tones, "Your father didn't buy me." But I guess  
eautifulgot a pretty big pain in the ass when he married me.

mmer's So I look at his ear again. Because that's so much easier than looki  
k, withthose burning eyes.

ert, and I'm not the only one who's paid a price for this dubious marriage. I  
him pain when he married me. Mostly inadvertently, but I still did it.



He's waiting for me to speak. But this moment feels too fragile  
pay forwards I carried with me up that elevator of glass and steel.

me. He He breaks the silence when it becomes painfully obvious that I  
going to stand there, staring at his gorgeous earlobe.

en I'm "You traveled all this way, Clarissa. It must be important for an in  
uch me.meeting without even calling ahead. What can I do for you?"

Close I swallow hard, and then I hold out the folder. "You can sign these p

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He's waiting for me to speak. But this moment feels too fragile for the words I carried with me up that elevator of glass and steel.

He breaks the silence when it becomes painfully obvious that I'm just going to stand there, staring at his gorgeous earlobe.

"You traveled all this way, Clarissa. It must be important for an in-person meeting without even calling ahead. What can I do for you?"

I swallow hard, and then I hold out the folder. "You can sign these papers."



*Cruel Summer*

CLARISSA



*Cruel Summer*

CLARISSA

## Two and a Half Years Ago

“SAY IT LIKE YOU mean it.” Bronwyn narrows her blue eyes, glaring at me through FaceTime.

I glance around my Brooklyn Heights brownstone bedroom, check for an audience I know isn't there.

“I...” I clear my throat.

“Clarissa, if you want to go away to school, you should go. Repeat after me: ‘Dad, I’m a twenty-year-old woman, and I want to go to college in Pennsylvania.’”

It’s true that I want to go away to school. Sometimes, as ungrateful as it sounds, I feel like I’m trapped here, living my life for another person. I want to make my own choices. Take some risks. Try something new.

But the idea of setting off my father’s anxiety pulls me up short even though I know he’s an amazing man. It’s not only me who thinks so. He’s been on the cover of *Time*, after all. But he’s also fragile in a way the rest of the world can’t understand.

“I can go my senior year,” I hedge. “I should keep commuting from home for now.”

“Pssh. At the rate you’re racking up credits, you’re not even going to need a senior year. You’ll graduate early.”

“What else am I supposed to do with myself? You and Franki and Mom are all gone. I have zero social life. Zero activities. School and writing are the only things I have besides my dad.”

“That’s all the more reason to get a life and grow a pair, Harcourt.”

“I’ve already brought it up, and he can’t handle it.”

“You were kidnapped by your own nanny *seventeen* years ago. You were only gone for three hours before they got you back without a scratch on your eyes,” Bronwyn says. “But then my mother died. It broke something in him. I can’t scare him. When I bring up going away, he looks so worried for heartbroken.”

“He was worried, so you didn’t go with my family to Europe. I was worried, so you didn’t play sports. Not even swim team, and you’re afraid to get fish in the water. He worries, so you don’t date, just in case the guy turns out to be Jack the Ripper or something. It’s pathological.”

“Mark my words—one of these days, you’re going to flip a switch and go viral as it is on some viral video having a meltdown. It’s better to ease into it now. Think of it as a controlled release.”

I gurgle in laughter at the ridiculous thought, throw myself back onto the bed, and land in a fluffy cloud of comforter.

I hold the phone above me, looking up at my blonde firecracker friend on the screen, my own image reflects back in the corner. And, for some reason, the contrast of my freckled complexion against the baby pink comforter makes me squirm. This entire bedroom is like sleeping in a cloud of cotton candy.

“He’s protective. He loves me, and I’m all he really has.”

She scoffs. “He has friends. Stop making your father sound pathetic.”

“Okay. I’ll bring it up at dinner,” I soothe, knowing full well I’ll be around it and back off at the first sign of trouble.

“Your dad’s fear rubbed off on you, too, even when your logical brain tells you it doesn’t make sense. It’s natural. You were raised by someone who was convinced the outside world is a constant threat. But you wouldn’t be

ou were I'd be there with you. And I know for damn sure he'd send your f  
n you." security detail. Nothing bad is going to happen to you."

re him, "It's not about something actually happening to me. He needs me.  
ed and be selfish and leave him alone."

"Who told you it would be selfish to live your own life?"

He was I'm saved from answering by a knock at the door.

e like a Turning my head, I call, "Come in."

irns out No one besides Dad or our housekeeper, Julia, ever comes up here.

a moment, my brain doesn't compute what I'm seeing when the door  
and end open.

reedom The man standing there is the absolute last person I expect to see

bedroom doorway. For a moment, I just lie there in stunned silence.

nto my This feels like some one-of-a-kind event. I want to point a fan at him

dark hair blows in the wind. Would he notice if I film him walking  
end. On me in slow-mo?

reason, Yes, of course he would. I've made the man uncomfortable enough

of the the years with my particular brand of hero worship. I've made a v

a vat of point of not giving away my ridiculous crush since his initial rejecti

avoidance of me—for both our sakes.

But here he is. The subject of my previous high school heart doodl

." youngest CFO in Harcourt's history and my dad's best friend...

I tiptoe Mellinger is in my bedroom.

I drop the phone onto my face with a squawk, and he lurches forth

in says the room as if he's about to reach for me. He stops about a foot from

who's and stuffs his hands in his pockets.

e alone. "Are you all right, Clare?" His voice is a little gruff.

I rub my cheekbone and climb out of my bed to stand, smoothing dc

reakingshirt as I go. I'm still dressed from a day of classes at Columbia.

"Fine," I say, praying I don't sound as breathy as I feel.

I can't Generally speaking, James rarely makes eye contact with me, choo focus somewhere around my hairline instead. At least that's been ti since I first tried to flirt with him at the age of sixteen.

I can hardly blame the guy for his reaction. He's never rude or disr but he's also, until this moment, been meticulously careful about neve So, foralone with me.

swings Good for him. I'm not even being sarcastic there. What else supposed to do when a teenager flirted with him? James isn't a creep. e in my But today he does look at me, if only briefly. His blue gaze darts cheekbone, then to my eyes in concern.

n so his "Do you need some ice?"

toward I shrug sheepishly. "I fall asleep holding my phone and do it all th No harm, no foul."

gh over He frowns, and I think for a moment he's about to deliver a lectur ery bignot using my phone in bed.

ion and Bronwyn howls through my phone, "Oh my God, is that *James M* in your bedroom?"

es. The I snatch up the phone, my cheekbones burning, and hang up on her. Jamesher forgiveness later.

James backs up toward the door, rubs the back of his neck, and says ner intofather sent me up to tell you dinner will be ready in half an hour."

the bed I glance back down at my phone. Sure enough, dinner is about to be at exactly the same time it always is. There's no logical reason message that I can understand.

own my I give him a confused but cheery thumbs-up. "I'll be there."



He stops for a moment. “Did you... already know about dinner?”

“I mean, it’s our standard dinner hour, so yes.”

osing to He pauses, frowning, before shifting gears. “I see. I’m sorry to in  
he case your phone call.” He gives me a sharp nod. “I’ll see you at dinner, Cla

And then he’s gone.

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He stops for a moment. “Did you... already know about dinner?”

“I mean, it’s our standard dinner hour, so yes.”

He pauses, frowning, before shifting gears. “I see. I’m sorry to interrupt your phone call.” He gives me a sharp nod. “I’ll see you at dinner, Clare.”

And then he’s gone.



*Hurricane*

JAMES



*Hurricane*

JAMES

**M**ARCUS HARCOURT IS UP to something. Which is nothing. He always is. Usually, however, it involves other people. Not me.

I'm sitting in one of his leather armchairs in his study, an ankle resting on the knee of the opposite leg, bourbon on ice held loosely in my hand. I haven't had a single drop. When Marcus Harcourt is up to something, it's best to keep your wits about you until his cards are all on the table.

He's standing near his fireplace mantle, a look on his craggy face that tells me he's struggling to determine the best way to start our conversation.

He looks... tired. I've never noticed that before. It's a mildly cool September, but he has the fireplace blazing and a cardigan thrown on over his button-down. Like it's February in Maine, and he's ready for an L.I. photoshoot.

I've been to his brownstone more times than I can count. Often it's just the two of us having a drink and shooting the shit. Or it's a quiet dinner with Marcus and his daughter, Clare.

He's been a widower since she was four. He could have remarried a dozen points since then. Women still throw themselves at him.

I asked once why he'd never remarried, and he just shook his head. He said, "If you ever loved a woman like my Ellie, you wouldn't ask for anything else. It wouldn't be fair to anyone else. They'd always be in second place."

Marcus plays favorites. Always has. Always will.

It's just my dumb good luck that I caught his attention as a greasy, hungry intern seven years ago. At twenty-nine years old, with no connections, I should still be hustling to fight my way up the ladder, not sitting in a corner office of a multibillion-dollar company.

I don't belong here. I'm smart, sure. Driven? Definitely. Ambitious? Obviously.

But I'm not some guy who grew up listening to talk of tax shelters and offshore accounts. I'm drinking organic fresh-squeezed orange juice and chef-prepared English muffins on the other hand. I know Marcus saw something in me, regardless, and he said he didn't want to be my "father figure" when God dropped them in his hands. He's been more of a father to me than my own old man ever was.

It's also obvious he's grooming me to take the helm at Harcourt when he retires. "Clare doesn't want it. She says she isn't mean enough," he said last night with a grin on his face.

There's no grin tonight. Just a cold, tired man staring into the flames of a fireplace. He's nursing a tumbler of the good stuff.

It's been a week since the first time Marcus made up an excuse to be in direct contact with Clare. Since then, he's found some reason to be alone in a room together four times. One of which was in his own office at Harcourt.

Obviously, given that she had a bit of a puppy love situation for a while, he avoided Clare when she was younger.

She'd tried out her fledgling flirting skills, and I'd shut her down as soon as I knew how to do—which was admittedly probably not all that great a display of hindsight. We both tended to avoid each other after that.

Apparently, Marcus has decided it's time for us to move past that awkwardness and act like the adults we all are. I suspect he's trying to ease the family awkwardness between his daughter and me by sheer force of proximity. I'm CFO. But if his intention is to make me more comfortable with Clare, he's failing miserably. It seems I've recently developed an incon-

omitious?*infatuation* with my best friend's daughter. *Comfortable* is not a word to describe our interactions.

over his Eventually, Marcus throws back his bourbon and moves to sit in the chair, lowering himself like a creaky old man. When did that happen?

“waste is fit, energetic, a live wire. He's only fifty-one years old. Some people think our friendship is strange, given he's more than years my senior. But Marcus and I, we're alike in ways no one would understand. He gets me.

I'd said “I need to ask you for a favor,” he says.

I don't need to think about it. “Of course. Anything you need.” He grimaces. “Not so fast. It's a big favor. I don't need an answer. Take the weekend if you need it...” He trails off with a frown and a sputter me his head.

I lower both feet to the floor and lean toward him. “Marcus, just ask a damn “The thing is... I'm dying. Inoperable. I had that scare about eight ago. Colon cancer. It's back. They warned me it might happen. Now for me, it metastasized. Doc figures I have maybe three months.”

That makes no sense. The man takes care of himself. He's a conscientious health nut. “Did you get a second opinion? Maybe there are experimental treatments.”

“Second opinion. Third. I know it's a shock, son.” Shock? He thinks the news that he's dying is a shock? It's not a shock, it's the devastation. A tsunami of fear and pain and loss and grief, and I'm sitting in the window of a high-rise watching the wave crest the shore, knowing he's entire damn building is about to be washed into the ocean.

I stare at my own hands for a long time before I finally manage something. “How is Clare taking the news?”

I'd use "I haven't told her yet. I wanted to talk to you first." He rubs his hand over his face. "She's so sweet. Just like her mother that way. Soft too. You know how she is. So innocent. So trusting. She's not ready to be out there unprotected in the real world."

I nod because I know it's true. I don't know how he managed to do it. Marcus has successfully sheltered his daughter from the worst of this hellish world. He's loved and protected her the way a parent is supposed to.

After a horrific episode in her childhood, Marcus somehow turned around for her.

He says she doesn't even remember that, while her mother was still alive, a temporary nanny and her boyfriend attempted to kidnap her for ransom. She knows it happened as a matter of record, but she was only a child and doesn't remember it or the bloody shoot-out that occurred as a result.

"Thank God for that. Because no one needs memories of blood and death." I'm only nine years older than she is, but it feels more like twenty years. "How do you need me to look out for her? I can look in on her for you, man. I'll take care of her finances—"

"I need you to marry her."

I look at the tumbler in my hand, then knock back the entire glass of bourbon in one go. When I can breathe again, I say, "I don't look at her like that." Which is true. But also an outright lie.

"Oh, I know," Marcus says dryly. "I see how much you don't look at her. But I think the way you *don't* look at her now is a little different from the way you used to not look at her."

He's right that I don't look at her. I look anywhere but at her. I avoid her as much as I can. And when I can't, I keep my vision squarely focused on the ground in front of my feet.



is eyes. I keep a tight rein on my fantasies. I don't want to know where m  
r. She's could wander if I ever let it. Clare Harcourt is a goddamn dream.

in this Her freckles and wide green eyes give her a girl-next-door lo  
couldn't be further from reality. As Marcus Harcourt's daughter, if  
it, but royalty in this country, she'd be a literal princess.

s awful Marcus knows where I came from. And not because I ever told  
talked about it. It's because before he ever allowed me in his home,  
ed that me investigated down to my preschool records. He dug into things he  
legal right to stick his nose in. He even knew I'd changed my name  
ck with was fourteen.

her for And, for some insane reason that I cannot fathom, he decided he  
ly three care.

ilt. Now here he is, offering me his daughter. As if there was ever a s  
eath. where Clarissa Harcourt could be my wife. Even imagining it feels like  
ty. "Do too close to the sun.

age her She's off-limits. Full stop. I owe everything to Marcus. Every bit  
career success, every bit of any sense of family and stability I hav  
provided those to me. The man has been a mentor, a friend, and a fa  
glass of me, never mind that I was in my twenties when I met him.

her like But I don't come from the kind of life Clare has been raised in. My  
are covered in blood. They have been since I was seven years old. Sh  
at her. someone gentle and soft and clean. Not someone like me.

om the "Why marriage? I don't need to be married to her to manage her mo  
her or make sure she has what she needs."

roid her "She's never lived on her own in her life. She has a gentle hea  
on her people will take advantage of that. They'll *hurt* her. She's commu  
college where she's majoring in library science, of all things. She w

my mindwork as an elementary school librarian. This world is going to eat her

The heiress librarian. When she loses me....” He closes his eyes in a blink. “She will be sad and lonely and rich as fuck. Predators and corporations are going to be coming out of the woodwork and gunning straight for her.”

Marcus isn’t wrong.

him or “You’re a good man, James,” he continues.

he had At the unconscious shake of my head, Marcus fixes me with a steady gaze. “You are a good man. You understand loyalty. You’ll be gentle with her, but ruthless with anyone who tries to hurt her. You are the *only* person I want to protect her.

he didn’t “I’m leaving the majority of my assets to the two of you. I’d also like to transfer trustee status of her trust fund from me to you until she’s twenty-five. It’s not that far off, really.

he’s flying “You could keep the vultures away. I’m not asking for more than that now. Once she has her feet under her, the two of you can come to work out any arrangement you want. But she needs someone she can count on to take care of her, he’s for her.

rather to “Without a spouse, she won’t have a single next of kin. Imagine that. Imagine a health scare, like me or her mother, and not having a single person’s hands there to....” He closes his eyes briefly before shaking away the thought. “I’m giving in to his fear, and he knows it.

“You don’t think Clare would object to this?” He can “offer” all he wants, but this is the twenty-first century. A man doesn’t just get to decide what his daughter is going to marry. Moreover, he *shouldn’t*.

art, and Marcus gives me the signature expression he uses when he thinks something is trying to blow smoke up his ass: one eyebrow raised, head slightly tilted, and he wants to

er alive. "My daughter has been in love with you since she was old enough to  
a long 'James Mellinger' in a heart on the cover of her notebook. She won't c  
n artists Heat curls up the back of my neck. "It was a little crush. She g  
ner." that."

Marcus waves his hand. "I know that. But I also think the two of you  
good fit. In time, you *will* love each other. Clare is imminently lovable  
n look. I'm half in love with her already. It would take nothing for me to fi  
her and only thing I'd need to do is give myself permission—but I don't trust  
trust to lose control like that.

"In the meantime," he says, "while she's still getting her feet un  
like to you could be her safety net. Her soft place to fall. I can't leave her  
ty-five. can't leave her with no one."

I don't think Marcus realizes the pleading note that's entered his  
at right He's never begged for a damn thing in his life, but he's begging me to  
hate ever Clare.

he there The answer is yes, of course. I would never allow Clare to be a  
frightened if it's within my power to prevent it.

ne that. And I won't let Marcus die afraid for his daughter. If he dies—  
person haven't quite accepted that yet, but if he does—it can't be in turmoil a  
it. He's that Clare won't be cared for.

"I'll do it."

he wants, "Thank you—"

who his "If Clare agrees."

"She will."

omeone "But, Marcus," I warn, "you know what I'm like. I can only promis  
y tilted. her friend."

Marcus reaches over and opens a box of Cuban cigars I hadn't

to write earlier. I've never seen him smoke before.

object." He offers one to me, and I shake my head. He proceeds to snip the end of the cigarette and lights it up. At my raised eyebrow, he huffs, "What's it going to do? Cause cancer?"

You are a... I don't smile.

." He looks back down at the cigar contemplatively for a moment. "You're like all the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that are made to snap together." He holds the cigar between his index finger and thumb and brings the remaining fingers of both hands together, meshing them. "You're like her, of a jigsaw puzzle that are made to snap together."

alone. I For the briefest moment, a familiar spark of mischief enters his eyes. "You're going to fall madly in love with my daughter."

his voice. Marcus has always had an eerie ability to predict connections. To me, he's the exact right fit, whether it's building a team or acquiring a company. Just this once, for Clare's sake, I hope he's wrong.

alone or

—and I

and fear

se to be

noticed

earlier. I've never seen him smoke before.

He offers one to me, and I shake my head. He proceeds to snip the end and light it up. At my raised eyebrow, he huffs, "What's it going to do? Give me cancer?"

I don't smile.

He looks back down at the cigar contemplatively for a moment. "She's what you need, too, James. You don't know that yet, but the two of you..." He holds the cigar between his index finger and thumb and brings the remaining fingers of both hands together, meshing them. "You're like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that are made to snap together."

For the briefest moment, a familiar spark of mischief enters his eyes. "You're going to fall madly in love with my daughter."

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Just this once, for Clare's sake, I hope he's wrong.

I STAND IN MY father's study, my arms tight around his waist, and make sense of the things I've learned over the last two days.

Dad has been my entire world. I've built every piece of my life him. And I've been his. And now... I'm losing him. To cancer. He's And I can't even bear to say those two words out loud.

Dad wraps his arms around me, and I breathe in the familiar scent of cologne.

He told me about the cancer two days ago. He didn't tell me James was going to show up with a diamond ring until half an hour ago.

It's an autopilot reaction for me to agree to anything my father could say at this point. He wants me to marry James—so I'll marry James.

Since his diagnosis, my father's every thought has been for other people. How will the staff and employees manage? Has he done everything necessary for the people who rely on Harcourt? How can he prepare his friends? How can he make his own death easier on everyone? And, especially, how can he ensure that I'm safe and happy after he's left this world?

The truth—that I will never tell him—is that he can't ensure sor



like that.

But he's got this idea that he can stop worrying about me if I marry James. In his words, it's "the only way I'll find peace." He says James will take care of me."

I know I've been sheltered. But I don't need or even want James to take care of me. That's not how I picture marriage.

When I said as much, Dad's response was that James will be lonely when he dies. Then he told me that James, who frankly has always seemed like the least needy or anxious person I have ever known, will need a friend as much as I will. That we'll take care of each other in our own ways.

I don't try to. I'm not sure I believe that. James will be sad, but I doubt he's in any danger of losing his friendship with me.

I'm around Dad. Still, it pulled at my heartstrings, exactly as Dad intended. Not that I'm dying, but I needed to do that. I will never allow my father to leave this world if it's in my power to prevent it.

It's not of his own doing. But I can't deny that the entire idea of marrying James is surreal. I've had some variation of a crush on him since I was fourteen years old, and it carries the potential for disaster. I could end up pining miserably for my husband for years.

I don't ask at all. Oh, I know it's infatuation and not real love—no matter how much I've spouted about it for the last six years. How can it be real, lasting love for people like us? I'm too nervous to even act like myself around him? How can it be real if I'm necessary? He doesn't act like himself around me? But there's no question that it's there. How potential for it is there.

How can he be so sure? And I hate that some silly part of me—the goofy sixteen-year-old part that's still hiding inside—is secretly counting on the idea that one day this marriage will become real. Maybe we'll fall madly in love with each other.

For me, this is like another girl being told the lead singer of her favorite James band needs to fake-marry her for some absurd PR reason. Of course it will “take” works.

But what if this marriage isn’t the beginning of my own personal road to takenovel? What if it’s some literary fiction novel where I’m supposed to learn some horrible lesson?

Only after Dad rubs my back and speaks cajolingly, almost teasingly. “I think it’s like the smartest idea I’ve ever had. Trust me on this.”

As much as I take a deep breath and nod. “You can send him back in.”

He kisses the top of my head and leaves me standing there alone. James returns less than a minute later. When he enters, he leaves the door partially cracked open—the better for Dad to hear if I have an attack that he vapors, I suppose. Just like a Victorian maiden with her suitor.

I fear if the thought nearly forces a bubble of inappropriate hysterical laughter out of me.

‘ve had James lowers himself to one knee and opens a little blue box. The sound this inside is perfect. Classy. Large but not obnoxiously so.

My own James is wearing a dark blue suit with a light blue button-down shirt. He sets off his eyes.

Which I’ve I’m in a T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms, my nose red and eyes when swollen from crying.

At least when For once, James is looking straight at me.

What the “Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask.

He frowns. “I’m sure. Are you? There’s no pressure.”

I who’s Of course there’s pressure. I don’t say that, though. “Yes. It’s just a marriage wrap my head around,” I say instead.

He stands up, and I think he’s realized the lunacy of this plan.



favorite. Instead, he leads me to the love seat and then sits beside me, his hair brushing against my softer one.

The contrast between us couldn't be more obvious. But he reaches for my left hand and plays with my fingers. "I'll be kind to you. In fact, I believe I will turn out better than most marriages. I hope you know I care about you and want to be here for you. As a friend."

It's the faint praise, indeed. "I'm... awkward with you."

"We'll get over that, Clare."

"Clarissa."

At his raised eyebrows, I shrug. "I know Dad calls me Clare, but the doormother named me Clarissa, and I like it." I don't tell him I feel as though I've lost a part of myself with the adult name. It's the name that separates me from the child I used to be in his eyes. I don't want him to see me as that girl.

He acknowledges my request with a dip of his head. "Of course, Clare."

"People will say horrible things about us," I say. "There'll be rumors that you married me for my money."

He doesn't answer right away, just rubs his thumb over my palm absentmindedly. It causes a building heat to ignite low in my body, an unexpected sensation in the face of the situation. James has never touched me like this.

Finally, he says, "The best thing to do is ignore them. It'll blow over and you'll know why we're getting married. That's all that matters. To the outside world we'll be like every other married couple. Eventually, we'll be too busy with our lives to bother speculating about."

For a moment, I consider letting my next question go. I'm marrying Dad, not for me. But this is my future. And there are things I don't know. Things that are none of my father's business.

and though James's answers won't change whether I marry him... but they'll  
whether I stay married to him after Dad passes.

for my "Can we discuss this a little? Just so I understand what exactly to expect it  
His brows come together a little, and then he dips his chin. "Of course  
t you. I you have a chance to read the prenup?"

I nod my head, very aware of his strong fingers still wrapped around  
own. "Yes. But I wanted to talk about more... personal things,"  
haltingly.

"You want to manage expectations."

but my That wasn't exactly how I'd thought of it. But I like that word  
ough it's makes the conversation we're about to have sound businesslike. It's not  
to be in on emotion. It's just *managing expectations*.

The idea steadies me a little. I've been in the background of enough  
crisis." father's phone calls and meetings that, surely, I can emulate him in  
rounds that ever round of negotiations. "Yes."

James is wearing his customary stern expression when he says, "It's  
almost a idea."

. It's an I reach for my phone and pull up the notes app.

er, ever He lifts a single eyebrow, and I think I see a hint of approval in his  
"You are definitely your father's daughter."

r. We'll At my wary look, he nods back down to my phone. "By all means, I  
: world, this action plan in writing."

ring for I type "Marriage Plan" at the top. "Okay." I clear my throat. "You  
would be friends. Can you clarify that for me a little?"

ng him "Platonic. We'll spend time together. Provide a support system for  
need to other. We can be each other's plus-one."

Exactly what I thought. It's not a bad idea to start out as friends first

I affect need time to transition into him seeing me as something other than friend's daughter. I can accept that. I don't expect it to take long once I start living together. Unless...

se. Did "I just want to check that you aren't, um, seeing anyone else?"

He shakes his head, frowning. "No." The word is clipped.

and my I press my lips together and bob my head in a nervous nod. Heat waves up my neck and over my entire face. I'm pale and freckled. And not blushing. Hard.

He's watching me intently. "I'm not the kind of man who would fuck around under any circumstance, fuck around on my wife." he says.

It based James has never sworn in front of me before. He isn't someone who would have done it accidentally. And something in his language feels like a glimmer of reassurance. He's giving me a glimpse behind his polite mask, and he's not lying because he understands that I needed to see exactly the level of disloyalty he feels for anyone who is disloyal.

a good "Okay," I manage a small smile as my shoulders loosen. "We're fairly good at this."

I type in capital letters, NO CHEATING. "Do you have any requirements for our plan?"

is eyes. He stands up and wanders to the window, shoving his hands into his pockets. "We should speak to each other for at least half an hour every day if it's possible. Ideally, we should attempt to have a meal together daily, as long as we're in the same city at the time."

said we "I agree." I tap the words into our plan.

He loosens his tie and leans back against the wall, casual and relaxed. "I have another demand."

"Demand away," I say, feeling more confident by the minute. That was a good idea. Everything he's said has turned out to be exactly

than his needed to hear.

we're "I expect you to chase your dreams. You have your whole life ahead of you. This marriage isn't here to hold you back. My only expectation is for you to be reasonably safe when you do. Don't be reckless."

I type, DON'T BE RECKLESS and CHASE OUR DREAMS.

shes up I nod and put my left hand out, waiting for him to place the ring on my finger.

There's approval on his face as he does so. "I wasn't sure whether you'd ever have some romantic fantasy about this. I should have known you'd be reasonable. You're a smart girl."

How would I shrug.

oddly "As long as we keep things strictly friendly, we'll get along fine. This does reassure me.

respect "What do you mean?"

He pulls back a little, brows furrowed. "I mean as long as we're careful." to develop romantic feelings for each other, we'll have a successful marriage."

"You think that's something a person can control? That you can just not catch feelings for someone?"

His eyebrows lift. "Yes." He says the word the way someone would say "Obviously."

At my look of consternation, his expression changes. He's looking at me like I'm an employee he just learned didn't meet a quota. Or a teenager who got caught sneaking out after curfew.

He nods over at my phone. "Write it down, Clarissa. Last rule: don't let your feelings plan your feelings."

what I

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n is for

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g at me  
ger who

't catch

I'm a miserable bride. Not that anyone realizes it. I've stuffed all my grief, disappointment, and anxiety all the way down where, hopefully, no one can see them.

Of course I'm marrying James. There was never a question that I'd marry For Dad.

James is marrying me for the same reason.

But the way he's so confident that he'll never develop an attraction for me.... My initial embarrassment is giving way to reluctant resentment.

It's true that I've never dated. *But I'm not ugly.*

I look down at this dress and swallow that thought.

I feel ridiculous. This gown, or one very like it, was the one I wanted back when I was around fifteen years old. It's a confetti-sparkling white organza and seed pearls, with a cathedral train and dozens of layers of mesh, tulle, bows, and flounces everywhere.

I look like a wedding cake.

But my father is staring at me with so much love and pride and hope that I have to keep reminding myself that he is the *only* thing that matters



moment.

Bronwyn, Janessa, and Franki are waiting near the altar. My bridesmaids are wearing hot-pink-and-black taffeta dresses, and the way they put them on without a word of complaint just goes to show how amazing they are. The hot pink is bright enough to fry my retinas.

They know exactly what kind of wedding this is. They've also been my best friends since elementary school, which means they'll never bring a word of it to a single soul without my say-so.

The organ is playing, and I'm supposed to look at James as I walk down the aisle. But I can't. This feels wrong to me, as if I'm making a joke of my own fear, something that should be sacred.

So I look at my friends instead.

Franki is trying to smile, but she's all choked up. Her big brown eyes are wet, and she's sniffing loudly enough that I can already hear her.

Janessa elbows her and passes her a tissue.

They all tried to talk me out of this before finally acknowledging it as a foregone conclusion. After that, they rallied around me with their unwavering support.

Of the three of them, Janessa was the most vocal of my friends to tell me this was a "horrible idea" and that I was "asking for a broken heart." She's five foot ten, topping Franki's height by five inches and Bronwyn by nine. She's right there in the middle of them, looking like an Italian and trying to force herself to smile for my sake. It looks more like a grimace.

Bronwyn's blonde hair glints under the spotlights, and she points at me from the front of the church, wiggling her curvy little behind. She fans her face with a hand, licks her finger, and pretends to burn it on me, mouthing,

She's trying to lighten the mood and turn my smile into something else. We both know I'm giving more Glinda the Good Witch vibes than something in this dress.

When the wedding planner had asked about my dream wedding, she pointed her to my old Pinterest board—the one I'd made right around the time I'd started practicing my signature as "Mrs. James Mellinger." So... This wedding is a bit of a hot mess express. Though no one can blame the planner didn't *try*.

We had a month to plan this thing from start to finish, so I'd sent her out of Pinterest board and said, "Figure something out, and please don't bother with the details."

Spending time with Dad was more important to me than picking out napkins and cake toppers.

Now, my bridal party, flowers, and dress are giving "A Very Wedding" vibes.

Not that I care. It's not a real wedding, anyway.

I finally get up the nerve to look at James as he stands there at the altar in a black tuxedo. His face is even more serious and stern than usual, his expression stiff.

We stop just in front of him, and Dad turns to me, whispering again into my ear, "You will always be my baby girl. Don't you forget that."

I choke out a watery "I love you, Daddy."

When my father hands me over to James, they do that man-hug thing that practically looks like assault, with the mutual back slapping. It's intense. Then Dad kisses my cheek and puts my hand in James's.

James's expression is severe. He almost looks angry, so I fix my attention on the minister instead. "Hot."



ng real. James's hand, however, is steady as a rock when he slips his ring  
x kittenfinger. And his voice is strong and confident when he makes his v  
love, honor, and cherish me.

I'd just When the minister says, "You may kiss the bride," I shoot a startled  
he timeup at my new husband and feel my nerves twang.

. yeah. How did I not think about the fact that our first kiss was going to  
say thefront of a cathedral full of witnesses? We didn't have a wedding rehear

I might have thought of it then. But we were trying to minimize the  
her theof activities Dad would feel he needed to participate in.

her me And it hits me all of a sudden that I've just married a man I've nev  
ki—

ing out "Hey," he murmurs quietly in my ear while he trails his knuckles do  
cheek. "Stop worrying. It's not that kind of marriage. I *also* vow not to  
Barbieyour lips with mine," he says dryly.

He leans down and rubs the tip of his nose against mine, then kisses  
the cheek.

ltar in a *That's my wedding kiss? A peck on the cheek?*

posture I know this marriage isn't normal, but did he have to make it so p  
*obvious*? Now the minister is introducing us as Mr. and Mrs.  
inst myMellinger. I spent years doodling that name, but now that it's here,  
sure I want it.

I'm not giving up the name that defined me to this point in my life  
ing that*Harcourt*-Mellinger. I can't just become an entirely new person in the  
intense.of one afternoon, an extension of a man who isn't even in love with me

Then Bronwyn is handing me back my flowers, arranging my tra  
ttentionJames and I walk back down the aisle. We prepare to take the short c  
the location for pictures, both of us sitting quietly in the car.

on my James clears his throat and says, "You look beautiful, Clarissa."  
frowns to I want to sink into the leather seat because I don't feel beautiful  
pretty silly, and I'm still trying to wrap my brain around the idea  
I glance wouldn't even kiss me the one darn time in front of an audience.

I tip my head at him, force a smile, and say, "Thank you."  
to be in He runs his thumb over his new wedding band and says, "The cere  
monial, or was nice."

number A laugh bubbles out of me, but I squelch it quickly.

He frowns. "Are you okay?"

er even I lie like a Persian rug. "Just nervous. There were a lot of people there."  
"I see."

own my And then the man who expects me not to catch feelings reaches out  
& attacks squeezes my hand. "Can I make a confession?"

I look down at our hands twined together, then stiffen my spine. "Can  
you tell me on that?"

"I was nervous as hell too."

*Damn it. Is he seriously trying to comfort me by showing me his vul  
nerability side? How am I supposed to keep my heart hardened against that?*

James Then the photographer and his assistant are climbing in with us, and  
I'm not telling us how to sit and where to look. And I don't have to answer Jan

The photographer, Rafe, is an energetic man with a shaved head  
& I'll be enthusiastic as hell and just as obnoxious.

of course He tried to get photos of the girls and me jumping on the hotel  
bed, which I'd simply given him the Marcus Harcourt stare.

in, and He'd backed off a bit after that. But he and his assistant were waving  
bright lights around and "orchestrating moments" every minute.

Then he intruded on my time with Dad. At which point, again,

channeled a little of my father, pointed an imperious finger, and den  
. I feel "Wait outside." Which he did, all the while muttering anxiously ab  
that he "shot list."

Under different circumstances, the photographer would have amus  
Under different circumstances, I'd have welcomed his obsessive atte  
remonymold a vision of this day as the fun and happy young heiress mari  
dream man. But these are not "different\_circumstances."

The planner gushed over Rafe. Apparently, he's world famous in w  
photography circles. He's won all kinds of prestigious awards, and th  
re." him in just for our wedding.

"Congratulations, you two! You did it," Rafe says in his New 2  
out and accent, a big grin on his face.

The less we smile, the harder he smiles back at us, as if he's willin  
What's respond in kind. His expression has become something of an unmovin  
on his face.

I try to fake a polite expression, but I can't quite manage "happy."  
*nerable* When we arrive at the location the planner selected, he says, "Okay  
just stand right here. There you go. Now, hubby, just reach your arms  
and he's your new wife. No, not her waist, up here—"

ies. He touches James and attempts to move his arm up around my col  
. He is area.

I can't see James's expression, but the photographer jumps back as  
bed, to seen a snake, then starts bobbing his head. "Right. No touching. Bad  
he says. From a distance, he starts to mime the motion instead. "Bri  
g wand face right in."

James slides in close. Tension is vibrating from him. Or maybe that'  
ain, I'd It's chilly out here, but James's body is warm around me, and he

anded,delicious. I want to turn around, burrow into his arms, and hide the  
out hisRafe get shots of nothing but this poofy skirt and the top of my head.

"Excellent." Rafe is moving around, snapping shots. "Sweetheart, tu  
sed me.face toward the sky and close your eyes. Gorgeous."

empt to Sweet baby Jesus, this is awkward.

ries her "Now, sweetheart, we're going to do the piggyback pose. James, c  
lift her on your back without help?"

wedding I whip my head toward the photographer in horror. *That dumbass P  
ey flewboard.* That's where he's been getting his "shot list." The memory of s  
the poses fifteen-year-old me had pinned... pure cringe.

Zealand James and I both speak in tandem and say one word. "No."

"Cool. Cool. Maybe the planner showed me the wrong Pinterest boa  
ig us to She did not show him the wrong Pinterest board, but I nod furio  
g rictusthink she must have," I say brightly.

Yes, I'm throwing the planner under the bus. She lost my loyalty w  
said we were "lucky the groom cheated" regarding the wedding Ra  
/, guys,originally scheduled to shoot this week.

around Let the planner and Rafe hash it out between them.

James looks down at me, and whatever he sees on my face has him  
larboneto Rafe and saying, "We're very private people."

I nod in agreement. "Very private."

; if he's "You'll appreciate having these memories later," Rafe argues.

habit," James squeezes my hand but doesn't look away from the photog  
ig your"You're making my wife uncomfortable, Rafe," he says coldly. "I do  
it when my wife is uncomfortable."

s me. Those words shoot a thrill through me that I don't want to feel. It'll  
smellsmuch harder to get over my crush if he goes around calling me his *wife*

ere. Let Rafe sputters. I get the impression that he's used to being in charge makes sense. He's telling couples how to pose and what to do all the time. But I've never seen anyone stand up to James when he uses that Rafe is certainly not going to be the first.

I feel a little bad for the man. He's just trying to do his job. "I think what we need are some more classic poses. Does that sound right to you?" Rafe finally asks.

I smile at him as brightly as I can manage. "That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much for being accommodating."

James grunts beside me, and I can almost hear the words he doesn't want to say. "We're paying him to be accommodating."

We do a number of classic couple poses on the steps, which are slightly awkward.

Then Rafe has James dipping me ever so slightly, my flowers fall from one hand. My other hand is on the back of his head. It's the first time I've ever touched James's hair. It's silky soft and cool in the October air. Flashes are firing around us as James looks into my eyes.

This pose is orchestrated. But the intensity is disarming, nonetheless. James has had his CFO face on all day—distant and a little scary.

And I've been tense and nervous, giving fake smiles and forcing through the motions. It's been awkward and uncomfortable, and I just want this day to be over.

But the longer we look into each other's eyes, the more the tension seems to bleed out of me. The tightness around his mouth eases, and my own muscles relax.

I've known this man for *years*, but I've never had the pure freedom to blatantly stare into his eyes.

, which I no sooner have the thought than, for no reason I can see, the corner of his mouth tip up just a little. I blink, surprised, and ask, "What?" in my voice. "I've never looked into your eyes like this," he says. "I thought they were green. But they're not just green. They're the color of moss with little flecks of gold in them and a halo of light brown around the outside. You know what I mean?"

When he doesn't continue, I prod a little. Because now I need to know what he means. "Thank you, they are... weird? Pretty? Odd? "What are they?"

"Magic."

I don't say: The word seems so out of character for James, so... *fanciful*. It's like something loose in me, and I have the strongest urge to just lift my hand and close the distance until our lips meet.

James moves closer, and his gaze seems to catch on my mouth. As I lean toward him, my breasts pressing forward, as he balances my weight with his first single hand at my midback.

Over my shoulder, Rafe's grating voice interrupts the moment, and I'm startled to realize where we are and what we're doing.

James doesn't kiss me. Instead, he hitches midmove, then brings his face close to my ear. His lips brush the outer shell as he mutters, "This guy is the most annoying little shit I've ever met."

I laugh, a full-on giggle-snort.

James pulls back from my ear. And when he's looking into my eyes, I notice the crinkles at the corner that I love so much.

He kisses my forehead, and Rafe "oohs" and "aaahs."

"Let's get a couple sexy shots now," Rafe says, completely ignoring my earlier comments about being private people.

ners of And then he makes a critical mistake. "James, I want you to just  
back of your fingers across Clarissa's collarbone like this."

ey were The photographer demonstrates by touching me, dragging his  
e flecks across my clavicle and brushing my breast, probably accidentally, v  
ur eyes forearm. It's a stunningly intrusive thing for a stranger to do, and I jer  
from his touch.

ow. My I'm about to tell Rafe to keep his hands to himself, but before I eve  
chance, James is *growling*, "Don't touch her."

Something about the way he says it feels as though he's an atta  
breaks ready to rip the man's throat out.

ead and He's using his body to intimidate and back Rafe away from me until  
far enough that I can't hear a word they're saying.

I strain But I can tell James is laying into the man. And I don't think it's th  
with a threat of financial destruction that powerful men like James ty  
employ. I think he's threatening to tear the photographer's arms off.

a kiss." I married James to give my father comfort and because I have drea  
member being loved by James for years. James married me as a favor to my da  
thought when he said we'd be friends that meant we'd be partners.

mouth realize James was signing up to be another one of my guard dogs.

re most I might never have rebelled against my father, but I can promise re  
is coming for my husband if he tries to stuff me into the same role Dad

I'm not a stubborn or unreasonable person, I don't think. I will gla  
s again, willingly accept James's help and support. And I hope he lets me supp  
in return.

But I don't need him fighting my battles.

ing our I would have told Rafe to back off on my own. And if the man  
listened, then I would be all for this current display. But I could have l

run the this.

We end the shoot standing a foot apart, holding hands but looking  
fingers different directions. It feels like an omen.

with his

back away

can get a

black dog

they're

the usual

typically

reminded of

did. But I

I didn't

rebellion

I did.

boldly and

port him

hadn't

handled



this.

We end the shoot standing a foot apart, holding hands but looking off in different directions. It feels like an omen.

When we reach the hotel ballroom, I excuse myself to go to the restroom for a while.

One of my usual bodyguards, Sasha, enters first. She's a fit black woman in her midthirties. She's in plain clothes today, dressed as a wedding guest albeit one wearing practical shoes. I follow inside when she gives me the go-ahead. Then she stands near the sinks.

What I need is a good cry, but I won't do that. Not even in the private restroom. I'd leave with red eyes, a shiny nose, and my makeup would be a mess. Screw that. No one gets to see what a disaster this day feels like for me.

Besides, my father would see the evidence of my tears. I can't have him worrying about me on my wedding day. He seems so relieved and happy about it all.

I lock myself behind the paneled wooden door of the handicap stall, the only one big enough to fit my dress—then stand still and just take a moment for myself.

Two women have entered the restroom and are standing near the far end of the sinks, just this side of the lounge area. I can hear them loud and



through the stall door.

“That ceremony has to be one of the most uncomfortable moments ever witnessed.”

The other woman says, “It’s clearly a business arrangement. He plans to give James his shares when he dies. Without that family contribution the inheritance tax alone would be brutal.”

Water runs, and I miss some words. “...you would know, I guess. They manage to work it out.”

“Please. Can you imagine James with a girl like Clare Harcourt? Not a girl about money. Knowing him, I’d be shocked if he ever lays a finger on her. He in a The other laughs. “He couldn’t even bring himself to kiss her at the wedding.”

“She’s not just young—she’s a spoiled little princess. She has to announce it to the guest list, hell out of him.”

Then I hear the clicking of their heels as they move toward the exit.

I rip the stall door open, peering out just in time to see the back of a woman with pale blonde hair, styled straight as a ruler, as she sashays recked way out the door. The sound of her stilettos echoes like gunfire.

I meet Sasha’s sympathetic eyes in the mirror, and I burn with humiliation and rage.

When I told James that people would talk, I tried to convince him I could grow a thick skin about it. I was determined to stay away from the media and stick my head in the sand. But I never expected to be confronted with it on my actual wedding day.

It would sting less if there weren’t tendrils of truth woven through the end of malicious supposition.

He *couldn’t* bear to kiss me. He doesn’t ever *plan* to kiss me. *A*

marriage is most certainly an arrangement.

its I've I want to go home. Right now. Just take a pair of scissors to this  
climb into my cotton-candy bed, and pretend none of this is happeni  
[arcourtDad being sick. Not this wedding. Not these rumors.  
rection, Bronwyn, Janessa, and Franki are waiting outside in the corridor  
with James, his groomsmen, and Dad, who played the part of best m  
I hopefather of the bride. James has a couple of friends I've never met befo  
too.

This is There's no time for anything except to be announced into the ballro  
her." By the time the toasts roll around, I'm seriously ready for a drink.

at the I've only ever had a sip or two of alcohol in the past because, dul  
girl. But there's no time like your wedding to a man who married y  
noy thefavor to someone else and can't even bear to kiss you to get tras  
champagne, I always say.

When the server begins to pour my glass, however, my new husband  
a sveltea hand over the top and scowls. "She isn't twenty-one. Didn't the  
ays herarrange for sparkling juice or something for her and the girls?"

Heat rises in my face.

iliation "No need," I say, saccharine sweet. "I'm sure I've got some juice b  
my bag."

1yself I He doesn't even hear me, too busy signaling the wedding planne  
1 socialquickly scurries over to retrieve the glasses of champagne my bride  
frontedwere served. She whips Bronwyn's drink right out from under her n  
as she's about to take a sip.

1gh the Bronwyn and I share a frustrated look. Then she makes a great s  
looking around for witnesses. Reaching into the deep side pocket of h  
und ourbridesmaid gown, she slides out a silver flask.

She shoots James a fulminating look, then leans over and whispers, “Later.”

I nod. I will definitely take her up on that. A toast to my looming marriage.

My friends are livid right now. Even Franki, who’s always the first on the bright side of anything, has her phone clutched in her hand like she’s preparing to hurl it at James.

Bronwyn stretches across me and raps on the table with her knuckles. James turns his head back to her, raising one eyebrow in a stiff gesture of annoyance.

A mask falls over him like window blinds closing. His severe expression is the same one he wore when he watched Dad walk me down the aisle.

I remember what he said about being nervous and the way he looked when he hugged my dad. And right then, I realize what I don’t think anybody would notice—my new husband is masking pain. He has been all day. Probably the same pain I’m feeling. He just handles it differently.

James stood there at the altar and married someone he doesn’t love for purely unselfish reasons. And, damnit, this just sucks for both of us, doesn’t it?

Bronwyn leans across my body, practically climbing in my lap, and hisses at James. “I just think it’s funny how—”

I grab her into a full-body hug. She shuts up and hugs me back, close just as I hug her fiercely.

She’s so much shorter than I am that her face hits my neck when I lean over and her breath tickles as she loudly whispers, “Okay.”

We’ve been friends for so long that she responded to my unspoken request before I’d even said the words. But I say them now, anyway. Just to

hispers, we're on the same page. I taste hairspray as I talk into her updo. "Be n

"You should file for divorce tomorrow," she mutters.

celibate "I'm not thinking about divorce at my wedding. And he's done :  
wrong."

t to see The hug is going on longer than anyone would consider normal. A  
e she's set of arms wraps around the two of us, long and thin and smelling o  
butter—Janessa. Then Franki squirms in and asks, "Is this an  
es until meeting?"

sture of Bronwyn says, "We're supposed to be nice to James."

Janessa reluctantly agrees. "For you. Not for him."

ssion is Bronwyn nods, face still crammed against me. "But if you ever nee  
make him suffer...."

d when Bronwyn has no fear. She never has. But I can't have her mal  
dy else enemy out of my husband.

ably the Everything she knows about James is filtered through the lens  
girlhood crush. Over the years, I've waxed poetic over everything fr  
ove for flex of his forearms to the rasp in his voice. His particular brand of  
doesn't politeness with me has her thinking he's harmless—like a pit bull wh  
scary but has a heart of gold.

as she That's a mistake. He has a reputation for being even more ruthless t  
father. And I'd rather not test that theory on my friends.

utching I try to defuse her temper with a joke. "He's already suffering. He  
marry me."

ve hug, "Don't make me force self-affirmations on you. You're an angel. A  
who marries you is the luckiest man on Earth," Franki says. She has a  
request dreamy voice that makes her threat the equivalent of being pelted with  
be sureballs.

ice.” Bronwyn heaves a sigh, then stretches her arms to shove all of us

“That’s enough of that. It’s getting maudlin. I’ve got a toast to give.”

nothing James clearly heard this last part and says, “Absolutely not—”

She turns back to him. “That was a dick move you made at the we  
Anothershe says in a surprisingly quiet and measured voice.

f cocoa “Bronwyn,” I warn.

official “I said I’d be nice. This is nice. I’m not threatening him. I’m discuss  
situation,” she says to me.

She turns back to James. “For the record, I don’t care if you make y  
look like a dick.” She pulls out her phone, opening her socials. “But I  
d me tothat you made a joke out of a wonderful person.”

Bronwyn’s voice wavers, and for one horrifying moment, I’m afraid  
king angoing to cry. Instead, her words get harder. “Not only does Clari  
deserve this, but you don’t deserve her.”

of my His voice is impatient. “What are you talking about?”

om the She shoves her phone toward him, and I shiver a little at the ra  
f gentle descends over his expression at whatever he sees there.

o looks Bronwyn says, “So you weren’t deliberately attempting to humiliat  
It’s not a nice, polite question. It’s a demand, full of disbelief.

han my He doesn't answer. Just reaches for her phone, tense with fury.

She stares at him. Evaluates his reaction. Then she puts her hand b  
: had tofor her phone and says, “You can look at them later. Most of th  
speculation about what’s so awful about your wife that you wouldn  
Anyonekiss her at the altar. You’re trending. #ialmostdo.”

gentle, “God dammit.” He pushes the phone back toward her.

1 cotton My stomach, already in knots, now feels like a ball of lead has ta  
residence there. I make a gurgling sound—one part defeat and o

s away.hysteria.

Bronwyn gives me a side hug. “Enough of that. Now that we know wasn’t deliberately trying to embarrass you, we can work with this. I’ll adding,” speech that paints you two as fucking *fated mates*. Full-on destiny s make up a stupid story about the kiss on the cheek. Everyone will wan from how sweet it is when I’m done.”

sing the She levels a scolding look at James. “But you two have to hold han into each other’s eyes, and sell it.” The ice in my water glass is warm /ourselfher words.

do care James’s blue eyes meet mine, and then he’s up and at my seat. He careful as he offers me his hand and helps me arrange my skirt as I ris id she’s a hand on my lower back, he guides me from the ballroom. A few pe ssa notto stop us to chat, but James just keeps on walking.

The manager appears before us, concern written all over him. Jame a demand, and the man shows us to a luxurious lounge space—all ge that drapes and club chairs. The logs in the art deco fireplace beneath a mantle burn merrily against the far wall.

e her?” Sasha clears the room, speaking into her earpiece. Then she shuts tl quietly behind her, leaving us alone.

I can’t look at him. I don’t even want to. So I wander to the fireplack outwatch the flames dance.

em are “I apologize.” His voice is clipped. Sharp.

’t even I nod and pick at a seed pearl on my gown. I don’t say anything for time. I’m not trying to be a bitch—I just don’t have words.

He starts again, his voice like gravel. “I didn’t think about repercussiken up That strikes me as odd. “Why not? You think about repercussions ne parttime. It’s part of your job.”



He moves in front of me, and his hands go to my shoulders. They  
James against me, and then he drops them.

I give a “I planned to kiss you at the altar, but then you looked so nervous  
hit. I’ll trying to reassure you.”

t to gag Oh. “It was the audience. I wasn’t nervous because of you,” I say  
that isn’t the full truth... well, I wish it were.

ds, look He turns away and paces in front of the fireplace, rubbing the back  
er than neck. “I can do damage control. There’ll always be gossip, but I  
manage it.”

’s very “What happened to ignoring rumors and letting them blow over?”

e. With He glares back at me. “I meant I didn’t care if the world decided  
ople try mercenary prick. I don’t like them talking about *you*.”

I nod. “Do you think we should make a statement? A press release?”  
s barks “The only way to make people believe we’re in love is to act like v  
velvet love.”

marble At my dumbfounded expression, he puts a finger under my chin and  
my mouth for me. “Just in public,” he says. “Behind closed doors  
he door friends. But Bronwyn is right. In front of others, we should  
affectionate.”

ace and I wonder if this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me or the  
Because seeing how James would act if he loved me, but knowing  
doesn’t... it will be a special kind of torture.

r a long At my prolonged silence, James clears his throat and tugs at his b  
He turns away. “Never mind. You don’t have to do it.”

ions.” Something in me snaps. He can’t offer something like that, then s  
all the back. “Oh, I’ll do it. I’m going to be so affectionate you won’t know v  
you.”

tighten In my peripheral vision, I catch the flex of James's hand. He's  
away, but I'm almost sure I hear him breathe, "Thank *fuck*."

is. I was Then he moves back into my space, his eyes on my mouth. For the  
moment, I think he might actually kiss me.

, and if Instead, he reaches into his tuxedo and pulls out a clean, monogr  
handkerchief. I stop his hand as he reaches toward my face with th  
k of his "What are you doing?"

we can "I'm mussing you up. So we look like newlyweds who snuck aw  
some fun."

"Ummm."

I was a He swipes at my lips with the fabric, then shows me the lipstic  
before he shoves it back in his pocket. "That works."

' I look at him speculatively. "What about you?"

ve're in His mouth twitches the tiniest, tiniest bit. "I don't wear lipstick."

I purse my lips. "I'm sure I can come up with something."

l closes With a lift of his eyebrows, he says, "Do your worst."

, we're I yank at his tie, fussing with it until it sits askew. Then I lift my  
l be...challenge.

He twists his lips to the side and looks me up and down slowly. I  
: worst.pulls one small strand of hair out of my updo to dangle by my s  
/ing hebefore he spreads his hands in a motion that says "Your move."

I rake my eyes over him, thinking. Then I reach for his pocket squ  
ow tie.mess it up.

There goes that lip twitch again.

natch it I wait. There's not much else he can screw up on me, really. The  
what hitpretty much—

He runs a finger across my neckline until he stops at the ridiculo

turned that rests low on my shoulder. Then he rips it right off and shoves it in his pocket.

briefest I gape. He smirks.

Narrowing my eyes, I shove both hands into his hair and give it a good yank. God, he smells good. And that hair is so soft. But that's not what I'm after. It's about making him look like he just got some at his work reception.

way for Snickering, I pull back to admire his brand-spanking-new case of brown hair. James looking disheveled is my new favorite thing. Ever.

My pulse picks up when I see the amused calculation in his eyes. I know retaliation coming for me, and he's about to deliver it. For a split second I consider bolting just to see if I can get him to chase me.

Then James puts both of his hands in my hair, exactly the same way he did to him, and gently but firmly makes a freaking *mess* out of my updo.

I gasp in laughing outrage. And James—growly, grumpy James—“Too far?”

chin in So I bite him.

I don't do it *hard*—I'm not a monster—but I lean right up and clamp my teeth gently on his full bottom lip. Then I give a little tug, just enough to make his lip look swollen and loved on.

He goes perfectly still as I press the entire front of my body against his. I hold those three seconds. Then I ease back.

He looks shocked, but I know I didn't hurt him.

I'm a little stunned myself, partially at my own audacity and partially at the sheer physical intensity of it. I've never done something like that in my life.

us bow He blinks, swallows, and takes a step back. Then he runs a hand through his hair.

t in his hair, honestly probably more from habit than remembering how I  
him up. I'm a little disappointed that he manages to smooth most of  
into shape in one move. I thought I'd been more thorough than that.

a good *Curse his perfect hair.*

hat this "I think that's probably enough," he says.

wedding "Should I fix my hair a little?"

"No. It just looks like it's down out of the—" He waves a hand at m  
edhead. "—whatever that is. You have the most gorgeous hair I've ever seen.  
think it could look bad if you tried."

There's It's clear that, as far as he's concerned, he's just stating a fact.  
cond, It makes me warm all over, like I just swallowed sunshine.

"So," I say. "We just go out there and...?"

ay I did "Sell it."

And James takes my hand.

—grins.

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his hair, honestly probably more from habit than remembering how I mussed him up. I'm a little disappointed that he manages to smooth most of it back into shape in one move. I thought I'd been more thorough than that.

*Curse his perfect hair.*

"I think that's probably enough," he says.

"Should I fix my hair a little?"

"No. It just looks like it's down out of the—" He waves a hand at my head. "—whatever that is. You have the most gorgeous hair I've ever seen. I don't think it could look bad if you tried."

It's clear that, as far as he's concerned, he's just stating a fact. And it makes me warm all over, like I just swallowed sunshine.

"So," I say. "We just go out there and...?"

"Sell it."

And James takes my hand.



My bride is trashed. I didn't see it happen, but I'm blaming it on the one, Bronwyn, as being her supplier.

We're riding up the gleaming elevator to the honeymoon suite. Clarissa's security detail, a blonde named Beth, stands in the pretending she isn't there. And Clarissa serenades her own reflection on the polished steel walls.

She's singing something about buying herself flowers and holding his hand.

I keep an arm around her waist because she's not that steady on her feet.

And, yeah, if I'd realized Clarissa and her bridesmaids were going to be sneaking alcohol, I'd have been an ass about it. I don't have a choice about PR.

But they were sly. By the time I noticed what they'd done, the party was nearly over.

Bronwyn's toast was ridiculous. The guests knew she was kidding; some of it, of course. She's a natural comedian.

But most of them bought the spirit of it, which is that Clarissa and I



just in love with one another—we're *soul mates*.

The alcohol the guests were imbibing probably helped in their suspension of disbelief.

According to Bronwyn, I'm such a lovesick sap that I drive halfway across the city just to bring Clarissa a cup of her favorite coffee every morning. To be fair, I actually would do that for her if she wanted me to. I really don't know why that one was such a big deal that it got a round of "aaahs" from the assembled guests).

Apparently, I also made her a layer cake from scratch for her birthday, which tasted worse than it looked.

In reality, I've never baked a cake in my life. I'll be buying Clarissa birthday cakes from the best bakery in the city. Hell, I'll take her to Disneyland if she wants me to. Why would I give her my shitty subpar efforts if I can get someone to do it better?

Also, according to Bronwyn, I've been writing Clarissa terrible poetry. She then read one of "my" poems aloud. She wrote it in five minutes and rhymed "auburn curls" with "my heart whirls."

I met every over-the-top, doe-eyed, fluttering-lashed look Clarissa could give me with a ridiculous smolder of my own. The day started awkward but the one-up flirtation game was... fun.

I'm not the kind of person who has "fun." I'm someone who's occasionally entertained. Sometimes I'll classify something as having "good time." But Clarissa had me grinning like a kid who was sneaking cookies.

I didn't even do that when I was a kid sneaking cookies.

Knowing it wasn't real took the pressure off.

But when she said she'd be so affectionate I wouldn't know what

she wasn't lying. It was a game, yes. But now I'm horny as hell and a  
pensionsleep on a pull-out sofa bed.

Clarissa is... stunning. Even tipsy and silly.

7 across She's always beautiful. But today she looks like an angel. Her gl  
ng. (Tohair is arranged on top of her head, but a wealth of long, loose tendrils  
on't seeher face.

om the I'm the one who gave her that tumbled look, and I don't regret it.

Her unusual eyes sparkle under long lashes. She's wearing a small  
irthday,looking thing, and between it and the shimmery gown, she looks like  
princess. Like she could grant all my wishes, if only I would ask.

arissa's I half expect to see her feet leave the floor and watch her float  
Paris, ifceiling.

can pay Clarissa changes tunes, turning in my arms and warbling a specta  
off-key rendition of "Unchained Melody," full-on Elvis Presley perfo  
ry. style.

ites and She maintains eye contact as she musically assures me she's been  
for my touch a long, lonely time. Then she sings that she can't help fa  
sent mylove with me.

as hell, She pokes her index fingers into my cheeks and grins. "You're smili

I try to fake a stern expression, and she laughs. "Don't pretend you  
who isI refuse to live in a women's fiction novel."

been "a "You're wasted," I say, pulling her poking fingers away from m  
neaking"Where'd you get the alcohol?"

She mimes zipping her lips and throwing away the key. "I am a  
Bronwyn's secrets are safe with me."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Clearly. Do you do this often?"

hit me, "Sing? Sometimes." She whispers very loudly, "But I'm kind of bac



about to I bite back my smile. “I was referring to getting drunk.”

She snorts inelegantly. “This is my first time. I have babysitters who watch me if I even talk to a guy, let alone try to sneak a nip of the hairy creaming bites you.”

I take a second to understand where she was going with that. I’m sure she means “hair of the dog,” but she doesn’t have the context right.

She looks over at Beth and says, “Tell him. How you all spy on me and report back to Dad if I sneezed, and what I ate for lunch, and if I varied my schedule by over ten minutes.”

Beth appears stone-faced and uncomfortable. “I do my job. We all do.” Clarissa makes a “pffft” sound and leans into me. “One time, in elementary grade, I sent a guy I liked a text. I’m sorry he wasn’t you,” she says sarcastically “but you weren’t available. I tried to hold his hand the next day at school.” Sasha pulled a *firearm* on him.”

She turns back to Beth and slurs, “Please don’t bother my father with your whole slightly tipsy thing. He’s sick. You’ll stress him out.”

Beth says nothing, and I turn incredulous eyes on her. *Is she for real?* The woman is going to give Marcus some report on Clarissa’s behavior? That’s fucked-up.

It’s not even that I think Marcus would care. He knows she’s safe with

Clarissa thinks it would stress him out. I think he’d probably just shrug about it, but that’s not the point. These people have no business reporting her activities like she’s a misbehaving child.

I bite out, “I took over all the household contracts three weeks ago. I’m no longer employed by Marcus Harcourt. And you will report exact shit on my wife’s activities to her father. Do you understand me?”

The blonde’s eyes widen before she dips her chin in an abrupt

“Understood.”

When we reach our floor with the honeymoon suite, I swing Clarissa into my arms. "If anyone is liable to trip over the threshold, it's you tonight, not me." I say.

She sighs and holds on, and after the guard confirms the room is clear, she leaves, I carry her through the door.

I kick it closed, then take her to the bedroom to lay her on the bed.

She stares at me, a dent between her eyebrows, sudden determination written on her face. Then she launches herself at me, pressing her lips to mine. I freeze, then pull away, dragging her arms from around my neck. "My whole life," she says mournfully, "I'm going to look back on this night and remember how my own husband couldn't even stand to kiss me on our wedding day."

I sit down heavily on the side of the bed. *Is that what she thinks? "Clarity with this—"*

"I don't want your pity." She sounds embarrassed. And, yes, definitely. *Clarity? The drunk.*

"Clarissa," I say more firmly. "I want to kiss you. I want it more than I can imagine, but it wouldn't be right. I'd feel like a dirty old man."

It's not her age. I know she's an adult. But she's never even kissed me, according to her father. And after that conversation with Beth in the evening, I wonder if she's ever done anything at all.

Add in that she's stressed out over Marcus's health and also factoring in her alcohol consumption? Yeah, the things I picture doing to her make me feel like a creep.

She recoils hard, and I realize my phrasing could have been better.

"So you never kissed anyone when you were twenty years old? Please."

*ridiculous,*" she says.

It's probably fewer people than she imagines. I despise when most  
touch me. It makes my skin crawl. Or worse, it ignites a bone-deep  
me. Clarissa is... an exception.

"If I kiss you the way I want to, then I'll want other things we aren't  
for."

"You'll want to fuck."

"Yes, Clarissa," I say through a clenched jaw. "I'll want to fuck."

"Good. I'm down." She throws herself back on the bed, arms out like  
kind of virgin sacrifice, and I'm the dragon ready to devour her.

I jerk to standing and turn my back to her, trying to will my erection  
down. It's not working.

My *wife* is lying in her wedding dress on the bed of our honeymoon  
Clarissa. And she is "down to fuck."

She's also drunk as hell, and we agreed we wouldn't do this. I resolutely  
put in a position where I have to reject her.

Especially when I don't *want* to reject her. I want to peel that sparkling  
dress off her, taste every freckle on her body, and lose myself inside.

I want to do it again and again. At least three times.

She'd hate me for it later. And I'd hate myself. She isn't thinking  
what a violation of trust this would be.

And she agreed to those boundaries. Yet she's pushing them on me  
in her first night as man and wife.

"Aargh!" she cries in frustration. "I'll bet you were having tons  
when you were my age."

I absolutely was not. But I just say, "This is different. We have to  
discuss it. If we cross that line, we can't take it back. We're trying to

friendship here.”

people I expect more of an argument, but she turns away and asks in a ringer intone, "Are we going to be married without benefits forever?"

"We can have sex when you're twenty-five," I say. "If you still w't readythen."

I didn't plan to say it, but she's right. The idea of never sharing a b her is not only intolerable, it's impossible. There has to be an end i Either I can trust myself with her by that time... or she divorces m e some she's financially independent so she can move on.

Yes, it's a long time. But we need it.

n to go I have a very driven personality. I focus my energy on my Sometimes I barely sleep when I'm in pursuit of a goal. I don't kno n suite. kind of monster I'd become if I turned that energy on a person.

My father claimed he loved my mother. But it was obsession. it being obsession.

I have to practice maintaining emotional distance with Clarissa. In t y cloud I've just avoided all relationships. That's not an option with her. So ide her. time we have sex, she has to be so firmly established as a friend t nothing more than an act of physical relief. There can't be passion.

g about Twenty-five is the sensible choice. It's when she takes over all of h finances. I can't be in charge of her assets and sleep with her. It fe ur very much like I'm controlling her. She needs money, and I *have* all her mo

I'm only just now thinking about how warped that is. How easily of sex trap her and control her.

And Clarissa herself needs to gain some autonomy. The revelati ve with bodyguards have watched and controlled her even after she entered ad build a has left me uneasy.

She turns back, wobbly on her feet, and her jaw drops. It took a moment to process my words. To do the math in her head. Her eyes saucers. "Twenty-five!" she squeals. "Are you crazy? Nobody waits twenty-five years until they're twenty-five!"

I shrug as if the idea of waiting five years doesn't sound like hell to me. "Twenty-five is when I no longer control any of your finances. You'll be financially independent then. There's a power imbalance between us right now. It's not fair to you, and you'd hate me for it later."

"I would not," she says, scowling, words overenunciated in that way that people the world over do when they're trying to sound sober. "You don't know that."

"Neither do you."

She moves into me and runs her hands up my chest to rest on my shoulders. Her warm body presses against mine. My hands land on her hips. I know she's only this bold because she's completely soused. Tequila, she past, trust my nose.

Her eyes glitter. "Kiss me on my wedding day, James. Just a kiss." Tenderness pangs in my chest—along with a dose of guilt. When she'll never forget that I didn't kiss her on our wedding day, I believe her own. It can't hurt to kiss her. Not really.

A kiss on your wedding day is symbolic of a promise. Of a future. I do plan to give her a future.

I cradle the back of her head with my hand and kiss my wife.

on that  
ulthood

She turns back, wobbling on her feet, and her jaw drops. It took her a moment to process my words. To do the math in her head. Her eyes are like saucers. "Twenty-five!" she squeals. "Are you crazy? Nobody waits to have sex until they're twenty-five!"

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*Say You Won't Let Go*

CLARISSA

James kisses like a god. This kiss is the kind I've read about in romance novels and thought were just fiction. I didn't believe anything like this in the real world, only in some writer's imagination.

My body doesn't quite feel like my own. And while some of that is tequila, most of it is the wild rush of sensation from James's mouth on

His lips are firm but soft. His tongue moves against mine. And I feel just where he's touching me but inside, down low, in a spiral of heat and tension that makes me want to squirm and push closer to him.

He nips my bottom lip and pulls on it lightly with his teeth, exactly like he did to him downstairs. And now I realize why he looked so shocked because the sensation is delicious.

I give an involuntary cry of pleasure, arching my back to press myself against his. His erection pushes against my belly, and a touch of anticipation joins the spiral of heat inside me.

He pulls back, just enough to meet my gaze with eyes of blue flame. I put my hand down to his chest, where his heart thunders under my palm.

My breathing is awful. I sound like I've just sprinted a mile up



whimper and try to pull him back down for another kiss, but he stops r that hand on my head. It's probably for the best, because the room has spinning around me. I don't feel well at all. I need him to keep me anch

He drops his forehead to mine and breathes, slow and deep. Reach he presses the hand I have on his chest harder against his heart, his oth holding my head to his. I feel the slow, deliberate rise and fall of his beneath my palm, his pulse calming. After a moment, I mirror him. Br in when he does. Letting it out slowly. We stand that way for long mor

Eventually, he pulls away. Takes his hands off me. Steps back.

"I'll get you some water and painkillers. You're going to need the omancesays, heading for the door. "Call me if you need me."

existed "James, wait—"

"I'm sleeping on the couch."

s on the "Of course," I say, irritated all over again. "But I need you to help mine. of this dress first." I turn to show him the back. It's lined from the bas el it not spine to the back of my neck with tiny buttons. There's no way o eat andwithout help unless I take a pair of scissors to it.

James makes a noise in his throat, but when I look back at h y like Iexpression is blank. Like he's watching paint dry.

cked— "It's not as bad as it looks," I say. "There's a zipper hidden un buttons."

y body He mutters something under his breath. Then he's tugging on my zi nervousslides down my spine like a shiver, his knuckles brushing the exposed my back. He stops when the zipper ends just at the crack of my butt. I . I slidebacks away.

"Get settled for bed. I'll be back with the water and painkillers," he phill. He shuts the door behind him.



ne with I struggle out of the dress and shoes and garter, dizzy and nauseo  
s begunthat some of the adrenaline has worn off.

ored. Then I search through my suitcase in dawning horror, more frantic  
ing up,second.

er hand Julia packed my suitcase for me... and she didn't add pajamas. W  
breathsdid pack has me breaking out in a cold sweat.

eathing I use my thumb and index finger to pick up the sheer white b  
nents. nightie and thong Bronwyn gave me as a joke. I never planned to wea

Julia didn't know that. All she knew was it was brand-new bridal  
em," heshoved in my top drawer.

The only thing I have packed for tomorrow is a structured dress  
sleep in either.

Naked or lingerie. Those are my choices. And James is going  
me outwalking back in here with water and ibuprofen any minute.

e of my I crack the door and call out, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I, um, fo  
ut of itpack something to sleep in. Do you have an extra T-shirt or some  
could borrow?"

im, his There's silence for a moment. Then he says, "Yes." There's some sh  
and then he passes a white cotton undershirt through the crack in the d  
der thewarm in my hand and smells like him. Twenty seconds ago, this

James's body. I hope he never wants it back because it's mine now.

pper. It I pull it on, then make my way to the bed. I don't get far when the  
skin ofhits me.

Then he I make it to the toilet. Just. I'm kneeling there, hugging the porcelair  
in a strange hotel room, wearing nothing but my white silk wedding  
says asand James's tank, puking my guts out, when he returns to the bedroom.

"Oh, shit." James joins me in the bathroom and puts a warm hand

us nowback. Then he gathers the strands of my hair that are hanging down the toilet and clinging to my sweaty face.

by the "Ugh," I sob. "I'm dying."

His voice is dry. "No, sweet girl. But you might wish you had that shemorning."

I try to turn a scowl his way, but I can't hold it because I'm losing the contents of my stomach into the toilet. Again.

He holds my hair, then fidgets with it. He's removing my tiara. It v lingerieon, loose and threatening to join the contents of my stomach in the bowl. I lay my head on the rim, closing my eyes. James lifts me away I can'tand wipes my face, hands, and neck with a cool washcloth.

"All done for now?" he asks.

I nod, so he flushes the toilet, then lifts me up and sets me on the c handing me my toothbrush. I brush, and he holds a cup of water for orgot torinse with. I spit awkwardly into the sink while he hovers to make sure thing Ilose my balance.

James isn't wearing a shirt. He's barefoot, wearing only trousers, a uffling, as fit and beautiful as I expected him to be.

My eyes catch on swirling tattoos rendered in black ink that stretch was on his upper arms and chest. They don't fit his CFO image at all. I thinking you're entering a room containing a cat and then realizing tw nauseain that the "cat" is actually a mountain lion.

I peer drunkenly at his half-naked body and notice something eve i thronestartling. The tattoos are covering scars, many of which are small and i panties "Now, take these." He hands me two pills and an open bottle of .

"And drink the whole thing."

I don't want to. But he sounds like the voice of experience, so I try.

toward uncoordinated that I spill, and James ends up helping hold the bottle for

No wonder he's not interested in sleeping with me. I'm a hot freakin'

So gross. I'll never be able to look him in the face again.

in the "Why," I ask as he guides me back to the bed, "does anybody ever

alcohol? This is horrab... horrabll."

ing the He pulls back the comforter and settles me there, tucking the

around me. The ceiling spins in a merry-go-round twirl.

was still "Some things you only learn by experience. Moderation is the key

to toilet comes to alcohol. And plenty of water."

from it "Did you learn by experience?" I slur, eyes closed. "Or were you ju

knowing everrrrryyything?"

I hear him huff in amusement. "Remind me to tell you about my t

counter, first birthday sometime. I'm pretty sure there's a bar in Newark that

for me topicture posted with 'Do Not Serve This Asshole' written on it."

and I don't I think I laugh before I drift into unconsciousness. But I might ha

dreamed it.

and he's

1 across

t's like

70 steps

n more

round.

water.

I'm so

uncoordinated that I spill, and James ends up helping hold the bottle for me.

No wonder he's not interested in sleeping with me. I'm a hot freaking mess. So gross. I'll never be able to look him in the face again.

"Why," I ask as he guides me back to the bed, "does anybody ever drink alcohol? This is horrab... horrabll."

He pulls back the comforter and settles me there, tucking the blanket around me. The ceiling spins in a merry-go-round twirl.

"Some things you only learn by experience. Moderation is the key when it comes to alcohol. And plenty of water."

"Did you learn by experience?" I slur, eyes closed. "Or were you just born knowing everrrrryything?"

I hear him huff in amusement. "Remind me to tell you about my twenty-first birthday sometime. I'm pretty sure there's a bar in Newark that has my picture posted with 'Do Not Serve This Asshole' written on it."

I think I laugh before I drift into unconsciousness. But I might have just dreamed it.

*How Do I Say Goodbye*

JAMES

I move into the brownstone the next day. I have my own room different floor than Clarissa's.

Apparently I don't need to worry about her demanding any more. She's embarrassed by the memories of our wedding night enough to avoid the subject.

Even if she weren't, our focus is on Marcus, not the two of us. Because Marcus is dying. It's happening now, not in some vague future timeline.

Over the next two weeks, it becomes horrifyingly obvious that Marcus isn't going to make it the full three months the doctors predicted. Three months was such a short time. To have even that stolen from us creates a great desperate sense of impending doom.

Within four days of the wedding, his hospital bed is set up in his room. Understandably, Marcus doesn't want to be shut up in his room for days.

Clarissa dropped out of school for the remainder of the semester and spends every waking moment with her father or arranging for his care.

I thought I'd be the one making those arrangements, caring for the



them. I am not a man who knows how to sit with his feelings. Well, it sucks, I get up, and I do something about it. I need to fix this. And I can't, I need to do the things that need doing.

But Clarissa isn't having that. She won't be usurped. And I am useless and helpless in the face of it.

There is no stopping the clock. I accepted that weeks ago.

And now I'm supposed to be sad. That's allowed, understandable, and encouraged. And if I dig around under all the layers inside me, I know the pain at the core of me.

But my overriding emotion right now is anger. A therapist from my childhood once called anger a "secondary emotion." He'd encouraged me to look beneath the anger, to find the pain and fear underneath.

Why would I want to do that? Why would anyone?

Losing Marcus so young and in such a horrible, unforgiving way is infuriating. I struggle to hide that because it's the last thing Clarissa or Marcus needs from me. But it's there, nonetheless.

For these last seven years, I saw in Marcus the father I wish I'd had. And I watched him with Clarissa, watched how he loved her and protected her. And in a weird way, seeing him with her was healing.

Marcus is not perfect. I can see now that he stifled Clarissa's growth and freedom in some ways. But it was never from a lack of control or a lack of love.

She told me yesterday that she has no memory, in her entire life, of ever raising his voice or his hand to her. I can barely imagine the character she described. Peace and safety inside a family? It seems impossible.

And now Marcus is leaving. He's abandoning Clarissa, long before she's ready.

men life It's a stupid thought. It's wrong, so I shove it down as deep as it v  
since I But it keeps creeping back up to scrape at me.

I don't know who I'm angry at. It's not Marcus, and it's not Clarissa.  
ess and it's God. And there's definitely some of it that's self-directed. Because  
am again, watching someone I love die without a single thing I can d  
it.

e, even I hate all that psychoanalysis shit. When I was a kid, I had to g  
now it's therapist to talk about my father after he murdered my mother. And a  
people do is rip pieces out of you and put them on display, like some  
om my mental autopsy.

l me to Instead of butterflying my lungs, they want to rip out my nerves ar  
and call them trauma. But I don't sit around and cry about feelings.

Sometimes anger is productive. Sometimes it's what keeps us from  
way is into all that shit we would drown in otherwise.

Marcus Marcus has asked me to take care of Clarissa, to be there and prot  
the way he would have. He wouldn't have ever had to ask. There is n  
that will stop me from doing it. She is not going to be alone and h  
rotected terrified. No one is touching her. No one is harming her. No one.

Clarissa is coping better than I am, at least on the surface.

with and She talks kindly to the nurses and the doctors. She patiently coaxes  
lack of to sip just a little more soup. She tidies up around him and helps hi  
sponge baths. She teases him and reminisces. She falls asleep hold  
Marcus hand in the chair next to his bed. And sometimes she doesn't wake up  
childhood touch her shoulder, so I carry her up to her bed. Then I return to t  
place.

re she's I sit with Marcus and hold his hand. When he's asleep, and we're  
let the angry tears fall. And when he's awake, I make the promises

will go stand in his shoes. I will protect her. I will be a man who does not h  
does not leave.

Maybe I always knew Clarissa was sweet and good-natured. What I didn'  
e here I was that she has a hell of a backbone. She has mental fortitude. I kn  
o about wants to cry, and she does, often. But she doesn't want to do it where  
can see. So she cries in the bathroom, then washes her face off and  
go to a back into that study with a smile on her face. And she makes him laug  
ll those through the pain. His and hers.

kind of They're both laughing now as I peek inside with a knock on the doo  
Marcus is gray and drawn. So thin he's skeletal. But he's laughing  
id heartweak wheeze. Clarissa is grinning. And propped in Marcus's arm is  
pink stuffed toy.

sinking Marcus lifts his free arm, the one with the IV taped to the back of hi  
and gestures weakly for me to come inside.

tect her "Clare thinks I need a little buddy to hug. What do you think?" H  
nothing crinkle at the corners.

urt and I smile because Marcus wants me to and say, "Pink is your color."

He closes his eyes, but he smiles in return. "I see... the appeal o  
Squishmallow, Clare Bear. Very comfy."

Marcus "I told you so."

m with He doesn't open his eyes, his breathing shallow. "Clare." He reac  
ling hiser, letting the pillow toy fall away.

when I She takes his hand, and I move to stand behind her, my hands cupp  
ake her shoulders. "I'm here, Daddy."

"You're going to be okay, honey. You're so strong. So smart."

alone, I "Yes I am. I get that from you."

: I will His head bobs in a shallow nod. "You bet you do." He tries to ca



urt and breath, then says, "And you got that sweet heart from your mom  
both... so proud of you."

't know Clare chokes back a sob, shuddering. I feel it under my hands,  
low she doesn't make a sound. Doesn't let Marcus hear.

Marcus She squeezes his hand gently and brushes the thin strands of his hair  
I walk his forehead. "I'm proud of you, too, Daddy," she says, her voice  
high, even an octave higher than it should be. "I don't know if I ever said that to you  
I know I love you, but I don't think I ever told you how proud I am of you  
I rframe. there hasn't been a single moment of my life when I didn't know how  
with you loved me."

a large He bobs his head ever so slightly. "That's how it's supposed to be."

Marcus surprises me when he opens his eyes and focuses on me.  
his hand, you, too, son. Proud of you. I should have told you that."

*I can't. I can't. I can't.*

his eyes This man has been my friend, but he has also been my father. Better  
my father. His love and pride are the most important words I've ever heard  
my life. And I can't fucking bear to hear them like this, when it means  
of you knows he's leaving.

I force the words past my closed-off throat. "I love you, too, Marcus"

He closes his eyes again. "I chose you for my Clare Bear. Found someone  
she's forgone enough for her." His small smile is a little smug. "I'd hoped I  
more time. That she'd be a little older. That you two would figure it  
out on your own. But this... works."

"I don't understand."

"Saw you... that first time... in the lobby. Dolores Kirby dropped  
a box... of paper. She has arthritis... but great at her job. Papers match  
his

. We're huge mess. Five people just stood there, but you... came through doors... and helped her."

but she "I don't remember that," I admit.

"It wasn't you... picking up papers... that did it," he says. "It was w  
ir from said... after she walked away... to the assholes... who ignored her."

just an I blink. "What did I say?"

ou. You "No... clue. But you were... an intern who made a group of se  
ou. And executives... ashamed of themselves. And the next time I saw... Dol  
v much He wheezes a laugh. "—she had a promotion... and a PA... to ca  
papers."

Marcus passes at 10:04 a.m. the next day, with Clarissa holding his  
"I love stand on the other side of his bed, and I shove the pain down where i  
to go so I can be there for Clarissa. I keep my back stiff, my face bla  
my eyes on my wife.

ter than I don't look at Marcus. I can't. When I'm alone, I'll look. Not now. N  
heard in Clarissa sits for a long time, just holding Marcus's hand. Quiet. Ur  
eans he let go, though he no longer lives in that body. Finally, she stands, eerily  
tucking blankets around him, kissing his forehead.

:" She walks to the door. "I have to call—"

someone I catch her just before her knees hit the floor. I sink down next to  
'd have wrap her up tight while she sobs hard enough to make herself gag.

out on Useless. I'm agonizingly useless. Helpless in the face of her pain and

I know this feeling well: the one where it seems I could just fly off  
ether and evaporate into thin air if I don't find something to tether me  
d a big ground. With the way she clings, I'd guess Clarissa feels the same.

ide... a So I pull her onto my lap and don't let go, ready and willing to  
anchor in the storm. I rock her in my arms until she cries herself out. /

h those steal some small comfort while I give it, no one has to know.

hat you

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ores—"   
urry the

hand. I  
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nk, and

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able to  
y quiet,

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l mine.  
into the  
to solid

be her  
And if I

steal some small comfort while I give it, no one has to know.







I'm not around as much as I'd like to be in the weeks following the : Marcus's illness and passing left a large void at work, regardless of how he orchestrated the transition. I'm working insane hours, even for me, our stock from taking too much of a hit. Stepping into Marcus's shoes is an honor; I can't let his life's work suffer because I'm not enough or because I didn't work hard enough.

But I also made a promise to be a friend to Clarissa.

I'm failing at that already.

I drop my napkin onto my dinner plate and contemplate the empty chair where Clarissa should be sitting.

She hasn't been down to dinner once since Marcus passed. She takes meals alone in her bedroom. In fact, she rarely leaves her suite of rooms upstairs at all. When she does come downstairs, she floats through the brownstone, ghostlike, quiet, almost transparent in her frailty. On occasions when I try to break through her haze of grief, she just blinks as though she's not sure I'm speaking English.

It's been weeks since the funeral. And while I'm not trying to put



kind of limitation or end date on her grieving—God knows I’m still in the depths of it myself—I’m deeply concerned for her.

Something has to give.

I reach for the bag with the sporting goods company name on it that I’d left on the floor beside my chair. I wanted to be prepared should she ever come down to dinner. But I needn’t have bothered.

Snatching it, I head for the stairs.

There’s a muffled sound behind her door when I knock, and then it opens just enough for her head and shoulders to peek through.

“Yes?”

funeral. “I’m here for our half hour.”

How well “What?”

to keep I hold up my phone with the email version of our marriage plan she’d sent me. “It’s in the rules. Half an hour of conversation.”

It’s not good “I’m not good company right now.”

“Are you refusing to follow the rules?” I shake my head at her teasingly.

“You little rebel, you.”

“I’m serious, James. I’m no fun to be around.”

My seat “Then we’re even. I’m shitty company too. How about we renegotiate the terms? Half an hour in the same room, no conversation necessary.”

She blinks, then moves to shut the door. “Tomorrow.”

I stop it with my foot. “Why not now?”

She lifts her shoulders briefly, then swings her door open. “You can come in here. I don’t want to go downstairs.”

It’s progress. I’ll take it.

I’ve never given much thought to Clarissa’s bedroom. The first time I’d been in it, I was too distracted by the fact that I’d walked in on her lying



I in the her bed.

The subsequent times were overshadowed by the feel of her in m and the odd sort of tunnel vision that comes with functioning in the mi t I'd set crisis.

actually But now I do, and I'm a little nonplussed by what I see. "This doesn't look like you."

She'd been headed to a seating area near her cold fireplace. At my t creep she turns around, showing some interest. "What isn't me about it?"

"Well, you hate pink and cutesy, for starters. And everything ab room is cute."

She frowns. "How do you know I hate pink?"

"You made this face every time you saw something pink at our w owing reception." I arrange my features into a prissy and mildly di expression.

There's the tiniest spark of humor in her eyes. "I did not." asingly. "I've also never seen you wear pink. Your favorite color is green."

She drops into an overstuffed chair and curls one leg under her. "W you that?"

negotiate She doesn't invite me to sit, but I do it anyway, making comfortable in the other chair and dropping the bag I'm carrying o floor by my feet. "No one told me. I have eyes. Your favorite scarf is your favorite earrings are jade, and the journal you use to write dow n comestory ideas is green."

She blinks at me, startled. Then she says, "You're right. I don't rea pink. I think it's mostly because I went through a pink phase wher ime I'd around ten years old and overdid it until I got sick of it. And greer ying on favorite color. Very observant, Mr. Mellinger."

“Thank you, Mrs. Harcourt-Mellinger.”

She lapses into silence and leans back against the chair, staring at me. She shivers a little, so I get up and light the gas fireplace. Then I pull the blanket off the bench at the end of her bed and drape it over her.

I sit back down and say nothing. I did promise we could sit in silence if she didn't want to talk.

She watches the flames and doesn't look at me when she says, “My favorite color is blue.”

I smile a little. “It used to be. Lately, I prefer green. The mossy kind with flecks of gold.”

She looks at me curiously, and I could kick myself for saying that out loud. I change the subject. “If you hate pink, you should change your room.”

“I don't want to hurt Dad's feelings. He picked all of this out for me.” She freezes, and then devastation floods her features. For a moment I almost forget that Marcus wasn't alive and well and just downstairs. I

won't care that she's changing a room he obviously had a part in choosing. Because he isn't here to care.

I've done it more than once. I think to myself that I need to tell her something or he'll get a kick out of something. Then I remember. And in that moment, it's like I'm losing my best friend for the first time all over again. Her shoulders shake, and I think, *Fuck it*. I walk over and pick her up. I sit back down with her, wrapped in the throw blanket, on my lap.

And true to my word, we sit in silence.

At some point, she falls asleep on me. And then I drift off myself.

I haven't been sleeping well at all. Which is par for the course for me since before Marcus died. I never rest for more than a few hours at a time when I do, nightmares plague me.

But her dozing weight in my lap, her breath on my neck, her head leaning against me—all of it acts as some kind of drug. I sleep, and my dreams involve murder or my failed attempt to kill a monster. They're of course smiling and biting my lip.

I wake when she stirs, my thigh numb under her weight. I'm not sure how long it's been, but it's well over our assigned half hour.

She stretches and clambers off me with a mumbled "Sorry."

I scratch across the scruff on my chin. "Nothing to be sorry for."  
"I'm going to take a shower," she says.

I stand, working out the pins and needles in my legs, and pick up the bag she brought with me. I hold it out, and she eyes it curiously.

"What is that?"

I give the bag a little shake. "Open it and see."

She takes it, peers inside with a tiny frown, then draws the contents out. "Ummm, why did you get me a swimsuit?"

It's a one-piece in a shimmery green-and-gold pattern. Made for competitive swimming, not lounging on a beach.

"I swim at my club every morning before work. If you'd like to join, meet me downstairs at five thirty sharp, and we'll ride over together."

She screws her face up. "That's not morning. It's still the middle of the night."

"Hey, if you can't keep up with me, just say so," I say and reach back for the suit.

She snatches it away and holds it to her chest. "I like to swim."  
"So I've heard."

"Maybe I'll be there."

I smirk. "I won't hold my breath."

heartbeat

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*Safe Place*

CLARISSA



*Safe Place*

CLARISSA



I SLIDE MY GOGGLES from my eyes to my latex-covered head and look up at James. He's talking to me, crouched at the edge of the pool in a black speedo with a white towel thrown over his glistening shoulder. I can't hear a word he's saying because my *God*.

I don't even know where to look. I've been swimming with him every morning a week for three weeks now, and the view never gets old. My eyes travel over the swirling ink of his tattoos, the ridges in his stomach, lower to the bulge in his shorts, down to those muscular, hair-covered

—  
“Clarissa.”

His voice sounds strained, and I drag my attention back up to him. “What?”

“I said I'm impressed by how fast you're regaining your speed and endurance. You're a natural.”

I pull myself out of the pool and sit next to him, enjoying the sensation of gravity returning and the scent of chlorine. “Thanks. Before high school graduation, Bronwyn helped me apply to Blackwater State University. They took video of me, and we sent my times to the swim coach there. We used a fake name—” I laugh at the memory. “—because I wanted to see if I could swim without knowing who I was.”

I shrug a little. “I thought nothing would come of it since Dad never swam competitively. I didn't really think I stood a chance of making the team, but a girl can dream.”

“What happened?”

“Coach said they definitely had a place for me.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

and look “Dad didn’t want me moving out of the house or going to a state school in the middle of nowhere. He didn’t think it was a real school if it was in the middle of nowhere, and I was in the I League. And he didn’t want me swimming competitively. There are no spectators at swim meets. And sometimes the press. He was afraid... well, you know how he was.”

My gaze James stands, and I join him, easing the cap from my head as we walk toward the locker rooms. He hands me a dry towel, his expression disbelieving. “You should have told him to fuck off and done what you wanted to do.”

I choke in laughing surprise, and he stops walking. I pause there for a moment in the short hallway to the locker rooms, turning back to see why he’s fallen over. His face is scowling, his jaw tight and flexing.

He moves closer, and at the intensity of his fury, I take a step backward, my shoulder blades kissing the wall.

He recoils. “Did you think I was going to hurt you?”

“Of course not.”

“You backed away.”

“I don’t like confrontation. You look angry.”

“I’m not angry,” he bites out.

“Oh—”

“I’m fucking pissed.”

I try to understand where this is coming from. “Why? What did I do?”

“What if I told you I forbid you from coming back to the pool?”

My heart sinks. “But... why?”

“Because you’re my wife, and I don’t want people seeing you here. If some douche sees you in a swimsuit and decides he’s going to stalk you, it’s your fault.”

“I—” My throat clogs. “No one else is here but the staff. You resent me for being a swimmer?”

whole pool. Are you sure—”

hook in “Tell me to fuck off.”

in’t Ivy I shake my head in disbelief.

crowds “We’re having asparagus soup for dinner tonight. I expect you to eat

u know “What?”

He moves closer and braces his forearm on the wall above my head.  
I hate asparagus. Tell me to fuck off.”

sturbed. *Oh, this asshole.* He’s doing a Bronwyn, except instead of gently cooing

to me to stand up for myself, he’s goading me. But I’m not afraid of

James’s feelings the way I was with my dad. James can handle it.

behind. I reach up to grab hold of his thick wrist. I whisper, “Fuck off, James.”

He makes a sound in his throat and drops his forehead to mine. His eyes  
narrow, my deep and growly when he says, “That’s my girl. Say it again.”

My nipples go diamond hard, and liquid heat pools low in my  
“Fuck off,” I say, a little louder this time.

“I’m having a decorator redo the billiards room in pink.”

I snicker. “You are not. Fuck off.”

He smiles and clenches my waist through my wet swimsuit. His  
chest presses against mine. It’s not the first time. We touch a lot. But  
mostly casual touches—nothing overtly sexual.

This is different. This is wet skin and elevated emotions, and I  
want him so badly my nerve endings vibrate with it. His cock is an inch  
from my belly.

“Tell me all the things you never did. Do you want to burn everything  
in your bedroom? We’ll do it,” he says.

you?” “No.”

drive the “You sure about that?”

“I want to donate it to a women’s shelter.”

“Good girl. What else?”

“I want to learn to drive a car.”

“Done.”

“I want a pet. Dad didn’t like animals inside the house. But I want a dog. There’s a doghouse behind my words as I begin my list.

“Keep talking,” he says, his mouth against the thin skin at my temple. “I want to travel.”

“Do it.”

“I don’t want to be a librarian. I want to write smutty romance novels. Nobody will ever take seriously.”

“So fucking hot,” he breathes.

“I want to kiss you.”

He holds still for a moment and doesn’t say a word. Then his mouth presses against my neck, his large body pinning me to the wall. He tastes of chlorophyll toothpaste. And the feel of his tongue stroking against mine, his lips exploring, his stubble that scrapes against my tender skin, it all ignites a maelstrom of sexual longing inside me.

He eats at my mouth, his hand moving to the back of my head to hold me first this way, then that. I reach up to stroke across the vaulted expanse of his back, exploring the satin skin with my fingertips, exultant that his iron baron mine.

The door at the end of the hall swings open. There’s a murmur of voices, then the sound of the door snicking shut again. It’s Sasha keeping a member of the staff away from us. I’d forgotten, for just a moment, we were. That Sasha is right there at the end of the hall in full view.

James eases back a little, his expression troubled as he says, “Tl

slippery slope. We're friends, Clarissa."

*Ouch.*

He steps away and rubs the back of his neck. "We can't be more than  
Not for a long time."

it one." It's almost worse that his expression is so gentle and kind.

This is his reminder—no catching feelings.

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*Too damn late.*







A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

*When the Party's Over*

JAMES

Clarissa is a torment. She's not even trying. She just is. It's not just love the feel of her touching me, it's that she's become necessary for function.

Knowing she wants me to touch her too? It's torture.

After the incident outside the locker rooms, I've pulled away from her. I'm sure she thinks it's because I don't want to kiss her or touch her or words, "catch feelings."

The truth is worse. I don't just want to kiss her—I want to own her. I just want to touch her—I want to tease her until she begs me to give her an orgasm. I want to watch her wrap that innocent mouth around my cock. I want to rut on her like an animal until she's shaking from how hard I come.

I need her.

And as soon as I think those words, I hear my father's voice screaming at my mother. "You don't get to leave me. I need you. I love you."

He's in prison now. He'll die there.

And I cannot be that man.



I have to stay the hell away from her. Just until I get these feelings under control. Until I can stop thinking about her and wanting her every minute of every damn day.

We still swim every morning. And we have dinner together most evenings unless I have something I have to do for work. But I keep my time with her on a strict schedule, and I've attempted to interject a level of formality back into our interactions.

Clarissa's not having it. She simply refuses to be cowed by my resentment as though she sees me, acting stiff and polite, and is determined to be affectionate. She just calls me her grump and says she'll be my sunst that I whatever the hell that means.

She trusts me, when what she needs is to be on her guard with me.

She thinks the way I goaded her into telling me to fuck off was sort of a game. It wasn't. She has no boundaries with me. It's not just that I can't touch her. I'm not allowed to—she would put up a token resistance, but she has a customized spendthrift trust fund that I control until she's twenty-one. At that point, certain parts of her trust fund will become available to her in increments until she's twenty-five. I'm not miserly about her money. Marcus's goal wasn't to keep her on some kind of budget. It was to give her access to the money she needs to get away from con artists.

But it's a disgusting level of power over her. One spouse should never have that kind of power over another. If I refused to allow her to leave me, she would be trapped.

Which is why I started funneling money every week into a "spending account" that's only in her name, plus a savings account for the same purpose. If she ever needs to run from me, I don't want her to be stuck with no way out.

So I keep my distance from her for now. After dinner with Clarissa

s undernights, I work alone in the downstairs den I've taken over as a home office. I damn could easily use Marcus's study, but his death is too fresh. Someday I'll sit at that desk and think of him with nostalgia. For now, it simply picks at the evenings of my grief.

h her to And every night, when I've finally worked myself to the point of falling back into exhaustion, I sneak up to the third floor like some kind of stalker. I don't sleep until I've done it.

erve. It's The first time I eased open her bedroom door without knocking, I caught her more her reading her Kindle in bed. She should have told me to get lost. Her light shine—reminded me to knock next time. She should have started locking her door.

She didn't. She patted the bed beside her, smiled, and invited me in.

I didn't go in, of course. I told her I was stopping by to tell her goodnight and to remind her I wouldn't be home for dinner the next night.

want to But when she's asleep? I'm an absolute weird-ass creep. I don't see the point of the doorway. Instead, I sit down beside her on the bed and just let the silence wash over me. I hope she'll bring me peace.

available I imagine a future where she's sleeping in *our* bed, and I can come in and sit beside her and pull her into my arms.

protect Sometimes I even kick off my shoes and lie beside her, fully dressed under the top of the blankets. Never close enough to touch. Sometimes I'll even fall asleep that way. And when I wake, I find she's rolled toward me in her sleep. She's put her head on my shoulder and her hand on my chest, right over my aching heart.

e same She's asleep tonight. I guess she's overheated, because she's pushed the new sage-green comforter off her body. And instead of her usual pajama bottoms and T-shirt, she's in a silky black thong and the underwear she bought for me on our wedding night. She's asleep on her stomach, one leg

office. In a way that means I could pull that strip of fabric aside and slide right  
'll sit ather.

he scab She's left her bathroom door partially open with the light on, so I  
everything. And a good man would turn the hell around and leave.

oint of Instead, I ease her bedroom door shut behind me and move closer.

I can't touch. I never, ever touch her. But when I sit beside her on the b  
shivers, and goose bumps pop up all over her.

caught *Damn it.*

ost and "Clarissa," I murmur.

loor. She doesn't move or make a sound, so I reach across and d  
comforter over her. "I know you're awake."

nd night She rolls over and lifts her sooty lashes to peer up at me from her  
"How'd you know?"

stand in I lift an eyebrow. "For one, I heard you tell one of your friends t  
sight of hate things. You call them 'butt floss.' I'm finding it hard to imagin  
enjoy sleeping in one. How long have you known?"

limb in "That you've been coming in here to check on me?"

That's a very gracious way to put it, but we'll go with that. "Yes."

ssed on "I think from the first night." She makes a bit of an apologetic face.  
en drift very light sleeper most of the time."

leep and "And you didn't think maybe you should start locking your door or  
beating me to stay out?"

Her expression is shocked. "Of course not. Why would I do that?  
hed here you the first night you found me awake that you're welcome here."

I fuzzy "How are you not freaked out?"

er shirt I She shrugs. "When I was a kid, Dad had nightmares. I'd w  
bent up sometimes in the middle of the night to him taking my pulse. I guess

it inside see this as all that different.”

“What?”

can see “He had nightmares about me dying or something happening to  
had a routine. Even though we have security here out the wazoo, every  
I won’t he had to check every door, lock, and alarm personally. And if he w  
ed, she with a nightmare, he couldn’t go back to sleep until he made sure I wa  
So he’d sit by my bed and take my pulse.”

I’d had no idea it was that bad. My chest aches at the thought of  
Marcus, yes. But also for that little girl who felt her father’s emotion.  
rag the being was her responsibility.

“And how is this the same?”

pillow. “I assumed maybe you felt lonely or were grieving but didn’t want  
You always left when I was awake. I was trying to give you time to j  
hat you don’t know... find some peace.”

e you’d “That thong is not giving me peace,” I say.

She mutters something under her breath.

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘It wasn’t supposed to.’ Are you satisfied?”

“I’m a I’m not. We have years to go before we consummate this marriage.

“I have to be at the Los Angeles office after Christmas. I’ll be the  
telling month.” I had no plans to say that. I’d had no plans to *do* that. But  
keep going like this. I need space and distance.

? I told She jolts into a sitting position. “When do we leave?”

“Not we. Just me. I’ll be too busy for anything but work. We’ll Fa  
every day. If you need me anytime, day or night, you call. You  
ake up probably start back up at school next semester anyway.”

I didn’t “I see.” Her expression is shuttered as she lies back down. She rolls

side away from me and pulls the comforter up to her shoulders. N

higher pitch than usual, she says, "Can you turn off the bathroom light  
me. Heyou go, please? I'm tired."

y night, I hesitate. What I want is to crawl into that bed with her, hold her, a  
rope upher to forgive me. Instead, I turn out the light and leave.

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“That dick-faced dickwad,” Bronwyn seethes, throwing herself against the back seat of the car with a huff.

I shoot a glance up toward the front, where my driver, Dean, sits behind the wheel. The privacy screen is up, thank goodness. “It’s not... he’s not.”

I want to say James isn’t a dick-faced dickwad. But that resentment started bubbling up in me when I took vows with a man who made us swear a stupid rule about not falling in love with each other has reached full boil.

What am I even doing here? I’m in love with my friend. And now I have to even stand to sleep in the same house with me.

Franki shoves her highlighted brown hair behind her ear, then reaches over and takes both my hands in hers. “You know I always look for the bright side.”

I nod glumly.

“The bright side here is that you do not have to stay there and suffer,” she says in her gentle bubblegum voice.

I lift my head to look into her big brown eyes. Then I look down at Bronwyn, who has her arms crossed over her chest and her lips held tight.



“What I’d like to know,” Bronwyn says, “is how James could ch your ass in a thong and not tap that. You’re fucking fine. Are we su into women?”

I sigh. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Because if he’s not... if he’s gay or asexual, then that’s a whole d situation.”

“Bronwyn, I know he’s attracted to me.”

“I think he’s trying to be noble,” Franki says.

I roll my eyes. “He thinks because of how strict this trust fund is a he controls all of my money, my home, and my education that it w inst thetaking advantage of me to sleep with me.”

“Hmmm,” Bronwyn says.

behind “What does that mean?”

ot...” She puts both her hands up, all “calm down,” and says, “He’s no ent thatwrong, is he?”

write a I reach down and adjust the Christmas packages on the floor. We’ oil. spending the afternoon shopping, and suddenly, I’m tempted to toss he can'tgifts out the window.

I’d never do that. But even the fact that I’ve thought it feels st hes outempowering.

o bright “I don’t care that he’s in control of my money. I’ve never been in of it. What difference does it make?”

Even Franki’s jaw drops. She and Bronwyn share a look I can’t deci er,” she “What?”

“You just want to go from being under your dad’s thumb to towardman’s? And he doesn’t just control your money. He could tell you to ght. that you’re not going back to school, that he won’t pay for it. Or he cc

“You know that the two of you are moving, that he’s closing up the house where he’s living in. And you couldn’t do a thing about it. He could sell this car without even discussing it with you first. How does that not bother you?”

“James wouldn’t do that.”

“But he could. And he knows that. If he’s uneasy about it, then I can say, as much as his rejection of you makes me want to cause him some bodily harm... I respect it a little.”

I frown and lean back against my seat. I hadn’t really thought about how she has a point.

I don’t want to be angry at my father. I won’t be angry at him. I understand the reasons for the things he did.

But why did he create this particular type of trust fund? I understand protecting assets with a trust fund, but why one so strict? Did he have that much faith in me at all? I may as well have been a seven-year-old with a guardian instead of a twenty-year-old woman.

My eyes widen at the realization. “James thinks he’s my guardian.”

Franki shrugs a little helplessly. “He kind of is.”

“No,” I breathe, my voice shaking a little with the word.

And something in me shifts, like ice breaking up on the Hudson.

She’s right.

I sigh. “This will never work if I just sit around and wait for James.”

Franki lifts her palms. “What’s keeping you in that house?”

Only my own fear of taking charge of my life and a pathetic dream.

James will change his mind. But he isn’t someone who waffles. If he’s waiting until I’m twenty-five for us to have a full marriage, he means

I will not waste my time sitting alone in that brownstone while he makes excuses to not be there. How soon until he moves back into his Ma-

you're penthouse because it's "closer to the office"?

without And what will I be doing while he does? Finishing out a degree I wanted at a school I never wanted to go to? I wanted to go to school in Pennsylvania before this marriage.

have to "I still have my acceptance for next semester at BSU," I say tentatively. Extreme Bronwyn's eyes grow wide. She slaps her hands to my cheeks and gives me a loud, smacking kiss right on my lips. I sputter and laugh, shoving her away from me. "It's perfect," she says. "If you keep living with him and seeing him every day after day, you'll be miserable if he doesn't change his mind about his relationship."

I chew on the inside of my lip.

d about "Is there any chance he'll change his mind about the sex?" Franki asks. no faith "I don't think so. He seems pretty determined."

uardian "Come to school with me," Bronwyn urges. "Let your relationship evolve slowly without all that pressure of your hormones going crazy around you. We both know there's no way you're going to wait until you're twenty-one, but you can make the next year or so easier on yourself."

I look up at the ceiling and bob my head side to side while I think.

"Come on. You've never done anything without an authority figure hovering over you, telling you where to go and what to do. Live a little, girl."

' At those words, my metaphorical spine stiffens a little. The last thing I want or need is for James to act like my boss or my father. I've been pushing back against that from day one.

he says "I'll do it," I finally say.

ans it. Bronwyn throws her hands in the air. "Whoo! Girl, we need to celebrate this!"

ie finds I don't feel like celebrating. This doesn't feel like a win to me. It's terrifying.

Franki reaches over and pats my hand. “It’s a good idea.”

I never “Think we can get Dean to celebrate with us?” Bronwyn asks  
hool inreaches for the button to lower the privacy screen between us.

I push her hand away. “Don’t you dare. Leave the poor man alone.”

ely. She throws herself back against the seat and crosses her arms. “Yo  
lands ahe likes it when I harass him.”

away. “Dean doesn’t like anything or, as far as I can tell, anybody. You  
im daymad because you can’t make a conquest out of him.”

ut your Bronwyn’s jaw drops in outrage at my words. “Dean’s not a co  
He’s the love of my life.”

“You don’t know a thing about him.”

ks. “I know enough.”

Bronwyn’s upbringing differed from Franki’s and mine in more t  
developobvious ways. Until she was five years old, she lived with her single  
nd him.in a trailer in a little town in central Pennsylvania. She still has  
ty-five,extended family there and spends a lot of time with them.

When Bronwyn’s adoptive father met her mother, it was a whirlwin  
at-first-sight thing. He snatched them both out of their Podunk rural li  
figuredropped them right into the rarefied air of New York high society.

.” But the two of them never quite made what I’d consider a full tra  
thing IAnd there are things Bronwyn is positively rabid about that I wouldn  
pushingeven considered if she weren’t a constant in my life.

One is that there’s no such thing as “the help.” The very idea of igno  
not being friends with the people paid to take care of basic services is  
rate!” mind, a symptom of a snob. And snobs are, to Bronwyn’s thinking,  
It feelsworst.

And that’s great if said employee is interested in being friends.

Dean is not. Dad hired him last year, and I'm pretty sure his instructions were along the lines of "Keep those girls safe and out of trouble."

That's what he's done. That and nothing else. And when Bronwyn made her usual friendly overtures, he met her with a stone wall of deference. You know First, it infuriated her. Then she decided Dean was a challenge.

He is anything but just a driver. None of them have ever been. But they're just He's a cut even above the usual bodyguard/driver. I don't even know Dad found him.

conquest. He's probably only in his early thirties, but Dean is obviously a seasoned veteran. He's built like a linebacker, carries a concealed firearm under a black suit jacket, and his head is on a constant swivel, looking for nonobvious threats to our well-being.

When the Bronwyn took one look at stoic Dean, with his stoic face and her mother's muscles, and decided she was in love.

a huge She inches her hand back toward the button.

"Bronwyn," I warn. "Leave Dean the fuck alone. Not everyone has a secret life and a love-you."

Her outraged expression morphs into first shock, then delight.

"Why is that funny?" I grouch.

Her position. "It's not funny. It's awesome. You never tell anyone off. You don't get mad. Ever. Then you went and drank at your wedding—way more than I would recommend, I might add—and you got mad at James. And now you're just sassed me. Right to my face. It's wonderful," she says.

She says, in her "It's not wonderful. It's awful."

just the "No." She grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze. "It's not. It's normal. I know I loved your dad—"

"Don't," I say.

uctions “I loved him, but he controlled you way too much. It was a l  
emotional blackmail, whether he meant it to be or not. You thought if  
/n tried yourself feel bad things, a meteor was going to fall out of the sky.”

“That wasn’t my father’s fault. And the meteor already fell, so what  
matter now?”

: Dean? “Okay, that’s not quite the life lesson I was going for, but let’s roll v  
/ where She looks back up toward the front of the car wistfully. Then he  
creeps back toward the button. It’s obviously an act designed to get a r  
easoned out of me, as evidenced by her slow and flagrant progress.

der his “Grow up,” Franki says to Bronwyn. “You act like a middle school  
existent a crush around Clarissa’s driver.”

Bronwyn smirks, and then her eyes widen. “That’s it. Clarissa, there  
is stoic compromise with James. Tell him you’ve been unfairly denied the bo  
experience.”

An incredulous laugh punches out of me. “What?”

: to like She shrugs. “If you two just avoid each other or do the platonic  
thing, how are you supposed to transition later into something else?  
know it’s not going to take until you’re twenty-five, but for this fir  
while? You should ask him to be your middle school boyfriend. The  
on’t get pressure for sex, then. Just hand-holding. A little light French kiss  
: than I promise that you’re going steady and won’t hold anyone else’s hand.  
ow you it, it’s brilliant.”

I roll my eyes. “Just as a reminder, I didn’t do any of that in middle  
Sasha would have broken the lips of any boy trying to lay one on me.”  
al. You Bronwyn snorts in agreement. “Yeah, she would have. That’s my  
You never had any of that. There has to be an easing into it, you know  
can’t soar in the clouds until you’ve learned to ride a tricycle, little spa



kind of I laugh, then give her my snootiest expression. “Birds don’t ride  
you let Your point is invalid.”

“No, you listen to your elders, missy.”

does it “You’re four months older than I am,” I say.

She nods slowly and repetitively. “And I’ve got a good twenty y  
with it.” you in life experience.”

er hand “Oh, of course, Wise Woman of Brooklyn Heights. Share with n  
reaction infinite knowledge of arranged marriages.”

“I will. Moving out and dating him will take some of the pressu  
ler with Living with him when your relationship is so squishy has to suck.”

“Squishy?” Franki asks.

’s your “Yes, squishy. They’re married. And he cares about her, but she’s s  
y friend more into him as far as I can see.”

*Oof.*

“Believe me—” She shoots a glance toward the front of the car, the  
: friend at me. “—that sucks. Your relationship is already weird.”

We all I speak in the soothing tone I do when I know I am absolutely not g  
st little say or do the thing she wants me to. “I’ll think about it.”

re’s no “Which means you won’t. But you are definitely coming to PA  
sing. As spring semester?”

. Admit “I’m definitely doing that.”

We’ve pulled up to the brownstone, and Dean is coming around t  
school. the door.

“Are you coming inside?” I ask them.

7 point. They both shake their heads.

w? You Bronwyn checks her phone. “Can’t. I have a shift at the youth center  
orrow.” “You’re a really good person, Bronnie.”

bikes. She rolls her eyes. “No I’m not. I’m a handful. Ask anyone. But come to BSU to be my roommate, I promise not to steal your food unless I’m really, really hungry.”

“That’s a very low bar,” I say.

My car door opens in the middle of my words, but it isn’t Dean standing there. It’s James.

He nods at Franki. “Hey, Franki.”

She smiles and gives him a finger wave.

He turns his attention to Bronwyn. “Hello, tequila,” he says, voice warm. “Welcome to the desert.”

“Hello, James.” She twinkles at him, and the dimple in her left cheek is just what I need to get me into place.

Now that she’s getting her way, she’s decided to skip the name game. Apparently.

James puts a hand out to help me from the car and says pleasantly, “I know. She terrifies me when she smiles like that.”

Bronwyn smiles harder as she hands me my packages. “Good.”

I turn back to my blonde friend, who’s about to have control of the privacy screen without adequate supervision.

She says, “I’ll text you later.”

I fake a scowl and whisper, “Back off my driver.”

She smirks and mouths back, “Never.”

Bronwyn’s eyes sparkle as she looks past me to make eye contact with her husband. “By the way, James, ask your wife about middle school.”

r.”

She rolls her eyes. “No I’m not. I’m a handful. Ask anyone. But if you come to BSU to be my roommate, I promise not to steal your food unless I’m really, really hungry.”

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He nods at Franki. “Hey, Franki.”

She smiles and gives him a finger wave.

He turns his attention to Bronwyn. “Hello, tequila,” he says, voice dry as the desert.

“Hello, James.” She twinkles at him, and the dimple in her left cheek pops into place.

Now that she’s getting her way, she’s decided to skip the name-calling, apparently.

James puts a hand out to help me from the car and says pleasantly, “She terrifies me when she smiles like that.”

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A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

*This Is Me Trying*

JAMES

Clarissa is not interested in discussing middle school—whatever about. In fact, she’s not interested in discussing much of anything with

I’d planned to ask her to go with me to the animal shelter to find she’d said she wanted. But before I could even fully explain where going, she gave me a tight smile and said she wanted to get back to she’s reading.

She’s still grieving, of course. But my entire purpose is supposed to make her life better. To protect her and make her happy. Instead, I j bruised look in her eyes.

Worse, I have no idea how to fix it. But I hope this is a start.

I tap on her bedroom door, pet carrier in my left hand.

When she drags the door open, her eyes widen at the sight.

Without a word, I step inside, set the carrier on the floor, and open i A fluffy white cat pokes its head out and yowls at us before hidin inside.

“I don’t know anything about cats, but the shelter said this o scheduled to be put down at the end of the week, so here you go. It’



For you.”

“Oh my God!” She lies on her rug and peers into the carrier. “You’re pretty. Yes you are! What’s his name?”

“He was a stray, so the name they gave him was new, just to give someone to adopt him. They said you can keep calling him Puffy, or you can name him anything you want.”

“Puffy?” She grimaces.

“Yes, well.” The sudden gleam in her eye makes me suspicious. “Remember, whatever you name this cat, you have to be the one to take him to the vet.”

“That’s fine.” She purses her lips.

I nod and turn to go. “There’s a bunch of stuff in the kitchen for him, including the pet and food. I’ll leave you to sort it out.”

She stands and says, “You just handed me a lot of work. What if I want a book? What if I wanted a gerbil or a snake?”

*Please.* She definitely wants the cat. I listen when my wife talks. I know exactly what she wants in a pet.

But I turn back and answer truthfully. “Then I’d have to learn how to take care of a cat pretty damn quick.”

She stands there, posture defensive, and asks, “How can you be a cat dad if you’re in Los Angeles?”

“Are you saying you want me to take him with me?” She has to leave her door. Consternation in my voice, but the timing of this cat was at least partially due to wanting to provide her with company while I’m gone.

“You don’t need to bother. Actually... you don’t have to go to Los Angeles at all. You can stay here.” She crosses to pick up a large envelope from her desk and passes it to me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s my acceptance to Blackwater State University. I’m starting the week of January.”

I try to keep my expression neutral while my heart pounds out of my chest. “This is the school you spoke about at the pool? The one you wanted to attend as a freshman?”

She dips her chin in acknowledgment.

“Do you even know a soul out there in the middle of Pennsylvania?” “If I didn’t, I’d meet them. But I’m rooming with Bronwyn. You’ll keep Mr. Snufflenuts while I’m at school. I’ll be back for the summer. I’ll keep him at school, though, until I’m ready to move off-campus.”

There’s so much to work through in that statement. I start with the one. “I’m not calling the cat Mr. Snufflenuts.”

“Fine.” She drags the word out with grudging acceptance. Then her sense of mischief peeks through. “Mr. Fluffynuts?”

“Hmmm, let me think,” I say acidly. “No. And I don’t like the idea of rooming with Tequila Bronwyn. That girl’s a menace.”

“She is not. She’s awesome. We had a lapse in judgment one time in ancient history.”

“We’ve been married less than two months,” I say incredulously. “Exactly,” she says.

She has it all worked out. I’m proud of her for it, even if the thought of living so far away is a locomotive in my chest, starting out slow but picking up speed as her plans inexorably sink in.

Why was it different when I planned my trip to Los Angeles? Because a white was in control. It meant I could turn around and come back the moment



needed me. It meant if it was too hard to live without her, I could cha  
secondmind.

*What a dick.*

control. “If it’s just that you want to move out, we can find an apartment  
to go toMy penthouse in Manhattan—”

She shakes her head. “My mind is made up. I’m going to PA.”

“You’re my wife. We should live together.”

’ The look she gives me is pure, sardonic disbelief. “You were plan  
need to go to the other side of the country for a month at a time. We’re not s  
. I can’ttogether. You’ll barely notice I’m gone.”

She can’t possibly believe that’s true. “You can’t go.” It’s sh  
easiestinstinct to say those words. They rip out of me against my will.

A hint of irritation seeps into her voice. “I am. You’re the one who  
naturalI should have gone in the first place.”

“You expect me to write the check for this?”

. of you She looks confused, as if it truly never occurred to her that I  
withhold it from her. “That money is for my education. I get to choose  
ne. It’sI get my education.”

When I say nothing in response, her mouth falls open. “Just be  
always did what Dad wanted doesn’t mean he’d have kept me a prisor  
against my will.”

t of her I’d thought my adrenaline was at peak level before. But that word,  
pickinga solid blow. I’ve heard it before—my mother begging, “I’m a pris  
this house. Let us go. Please. Please let us go.”

cause I I choke on my words. “I’ve never tried to keep you from doing anyt  
ent shegoing anywhere.”

“Except for the one place I said I want to go,” she says gently.

She's right. I can't ask her to stay. But how can I protect her from...  
Four hours away? Five?

She's only twenty years old. I'm twenty-nine. Those nine years  
nearby nothing when she's twenty-five. But right now, the gap in life exp  
between us is almost criminal. Not just because of the actual ye  
because she's done next to nothing. Clarissa has been a princess in he  
floor tower.

She wants to experience what most young women experience. She  
keeping freedom and the right to choose her own path. I'd be a controlling mo  
hold her back from that.

I did this to both of us when I told her I was leaving. I thought I'd  
the situation, maintain emotional distance while also knowing she w  
told me here waiting for me.

Now she's flipping the script. She's taking control of her own l  
choices. I recognize that fact with grudging admiration.

I remember her demands on our wedding night. The way she wa  
e where know if I'd been having sex when I was twenty. Is my refusal leav  
frustrated and wanting to find someone else?

Maybe we should sleep together. If I tell her I changed my mind-  
er here want a normal marriage with her right now—I know she'd stay.

It would keep her here, safe and away from other guys—but that's  
it lands my reason for not sleeping with her in the first place. It would be too  
oner in control her.

I'm already obsessed with her.

The thought of hurting her like that makes me sick. If she goes and  
around with college guys, that isn't the same thing as me manipul  
with money and sex.

. what? But thinking of her out there, surrounded by college guys, the most jealousy I've ever experienced in my life is clawing through me.

will be "Will you pretend you aren't married when you're gone? Hook u  
eriencefrat boys and football players?" My movements are jerky, my words s  
ars butmove to the mantle of her fireplace.

r third- She makes a sound of frustration. When I turn to look at her, she r  
eyes at me.

e wants "Will you?" I insist, and before I realize I've moved, I'm close enou  
nster toher breasts skim my chest.

She doesn't back away. Instead, she pushes closer to me. Her skin j  
controlbeneath her black tank top, nipples perking. And I'm a bad, ba  
as rightBecause I like that a hell of a lot.

Those captivating eyes of hers stare up at me intently. She bri  
ife andthumb up to rub back and forth across her plump lower lip.

Finally, she says, "It's not like you want to sleep with me." Her exp  
nted tois a little belligerent and a lot hurt. "It feels a little 'dog in the mar  
ing herme."

"I *want* to. The fact that we're not sleeping together is temporary  
—that Iyou changed your mind about that?"

She shows me her left hand, where my rings sparkle on her  
exactly"Fidelity was my idea in the first place. I'm not a cheater. This might r  
easy tonormal marriage, but I still promised to be faithful when I said my vow

I want to kiss her, so I stomp to her window and stare out at th  
below instead. The traffic. The bicyclists and pedestrians. The prett  
screws with all the brownstones lined up so neat and clean.

ing her It looks nothing like the run-down rental house where my mother  
looks... perfect. The view from her tower.

intense I have to give her something. How can I expect her to wait for u  
ready if I give her nothing of myself in the meantime?

up with Forcing myself to speak, I admit, "Marrying you is the best thing t  
tiff as I ever happened to me."

I turn at her scoff. There's a confused frown on her face.

olls her I move closer and smooth a soft auburn curl behind her ear. It's i  
more than a blatant excuse to touch her; I won't even pretend other  
ugh thatmyself.

"I know I'm fucking everything up with you. I'm trying to do what'  
pebblesWe just need to weather the next few years until we're on more equal  
d man.in terms of this power imbalance."

The cat has made his way out of the carrier and is rubbing against h  
ags herShe leans down to pick him up, and he purrs as she snuggles him aga  
face. She says nothing at all.

ression "I broke one of our rules," I confess.

iger' to Her whiskey-and-moss-green gaze flies to mine, and her face crum  
takes me a second to understand.

7. Have "I'm not screwing around on you." I don't really care if she can he  
offended I am at the thought of it. "You think I'd let anyone but yo  
finger.me?"

not be a I reach out for her but then drop my hands. I have no business pull  
vs." into my arms.

e street "What rule, then?" She looks afraid to hope. And I don't know  
y streetdoing the right thing by admitting to it.

"It's not good. If you think it is, you're wrong, because all it does i  
died. Itour lives harder."

"What rule?"

is to be I try to say it, but the words don't want to come.

She puts the cat on the floor and moves closer to me, cupping my face. "What has that got to do with you?" she asks. "James, what rule?"

I shake my head. One sharp movement. Then I shove my hands into my pockets and fiddle with the little satin bow I carry there. "The last one. Nothing. James, I—"

wise to "It doesn't change anything right now. We're not having a relationship while I still have this kind of power over you. But I'm not wrong. It's right. I'm so fucking in it. Right there with you.

footing "And you're right. You absolutely should go to school. You've never had a moment of freedom. Marrying you was..." I almost say "wrong," but I don't. I say that word about the greatest gift I've ever been given in my life.

inst her But that's part of the problem, isn't it? Even at the time, I saw it as her giving me his daughter. And I suspect she saw it that way too. She married me because her father wanted her to. She didn't feel she had a choice. It's not her choice. Is she? Not really.

I don't have any experience with relationships, but even I can see how it started on a fucked-up premise. That she was this precious treasure that was passed from one man to another instead of a living, breathing person who was allowed to make her own choices.

ling her Five years might be enough time for me to be sure I can trust myself with her. But the passage of years alone is not enough to change the nature of my relationship. Especially if she stays here and caters to my emotional needs the way she did her father's.

is make "It's better for you to go away and stretch your wings. For both of us. I don't want you to go feeling... rejected."

The sound she makes is almost a laugh. Then she throws her arms

me. With her voice muffled against my neck, she says, “James?”  
my face. I press her closer and speak into her hair. “Yes, sweet girl?”  
“I want to talk about middle school.”

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I press her closer and speak into her hair. “Yes, sweet girl?”

“I want to talk about middle school.”









I only have three more nights of living under the same roof with n—  
—who is also now, in her words, my girlfriend.

I draw the line at calling myself a *boyfriend*, if only because it’s  
damn long time since I was any kind of boy.

I love every second of it... except the parts where our physical co  
limited to “safe zones,” our hugs are brief, and I give her a sweet kis  
bedroom door every night before walking back to my bedroom alone.

Those parts, however, can’t be helped.

Her departure for school is looming. No longer weeks away, it’s  
question of hours—approximately eighty, by my current calculations.

We only have three more of these dinners at home before she’s of  
in a dormitory in a different state.

The thought is ridiculous. Her closet is bigger than a dorm room. I  
sees it as an adventure, and I haven’t fought her on it.

She’s never had to share a room with anyone, let alone someone  
personality as forceful as Bronwyn’s. Again, I haven’t objected. At le



beyond my initial knee-jerk reaction. God knows it'll be a 1  
experience for her.

In fact, I haven't fought her on anything, mostly because I am enti  
aware of my own power. It's not just that I have the ability to make th  
my own way with the careful application (or removal) of funds—it's  
I'd have to do is apply the smallest amount of emotional manipulati  
she'd fold like a cheap card table.

I've been careful not to do that to her.

But this? I'm putting my foot all the way down.

I shake out my napkin and lay down the law. "No."

ny wife My answer ticks her off. I'm not even sure how I know that. It's 1  
she ever says she's angry, or even raises her voice. The closest I'  
been heard it was that drunken squeak on our wedding night when I sugge  
could have sex when she turned twenty-five.

ntact is Even when I goaded her to tell me to fuck off, she did it gently, ali  
s at her though she was indulging me.

Occasionally, she'll show irritation—though you have to know her  
recognize the signs of it.

now a Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger doesn't slam doors or tell people off  
great at cajoling and charming people. She's outright gifted at it.

f living I'd guess it's something she learned watching her father. He took h  
him often enough as he schmoozed everyone from heads of industry to  
But she leaders.

But she doesn't have the killer instinct he had. When push comes to  
with as he backs off. Every single time.

east not For once, that's a damn good thing.

She clears her throat. "Could you just think ab—"

earning “No.”

Our personal chef sets the last of our meal on the dining room table. “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“We’re all set,” I say.

Clarissa smiles at the woman tightly. “Dinner looks lovely, Carol. Thank you so much.”

She pats Clarissa gently on the shoulder. “I made your favorite for you. Double-chocolate cake.”

Clarissa nods and looks at her place setting. “Can’t wait,” she replies.

I wait until Carol has left the room before I pick up my fork and say, “I made no objection to any of your other plans, Clarissa. But if you think you’re ever letting you leave here without your security detail, then you don’t know what you’re doing.”

She picks up her fork and knife, cuts a small portion of her chicken, eats it, and pats her mouth with her napkin. Then she says, “I like the word, *let*. It’s funny coming from you. It’s almost like you think I’m well to your employees.”

Impressive. And not at all the reaction I expected from her.

She’s This is the same girl who sat at this table and smiled at Marcus when he told her it was too dangerous to join a swim team.

“Where is this coming from?” I question.

She stares at her plate hard, then stiffens her spine. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I know I’m not sorry. And I know that the more you push me, the harder I want to shove back at you.”

“This isn’t like you,” I say, frowning.

Eventually, she huffs. “Everyone thinks I don’t have a temper. I think I didn’t have one too.”

“But you do?” I try to put myself in her place: imagine myself sitting at the table. “I’m conceding the things I wanted to do and the life I wanted to live. Over and over, she did it with a smile.

I’d never have done it, not even to make Marcus happy. I was the obedient Thankchild for the moody, rebellious teenager.

She nods and looks down at the linen napkin she’s twisting between her fingers. “I do have a temper.”

She sets the napkin on the table and keeps her eyes trained on it. “I know,” she whispers, “I am so fucking angry right now.”

I watch her for a long, quiet moment, taking in the stiff set of her shoulders. The way her fingers twitch and a muscle flexes in her jaw. I say, “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Her attention shoots to my face. Then she glares at me, fierce and determined. “You’re not my father. You don’t get to boss me around or tell me how to do things like that.”

It’s not often that I’m caught without words, but I don’t have a single word.

She mutters something, and I’m not sure I trust my ears. “What do you want to say?”

Her voice is stronger when she says, “Keep fighting me over this. You’ll suffer my wrath.”

I can’t help the quirk of my lips at her wording or the stab of pride. “I’m not.” She spirits. The majority of her social life has taken place in the pages of the books. I hear it sometimes in her language.

I concede her point with a nod, but I can’t back down on this. It’s not just happening. The things I’m doing are for her own protection.

Clarissa is naive as hell. She’s a baby bird, and I’m trying to let her fly while still giving her the safety net she needs.

ting at “We made promises to each other. I expect you to keep those promises today.”

“This isn’t the 1920’s. I never promised to *obey* you,” she says incredulously.

I dig my palm into my eye, then drop my hand to the table, clenching it into a fist. “I don’t want obedience from my *wife*.” The idea of it is revolting.

At her wary expression, I say, “Our promises to each other, Clarissa James,” your dreams, but don’t be reckless.”

A frown forms between her brows.

of her “Even I have a certain amount of security. It would be foolish to give it up. Finally, You’re one of the wealthiest women in the world. If you’re unprotected, you will be a target. That’s a fact.”

and wild. She presses her lips together, her expression troubled. “I want to know what it’s like to be normal.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give that to you,” I say. And I mean it. “If you’re serious about being comfortable having your bodyguards masquerade as friends or fellow students, you go right ahead and do that, but you’re not going there without security.”

is, and “I’ll be in the middle of nowhere. Who’s even going to know or care about me?”

at her “Don’t be naive. It just means you’d be an easier mark.”

of her She doesn’t get it. Why would she? Marcus did everything in his power to keep her insulated from anything and everything he deemed unpleasant. It was just not alone dangerous.

But the real world is a nasty place. It’s full of evil and violence. She has to learn to fly to understand that—at least enough to not do stupid shit like disbanding her security team.

ises,” I “I wasn’t raised in your nice little world, princess. Ask me what I  
someone hurt you.”

ie says She swallows. “What would you do?”

I hold her gaze, willing her to understand. “Absolutely ar  
ching itRemember that before you deliberately put yourself in harm’s way.”

olting. She lifts her chin. “I want my name added to those security cont  
. Chase want access to everything. Every report. Every plan. And I want t  
know that I’m in charge of myself. I’m not passing over that control fr  
father to you.”

not to. I nod slowly. “Good.”

ed, you She builds up more steam, and I’ll be damned if I don’t hear a life  
resentment in her next words. “If the guards try to act like babysitters

o know find out they’re reporting my activities back to you like I’m a child  
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without getting pissed."

"Does that count for standing up to you too?" she demands.

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“I wasn’t raised in your nice little world, princess. Ask me what I’d do if someone hurt you.”

She swallows. “What would you do?”

I hold her gaze, willing her to understand. “Absolutely anything. Remember that before you deliberately put yourself in harm’s way.”

She lifts her chin. “I want my name added to those security contracts. I want access to everything. Every report. Every plan. And I want them to know that I’m in charge of myself. I’m not passing over that control from my father to you.”

I nod slowly. “Good.”

She builds up more steam, and I’ll be damned if I don’t hear a lifetime of resentment in her next words. “If the guards try to act like babysitters, or if I find out they’re reporting my activities back to you like I’m a child they’re tending, I’m firing them. They follow my orders, not the other way around.”

I lean toward her and narrow my eyes, challenge in my voice. "You stand up for yourself any damn time you need to. If you don't, then I'm the one getting pissed."

"Does that count for standing up to you too?" she demands.

I pick my fork back up. "Sweet girl, it counts twice for me."









*Fall Into Me*

JAMES



*Fall Into Me*

JAMES

## Four Months Later

I HAVEN'T SEEN CLARISSA outside FaceTime in two months. She's gliding down the main staircase of our Brooklyn brownstone, dressed for the Marcus Harcourt Charity Gala. A struggling to keep my tongue in my mouth and my dick in my pants.

Her black evening gown clings all the way down until it flares into train near her knees. She has one elegant, freckled shoulder on display. Her body is a roadmap of dips and curves and slender lines. She's wearing her hair up, with constellations of gold and emeralds dangling from her ears.

I keep my expression stoic and my hands in my pockets when I launch myself up those steps and put my hands all over her.

I knew when I told her we needed to wait for her to be financially independent that keeping my hands to myself would be difficult. But I never fully understood the sheer level of self-control it would stick to my word.

It was one thing to tell myself—and her—those words when I barely knew her. When she represented a promise to her father and a vague fantasy future.

But I know this woman now. We may not see each other in person for months at a time, but we talk every single day. We text all day long, sometimes all night long.

I know all her favorites: food, movies, books, and music. I know what makes her laugh, what makes her cry, and what makes her angry.

She's kind, stubborn, intelligent, independent, and hot as fuck. (Marcus Harcourt-Mellinger is so much more than the princess I thought

marrying.

When I'd admitted to myself that I was halfway in love with her before the wedding, I had no idea how far there was to fall.

Heights I haven't landed yet. I'm just in free fall every minute. Every day. I'm going to hit the ground. She's going to be eighty years old, poking me with her cane, and I'll still be falling and fantasizing about grabbing her ass. A little The way I went into this thinking I could marry her and somehow live with that feeling? It was ludicrous.

ing her The only thing I can control is my behavior. That, at least, is something I've managed with an iron will.

want to Despite our dubious beginnings and my own personal demomaniac marriage is working. Our path just looks a little different from other people's. But holy fuck, I want to put these dirty hands of mine all over her.

I could Clarissa reaches the bottom step, and I hold out a hand for her to take. She steps down onto the black-and-white marble flooring of the foyer. She gives me a sassy little smirk and does a slow spin, still holding on to my hand. "Do I pass inspection?"

for the I lean down and put my lips on hers. The kiss is just short enough without enough tongue to drive me insane.

son for "You're beautiful. You ready for tonight?" She's been anxious about the gala.

She swipes at my lip with her thumb to remove whatever gloss I've stolen from her. "I think so. Maybe."

She gives a small but eloquent shrug. "Everyone is going to want to talk to Clarissa about Dad. And I want to do that. He meant a lot to a lot of people. I was. But...."

"It might be too much," I finish for her.

"I still get emotional about losing him. I don't want to do that in public before the—" "Tell you what," I say, holding her hand and leading her to the waiting area. I wave Dean back to the front when he makes a move to come around the corner. I do that myself, then help her arrange her skirts before climbing in beside her. "If you feel overwhelmed or just don't want to have a conversation, just"—I reach out and tweak her earring—"play with the earring. I'll run defense."

"Do you need me to run defense on anything for you?" she asks. My first instinct is to say I don't need anything. It's my job to take care of her, not the other way around. But she looks eager, maybe even hopeful. It matters to her. My head is a weird roll in my chest at the realization.

I scramble to think of something she could do. I'm vividly aware of how easily I can hurt her feelings without even realizing I'm doing it. I've done it more than once. I've heard people refer to me as a ruthless asshole—which is absolutely accurate. I'm not exactly known for being sensitive or empathetic. With just Clarissa, I try.

So I say, "I *could* use your help with something. But it's more offer me out this defense."

"Interesting," she says.

"Franklin Barrett."

"Of the Boston Barretts?"

"Yes. I've been trying to nail him down for a meeting, but rumor has people offended on your behalf that you didn't inherit the Harcourt shares."

Clarissa laughs. "Oh, Frank. That's actually really sweet."

"The man's got daddy issues," I grumble.

lic." "Many people do. I'll talk to Frank. Maybe when he realizes I'd  
ing car swim naked in a giant vat of stinging jellyfish than deal with anything  
to open with Harcourt, he'll come around."

bing in "It couldn't hurt." I squeeze her hand. "You also need to keep an  
certain for Lyndsay Roker."

h your She purses her lips and gives me a narrow-eyed look. "What about  
Clarissa looks annoyed, which tells me everything I need to know  
already heard about Lyndsay Roker and the woman's big mouth. It's a  
care of but a small world.

It's no secret that people talk about us and our living arrangements  
art does Lyndsay is the most vocal and, arguably, the most venomous of the bunch.

I don't want Clarissa anywhere near her. My wife makes a point  
of how avoiding social media. The last thing she needs is to come into contact  
done it woman who's built her entire personality around being as nasty as possible  
on the internet. "Just avoid her if you can."

olutely I wanted to have her banned from the entire event. But our public relations  
But for team felt it would be better to allow her to attend—she did, after all, made  
\$100,000 per plate donation—and simply give her nothing to work  
use than terms of our marriage. Refusing to allow her to attend would give her  
she wants: more drama.

Clarissa's face is the hardest I've ever seen it. "My poor, deserted husband  
Did you know I wouldn't even let you kiss me at our wedding?"

"She's a bitch. Ignore her."

s it he's "She wants you. That's why she says the things she does about me."

I flinch back, my lip curling in disgust. Clarissa's flinty expression  
when she sees my reaction, and she laughs. "She's not your type, huh?"

"Very funny. I only have one type. And I'm married to her," I say



I rather scowl.

g to do She grins at me and puts her hand on my thigh. "Well, we'll just make sure everyone can see we are perfectly and incandescently eye outtogether. Just like our wedding reception."

That hand on my thigh is not within the parameters of our agreeer?" boundaries. At this moment, I couldn't care less.

v. She's I pull at the knot of my bow tie, which is way too tight. "You don't big citydo that. It's just good PR for people to see us happy together."

I sound like a stuffy ass. But this could easily lead to lines be nt. Butblurred.

nch. "Oh, I'm doing it."

oint of I dip my head casually in agreement, as if I'm not virtually sagging i t with aon the inside. But the second I pictured being able to put my hands on possiblethis gala, the thought of not getting to do it became unbearable.

The idea of slow dancing with her body pressed against mine is elationsneed. It's right up there with oxygen.

ake the She twinkles at me. "It's not a lie, is it? We are perfectly, incande with inhappy together."

er what My fucking heart.

When we arrive at the gala, we walk the red carpet to the flashing l husband.the paparazzi. She smiles, and I keep my arm around her waist every n

Inside the ballroom, lights are low, a pop artist is singing her onstage, and the movers and shakers are moving and shaking.

' A waiter steps near with a tray of champagne, and Clarissa shoot cracksmischievous grin. "Damn. I was hoping for tequila."

" I tip my head toward the bar. "Plenty over there, I'm sure. Probabl r with asalt and lime too. You can do body shots."

I laugh at her scandalized expression.

have to “*James.*” She clutches pearls she isn't wearing. “I'm not twenty-  
happythree months. Don't encourage me. You don't want to see what happen  
That's exactly what I'm afraid of. And exactly what I crave with eve  
d-uponin me.

She orders club soda and lime.

have to Then she works the room like she was born to it. Because she w  
may not be interested in running a corporation, but she is her  
comingdaughter, and she has them eating out of her hand.

I see Marcus in her. It's in the way she tips her head and lau  
someone's lame joke. It's in the playful wink and the nudge with her  
in reliefthat tells the person she's speaking with “You and I, we're on the same  
n her atIt's in the way she has of making every single person she speaks w  
important and special.

now a “... and then I told Dad, 'Don't you dare try to give that company  
Marcus Harcourt. I'm not mean enough to own a corporation.'” She tr  
scentlyat Franklin Barrett and his cronies as she tells the punchline, and th  
with laughter.

Franklin has to be in his late forties. He's a well-groomed black mar  
ights oftrimmed beard who has a bit of an Idris Elba look going on. He also, r  
minute. my irritation, has an obvious crush on Clarissa.

ballads She looks up at me with a wrinkle-nosed grin, and I wrap my arm  
her waist, dropping a quick kiss on her mouth. She melts into me with  
ts me asigh.

Barrett shoots me a look—one that says he's not sure he trusts me v  
y someown wife. “Word is you're plenty mean enough, Mellinger.”

He's trying to determine whether my ruthless persona is exclu

business. It isn't. And Barrett can kiss my ass.

one for Clarissa scoffs. "My husband is an absolute teddy bear. Don't let  
s." tell you any differently."

rything They're laughing again because everyone knows my reputation is a  
but "teddy bear." Barrett gives her a skeptical look.

She pulls her phone out of her clutch and scrolls through her photos  
as. She of me and Mr. Snuffleputz. I don't bother trying to remember his real  
father's because every new iteration we come up with makes Clarissa laugh.

I'm lying on my back in the photo with a put-upon expression on my  
face. Clarissa had been missing her cat and asked for a photo of him while I  
was elbowtexting. He was sleeping on my chest at the time, so there it is. Photo  
evidence of me allowing her cat to use me like a rug.

She shows the photo all around to snickers and grins. "See? Teddy bear  
with feel."

And just like that, she's shown these men that I'm not just ruthless  
to me, efficient in the boardroom. I also have a heart.

winkles My wife is a genius.

ey roar Franklin Barrett lifts a single eyebrow. He looks first at me,

Clarissa... then back at me. I see the exact moment he decides I've won  
1 with a done playing his stupid games.

nuch to "That, gentlemen, is our cue to move on," I say with a quirk of my lip.

We begin our exit to the sound of chuckling. But Barrett calls out  
around we get far, "Mellinger, have your assistant call mine on Monday. We'll  
1 a little

As we walk away, I mutter under my breath, "Yeah, that is not happy  
1 a little

Clarissa leans into me and tugs me down so I can hear her. "I thought  
with my wanted a meeting with him."

I shoot a look around to make sure no one can hear us, then say,  
sive to before I realized that old lecher has a thing for my wife."

She sputters out a laugh. “That’s ridiculous. He’s never said or anyone single thing that was the slightest bit inappropriate with me.”

“You don’t know the things he was thinking.”

She smacks my chest with the back of her hand, laughing at me. “Anything do?”

I slide my jaw to the side, then ease my hand from her waist to her ear and gently nip the lobe. “Yesss.”



my face.

we were graphic

**C**LARISSA NEVER TUGS HER earring. She seems to be reminiscing about her father. Everyone has a story to tell. We listen to speeches, and she and I each say a few words about the four year.”

ess and

That’s the only time she chokes up. But she isn’t the only one.

hardly a dry eye in the house. I squeeze her hand and lift it to her knuckles. She looks up at me and ends her small speech with a bitter smile on her face.

n. He’s

And then we slow dance. I get to put my hands on her. Slide my palms and down her back. Smell the delicate scent of her. And feel her lips moving against mine. She leans up to speak directly into my ear, and I before down to feel her lips against it.

l talk.”

ening.”

This feels like a real date. The kind that ends with us ripping each other’s clothes off the minute we get home.

That’s what it’s supposed to look like to the rest of the world. But “That’s what it *feels* like too.

done a And I am so stupidly in love with my wife that I can hardly think str  
As we're making our way back to our table, I see my executive a  
across the way and beckon her over.

and you I don't think Clarissa has met her yet. Considering how often F  
communicates with her through email, providing her my schedule, h  
r hip. I minor requests, etc., the omission feels like an oversight.

Rebecca joins us, and Clarissa stiffens beside me. I glance down a  
confusion.

"Clarissa, this is my executive assistant, Rebecca Adair. Rebec  
wife."

enjoy  
eat, we  
ndation  
Rebecca pushes her hand forward for a shake, and I have to nudge C  
to take her hand. She's looking at it like it's a snake.

I have no idea where the Clarissa who worked the room earlier ha  
Instead, she looks pale. Upset.

There's  
ciss her  
ersweet  
"Have you two met?" I ask.

"I haven't had the pleasure," Rebecca says at the same time Clariss

"I've seen her around. I just didn't know who she was."

alms up  
r body  
I bend  
"It's nice to meet you finally face-to-face, Clare. I've heard so muc  
you. You must almost be ready for summer break, right?"

Clarissa gives a tight smile. "It's Clarissa. And that's right."

"It must be nice." Rebecca shoots me a commiserating glanc  
summer vacations for us, huh, James? Once you get out in the real wo

other's  
think we'd be better off just keeping a bed in the corner of the off

it that's  
be over too soon."  
spend so much time there. Enjoy these years," she says with a sigh. '

I'm about to point out that Clarissa hasn't actually taken a full sum

aight. to relax since she started school, but Rebecca is still talking. "I wish  
ssistant and I had a couple months to just lie around and do nothing. Ooh, you  
do a tour of Europe over summer break. There'll never be a better time  
Rebecca I make a noise of agreement, but I'm not really listening to w  
andling Rebecca is prattling on about. I'm watching my wife. She loo  
Uncomfortable. She glances at me with annoyance, as if she's waiting  
t her into say something. But I have no idea what she wants from me.

"Did you like the care package last week?" Rebecca asks Clarissa.  
ca, my worried the chocolate-covered strawberries might have melted, I  
company promised me they were packaged very carefully with ice pac  
Clarissa they arrive in good condition?"

Clarissa slowly turns her head toward me and glares with uneas  
s gone. venom. She has never looked at me like that before. This isn't annoy  
irritation. She's furious.

She smiles with her mouth but glares with her eyes, and it's the  
sa says, damn expression I've seen on her face since our wedding photos. "I  
those were from you, James. I didn't know I should be thanking *Rebe*  
h about my care packages."

"They were from me. I paid for them."

"Absolutely," Rebecca says. "They're all from James. I'm ju  
e. "No facilitator. He's really too busy to spend time tracking down every  
orld, it's present. And I don't mind at all. I think care packages are so impo  
e time I remember what it's like to be a young girl away from home for the first  
ice, we "Rebecca," I snap. "Stop." She is not helping. She makes it so  
'They'll though she and I are Clarissa's parents on Christmas morning, and  
loser dad who has no clue what Mom has wrapped under the tree from  
mer off I may not have gone through every ordering process, but I sure as h

James Rebecca exactly what to buy and when. I approved every one of those should when they went through. She may as well have been a warehouse ."

packing boxes.

Whatever Rebecca wisely steps back, a placating expression on her face. "I'm ks off. wasn't trying to upset you," she says to Clarissa.

for me Rebecca looks at her watch, then raises her brows a little, opening h wide as if the time is a shocking discovery. "Maybe Clarissa is tired. S "I wasto have been on the road pretty early this morning to make it here in t out thethe gala."

ks. Did She gives Clarissa a patronizing smile. "You have to be con tuckered out."

xpected "Are you fucking kidding me right now?" Clarissa doesn't raise he ance orbut she doesn't need to. The words crack through the space on an incre laugh just the same.

fakest Rebecca startles, and we catch the attention of a few people s thoughtnearby.

cca for "I'm not a child," she tells Rebecca. "I don't need a nap. I don't bedtime. Jesus, you're a piece of work."

Clarissa yanks out of my grip, and I move to follow her.

ust the My skin crawls when Rebecca's hand lands lightly on my arm.

y little She says, "I don't know what that was about, but you might want to rtant. Iher about using that kind of language in public. It's not good for Har t time." image. I know her father tolerated a lot, but she's representing the cc und asas your wife now."

I'm the I look down at her hand on my arm, pure ice in my eyes.

Santa. She releases me immediately.

ell told "You don't touch me. Ever. And if you disrespect my wife again..

orderseven look at her with anything less than the deference she deserves, you  
worker, finding another job. And it won't be in this city. You and I are not

We have never been friends. You do the job I pay you to do. That's  
sorry. I about my *wife*, offer me *advice* about my marriage, and that MBA worth  
worth the paper it's written on. Am I clear?"

er eyes The color drains from her face. "Of course. I overstepped. My apology  
She had I search the room for Clarissa and freeze when I finally find her. I  
ime for like she intended to head back to our table, but Lyndsay Roker has not  
stepped into her path, she's got her phone in Clarissa's face.

pletely Clarissa searches the crowd—I'd guess for me. I try to catch her  
moving as fast as I can, literally shoving people out of my way to get to  
r voice, Something Lyndsay says has a furious flush sweeping over Clarissa:  
adulous in a wash of red.

Then Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger, the sweet angel who once whispered  
tanding me that she was angry, says loudly enough to be heard ten people

"Lyndsay, you lying cunt."

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even look at her with anything less than the deference she deserves, you'll be finding another job. And it won't be in this city. You and I are not friends. We have never been friends. You do the job I pay you to do. That's it. Talk about my *wife*, offer me *advice* about my marriage, and that MBA won't be worth the paper it's written on. Am I clear?"

The color drains from her face. "Of course. I overstepped. My apologies."

I search the room for Clarissa and freeze when I finally find her. It looks like she intended to head back to our table, but Lyndsay Roker has not only stepped into her path, she's got her phone in Clarissa's face.

Clarissa searches the crowd—I'd guess for me. I try to catch her eye, moving as fast as I can, literally shoving people out of my way to get to her.

Something Lyndsay says has a furious flush sweeping over Clarissa's face in a wash of red.

Then Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger, the sweet angel who once whispered to me that she was angry, says loudly enough to be heard ten people deep, "Lyndsay, you lying cunt."





A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

## *Dangerous Woman*

JAMES

I only catch up to Clarissa before she hails a cab because I virtually through the lobby. When I reach her, I ask, “Are you okay?”

She doesn’t say a single word.

“Clarissa, please. What happened?”

I put my arm around her waist, but she jerks away, stiff as a board off in confusion, dropping my arm. “You’re not leaving here separate me in a cab. It’s not safe.”

She’s stiff but looks around at the milling crowd and paparazzi, in her head and faking a smile.

“What did Lyndsay say to you?”

She stares straight ahead. “Do you sit around and discuss how I am with Rebecca?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Is that what Lyndsay said? You know she makes shit up out of thin air.”

“I’m not ridiculous. And I am not too young to be a good wife.”

“I didn’t say you were. You *are* a good wife. And there’s no point in sensitive about your age. It is what it is.”



She keeps the fake smile pasted on for the photographers. "God, either dense or deliberately provoking me," she says.

Our driver pulls up, and I yank open the door to the back seat. She clambers in, and when I move to help with her skirts, she grabs them and flicks them out of the way herself.

"For the record, I'm not sensitive about my age," she says when I climb beside her. "I'm not wishing my life away or wishing I could just wish I was older. I'm talking about the way Rebecca was deliberately reinforcing a narrative that I'm your dependent while pointing out that it's the two of us who have things in common with me on the outside."

She nods at the hotel behind us. "She made it clear that you and your teammates while I'm not even on the field. And if you tell me you don't believe that she was trying to make me wonder if the two of you are fucking together, I don't believe you."

"Just what are you accusing me of?" I bite out.

"I don't think you're sleeping with her, James. But I don't appreciate your attitude."

"My attitude? Are you fucking kidding me? You started acting like that before Rebecca even opened her mouth."

The look she gives me is scathing. "Don't call me a brat unless you can back it up. I've been called an asshole."

She lets that sink in, then says, "I overheard her say some things during the wedding. It was obvious she knew more about our arrangement than I did at the time."

"It's not an arrangement. It's a marriage," I snap. "She had no business being talking about us. But she didn't *know* a damn thing. She was guessing. It's the same as everybody else. I've never discussed the private details

your remarriage with anyone but you or your father. Which is not something I can say, is it?"

Clarissa Clarissa ignores my question and holds up her hand, ticking items off on her fingers. "She knew my father was leaving you his shares. She knows we're not living together, and she's pretty damn sure we're not sleeping in the same limb in together. She knows my schedule. She's the one ordering my present cards. She takes up drops her hand and glares at me. "She's probably the one who is putting the money into my bank account every week, all while reminding you of your allowance."

"I choose your gifts. How would my assistant even know what you want if she aren't? And I pay your allowance, Clarissa. *Me*. It takes two seconds on my calendar. She knows your schedule because it's on my calendar."

James, then I "It's not an allowance."

I glance toward the front of the car to double-check the privacy screen is set up because Clarissa has gotten loud.

Clarissa "Call it whatever you want. I don't care."

"Words matter, James. That language infantilizes me."

James "Spare me the psychobabble. Do me a favor and stay off Reddit," he says, leaning back.

Clarissa She makes a sound of frustrated rage between clenched teeth. Half a second of half squeal. "It's not an allowance. It's money for cost-of-living expenses."

James I lean back and spread my hands in a classic "I rest my case" gesture. "I did at" "Congratulations, you just gave a textbook definition of 'allowance.'"

Clarissa "I wouldn't need you to send me an allowance if my father had allowed me to manage my own trust."

James "But he didn't. Because your father didn't think you were ready for it. And, frankly, I agree. You don't have any concept of how much a

you can cost. And you're a bleeding heart for every sob story you hear."

"So I'm a child. That's what you're saying. A child who needs Daddy to send her money every week."

knows "Aren't you?"

keeping She snaps her head to look out the window, arms crossed defensively." She against her chest.

deposits *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Why am I saying this shit to her? I knew we'd figure it out eventually. I knew we would. It was inevitable.

I need to be kind. Sympathetic. Keep my fucking cool. I'm supposed to de-escalate this scene, not fan the flames.

phone. But her accusations—her implications that I've been disloyal—infuriate me.

No, that's not it. The truth is... it hurts to realize she has so little respect for me.

And I'm doing what I always do when something hurts. I burn shit down.

I take a breath and try to lower the tension between us. "Before we did, I didn't realize Rebecca was a problem. But she was patronizing as hell. And that's unacceptable."

"So you did notice that," she says sarcastically.

growl, Yes, but obviously far, far too late. The truth is I simply wasn't listening." Rebecca. She was unimportant.

gesture. "Lyndsay has video of the whole thing," she says bitterly.

I pull out my phone and begin texting security.

wed me "What are you doing?"

"I'm having Lyndsay and Rebecca escorted from the gala. And I'm not doing that. Rebecca on Monday morning. You and I are the only *team* that ever matters."

nothing Her eyes fly wide, and she swivels her head toward me. "You'd figure it out."

executive assistant for me?”

addy to Why is this even a question? “Yes, of course I would. I’d fire anyone I wanted me to.”

Her mouth pops open. “You can’t fire your assistant just because I’m insincerely her.”

“I can. And I will.”

ght over Clarissa puts a hand on my arm to stop me. “Please don’t. And don’t get them removed from the gala. It’ll just make things worse. It’s enough to be known you would. Just... talk to your assistant about the way she represents the company in public. The things she said at our wedding reception—they anyone could have heard her. And considering she works directly for you.”

She trails off, then huffs. “Put a letter in her file or something.”

faith in There’s a certain poetic justice in that. I’d rather fire her. But Clarissa is serious. She’s too damn forgiving.

own. I sigh and reach out to pull her into a hug. “I’m sorry for calling you a child. I don’t believe that. And it’s okay that you aren’t ready to manage your own trust, Clarissa. That’s hardly your fault. It doesn’t bother me to send you money. I’ll always make sure you have anything you need or want. I’ll give you those credit cards so you never have to feel like you need permission to buy anything you want.”

She stiffens in my hold and shoves away from me. So I let her go.

“You still don’t get it.”

I beat my head back against the black leather seat in one sharp, jerky motion. “Will you fucking stop?”

n firing "I'm glad it doesn't bother you to send me a small part of my own money for popcorn and textbooks. It seems a small price to pay, considering I'm re your



a multibillion-dollar corporation and a hell of a lot of your own money  
one you marrying me," she says.

I'm hanging on to my temper by a thread. "I'm not for sale, Clarissa.  
I hate father didn't buy me."

She braces her hands on the seat, leans in, inches from my face  
enunciates very clearly, "If the shares fit."

I'm breathing hard. The scent of her in my lungs. I'm distracted  
ough to freckled satin skin. Her soft, plump lips. The adrenaline of anger is m  
resents into something far more dangerous. I've never been pissed off and tu  
ption...at the same time. I look from her eyes to her lips, then back again.  
/ou...."you."

She laughs bitterly. "That would be a nice change."

Clarissa is I glare at her for long seconds. She glares back.

And then her mouth is on mine.

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a multibillion-dollar corporation and a hell of a lot of your own money out of marrying me," she says.

I'm hanging on to my temper by a thread. "I'm not for sale, Clarissa. Your father didn't buy me."

She braces her hands on the seat, leans in, inches from my face, and enunciates very clearly, "If the shares fit."

I'm breathing hard. The scent of her in my lungs. I'm distracted by her freckled satin skin. Her soft, plump lips. The adrenaline of anger is morphing into something far more dangerous. I've never been pissed off and turned on at the same time. I look from her eyes to her lips, then back again. "Fuck you."

She laughs bitterly. "That would be a nice change."

I glare at her for long seconds. She glares back.

And then her mouth is on mine.





A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

## *Don't Blame Me*

CLARISSA

He's kissing me back. It's not tentative or sweet or gentle. It's not polite or controlled, the way he usually kisses me.

He's devouring me with his lips and teeth and tongue. He's pulling bobby pins in my updo and tossing them to the floor, then wrapping my hair in a tight fist.

And I give it right back, gripping his hair with both hands and eating his mouth. I'm on fire. My body aches for him, and everywhere he's touching reminds me of all the other places he should be touching but isn't touching. I'm starving, literally starving, for James. If he stops, I'll die.

He's wearing the cologne I got him for his birthday. It's clean and vanilla and there's a hint of his own salt beneath it.

All of it—his taste, his smell, the silk of his hair—makes me feral.

He releases my curls to put his hands on my waist and hike me over his lap. I end up sitting sideways, his erection shoving against my hip. The condom is too tight for anything else. It has no give all the way to the knot. The design doesn't even allow me to take full steps when walking, so it's so conducive to straddling a man in the back seat of a car.



I let go of his hair, and he pulls back to eye me warily, breaths ragged. I can see that he's still pissed off. But he's also desperately turned on. *Well, so am I, James. So am I.*

I reach down with both hands to gather the heavy silk skirting and shove the thing up until the flounce at the bottom is now around my waist.

Then I straddle James, his cloth-covered erection hot at my center. He wraps his hand around the back of my skull and drags me down to his chest.

His abdominal muscles clench, and he pushes his hard cock against my center. I grind down, and he makes a low noise in his throat. I can feel his hand working its way up the back of my thigh, and I know the exact spot he's practiced he realizes I'm wearing a thong. His fingers clench convulsively on my cheek, pulling and spreading me wide. His fingers play with the ritche out the fabric, tugging and teasing me with it.

He groans as if he's the one being tormented. Then he's sliding his tongue and forth across the hard heat of him with a rhythm of his own.

It's a little rough. It isn't nice. He takes small bites, nipping across my shoulder. Then he tongues my neck and earlobe. He's creating this delicious pressure against my clitoris. I want to scream. I want to bite his

And I want him inside me in a way I don't even fully understand. This craving is instinctual. If we existed in a bubble on this planet where we never heard of the existence of sex or any of the mechanics, we would have arrived right at this moment. Of me knowing James's cock belongs into his pussy.

I am still so mad at him, I could scream.

Oh, I know he didn't marry me for money. It's not even a question of money. It's in his mind.

But he pushed my buttons. So I shoved back at his. I'll be ashamed.

ed. myself for it later. Right now, I'm still too angry to care.

n. How does he not see that the words he uses keep me his subordinate, not his wife.

himmy "She's not just young—she's a spoiled little princess. I'd be shocked ever lays a finger on her." Rebecca's words at our wedding reception irritate me like a pebble in my shoe. I've tried to forget that conversation in the restroom. Tried to put it behind me. Rebecca doesn't know me. But the memory of it prods at my every insecurity and I feel his James.

second I loosen his tie and undo his shirt. I need his skin under my fingers. my butt I've just yanked his shirttail from his trousers when he grabs my wrist with one hand and forces my hips to stop moving with the other.

"Clarissa," he says. "The car has stopped."

me back I hear the clunk of a car door closing and know Dean is coming around to usher us out.

cross my James has me deposited on the seat next to him, using his body to hold me, mere seconds before the door opens.

ite and "Give us a minute, Dean," James says.

l. "Of course, Mr. Mellinger." Then the door thunks closed once more. James turns to me and grabs the flounce of my skirt, jerking it down over my hips. I help by lifting my butt off the seat to make the slide easier.

ongs in His eyes travel over my hair, my lips, my neck. He looks... I don't like that look. Wild? A little unhinged?

I indicate his shirt. "Are you going to put yourself back together?"

1 in my He smooths a hand through his hair, then says, "No point. It's not like he doesn't know exactly what we've been up to."

med of Then he opens the door.

He reaches out to assist me from the car, so I grab my clutch with my right hand and place my right in his. I glide out of the car with the dignity of a queen. Like I'm not still breathing hard. Like I'm not wearing a catastrophically wrinkled evening gown, with my lipstick kissed right on stillswollen lips, love bruises on my neck, and what must be utterly spectacular sex hair.

I catch Dean's eye as he stands near the front of the car. Hands guarding expression stoic.

I tip my head as we stroll past him, James still holding my hand.  
"Good night, Dean."

He nods. "Good night, Mrs. Mellinger. Mr. Mellinger."

I don't turn my head, but I sneak a glance at James. His tuxedo is completely unbuttoned, shirttails loose. His tie is half shoved in his front pocket. His lips are swollen, there is a smear of my lipstick on his neck. One unruly piece of hair is sticking straight out on the side of his head.

He catches my look with a smoldering side-eye of his own. They're moving fast up the steps to the brownstone, and I'm running to keep up.

The moment we're inside, James has me backed against the front door, his hands working the skirts of my gown up over my hips, his mouth on my neck. I shove his jacket and shirt off his shoulders. We get tangled for a second, and he has to pull his hands off my body to shake them off. I hear links clatter across the marble floor.

He reaches a desperate, greedy hand up my back, running his fingers along the seams of my gown, searching. "Jesus, woman. How do I get you to wear this dress?"

My heart thrills at his words, not just because they're sexy as hell, but because of what he called me. *Woman*. That's what I need from him.



my left everything I need.

ity of a I twist to expose the side of the gown. "The zipper's here. There's  
ring a hook at the to—"

off my James rips the catch apart with rough fingers and slides the zipper  
ctacular way down. Then the gown is in a puddle on the floor, and I'm kicked  
away.

folded, He cups my breasts and rubs his thumbs across my peaked nipple  
he takes a small step back.

"Good He's looking.

"No bra?" His brows are furrowed, his eyes moving back and  
between my breasts and my face like he can't believe what he's getting  
shirt is "I didn't need one. The dress has a built-in—ahh." His mouth closes  
; jacket my nipple, sucking, then flicking with his tongue. First one, then the other  
ck, and I squirm and push up toward him, holding his perfect, beautiful hands  
hands.

en he's He pulls away to look up at me. Runs a single finger over the crescent  
). breast, just where a spray of freckles scatter. "I always wondered," I  
it door, "if you had freckles here."

ine. He breathes deeply, in and out. He's visibly trying to bring himself  
r a hot control.

his cuff I can't bear it. I don't want James under control.

I squirm against him as he rises to his full height, pulling his muscles  
ers over mine once more. When he leans back again, I nip at his jaw. He  
I out of moving his mouth to my neck.

I reach for his belt, but he stops me with a hard hand at my wrists  
well but slow shake of his head. I frown, frustrated.

im. It's Then he gathers both of my wrists in one of his hands and pushes

over my head, holding me against the door like some sort of pirate's c  
a littleHis free hand trails down the front of my body. Then he reaches i  
panties and slides a single finger through the seam of my wet sex.

all the My abdominal muscles clench, and I close my eyes at the sheer wor  
eking itthe unfamiliar beauty of the contact. "James...."

"Yes, sweetheart. That's it. You're so slippery down here. So l  
s. Thenslick."

I writhe against him, pushing. Trying to make him move. His finge  
me with small, tight circles against my clit, winding me tighter and  
d forthinto a coiled spring.

to see. When he moves down, away from my clit, I could cry at the loss.  
es overway my body hovers at that edge with no way back and no way over.

ther. James presses a finger inside, and it's an entirely new sensation. F  
d in mythat *needs* friction. He fucks me with his finger, and I'm still in tha  
sprung tight, needing more. More.

t of my I realize I'm chanting the word out loud.

ie says, James gives me another finger and mutters, "I am going to hell for tl

I open my eyes to look at his face because his words are registering  
f underdon't like them. He's my husband. He's not going to hell for loving my

His fingers keep working my pussy, but he also rubs my clit in tho  
circles again.

outh to The pressure is perfect. The friction is perfect. But more than all of t  
groans,James. It's James who's giving me this.

I've long forgotten why this started. I've long forgotten anything b  
it and amuch I love this man. I'm right there. Ready to jump from the cliff, n  
caring if I'll land in cool water or on jagged rock.

as them I follow his tormented gaze down to where his eyes are trained—

captive. outline of his own hand, moving under the wet black silk of my thong  
into my motion is set in bas-relief as he watches his own fingers fuck me, his  
swirling against me.

ider. At His fingers hook inside, pressing against something that makes my  
give way. Only James's body pressed against me and that hand work  
not and pussy keep me from crumbling to the floor.

I cry out in a sort of keening wail because I don't know how not to,  
rs workeyes jerk up to meet mine. The second they do, the tension inside me s  
tighter Pleasure courses through me, so acute it's just this side of pain. His  
don't stop, and my eyes widen in a brief burst of panic because the  
At the isn't stopping either. It's too much. I'm electrified. Existing as an at  
hovers just outside of this body. I don't know if it's ever going to st  
fullness eyes are the only thing keeping me on this planet as I shudder and s  
t place, his hands.

"Good girl," he says. "Shhhh. Oh, my sweet girl...."

His hands are on my face, wiping away tears. I don't know w  
his." crying, because I'm not sad at all. My heart is just spilling out of m  
g, and I shaken bottle of champagne. I try to will myself to stop because Jam  
body. going to understand that these tears are a release valve for feelings oth  
se tight pain or misery.

He carries me into the living room and sits on the sofa with me cra  
that, it's his lap, my arms wrapped around his neck.

I'm not cold, but I shiver anyway. He reaches for the cashmere  
out how blanket on the arm of the sofa and wraps it around the two of us.

ot even He holds me in the dark, naked torso to naked torso, as he strokes  
and my back. And he speaks quietly, lips pressed into my hair. He t  
-on the

. Everyhow sweet I am. How good. He calls me his angel and promises to pro  
; thumband take care of me.

I grow sleepy and sated, and when my body is fully relaxed, he says  
y kneeswas a mistake.”

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how sweet I am. How good. He calls me his angel and promises to protect me and take care of me.

I grow sleepy and sated, and when my body is fully relaxed, he says, “That was a mistake.”





A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

*Say You Love Me*

CLARISSA

If I had a single speck of pride, I'd let go of his neck and slide off. Then I'd sit beside him on the sofa, and we'd have a cool, calm, collected conversation in which I would—nicely—tell him to get his head out of his ass.

But I don't have a single speck of pride when it comes to James. So I don't let go. I hold on tighter. "Don't say that. Don't you dare."

He sighs, exhausted frustration in the sound. "I never should have my hands on you like that."

"I wanted you to touch me. You didn't hurt me."

"We weren't ready for this step."

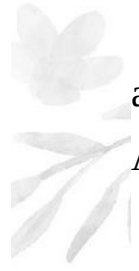
"I was. I am. I didn't cry because I was upset. They were happy tears."

There is a lump in my throat and a sob crouching in my chest now, but I do nothing to do with happy tears.

To James's credit, he doesn't pry me off him or push me away. He stays there and rocks a little in place, stroking my hair.

But he won't stop talking. He won't shut up, and I can't plug my ears. I hang on to him at the same time. So I hear every horrible word.





“Nothing has changed from that fight in the car. I still control your money and therefore, I control everything from where you live to what you do. And you still resent me for it—”

“I do not.”

“Clearly you do, or we wouldn’t have had a knock-down, drag-out fight about your allowance.”

I guess I still have a little pride after all, because I take my arm around his neck so I don’t strangle him with my bare hands. Sliding my foot over his lap, I move to stand, wrapping the blanket around me as I go.

“I don’t care about the money,” I say. “What I care about is the way you use his lap as a barrier between us.”

Now he’s standing. “How are you not understanding how fucked-up the power imbalance is between us? I *have* everything. I *control* everything.”

“You’re not just financially, Clarissa. You aren’t independent yet. You’re a baby who’s just learning to fly, and I’m your soft place to fall. The way things are right now, how could I ever trust that you want me and don’t just need me? I suck in a breath so hard it almost hurts. I want James. I do. It’s a little bit that I need him, but so what?”

Money is the least of it. I need him as my anchor. He’s my family and my *only* family. He’s my port in the storm. He’s my shoulder to cry on and my soft place to fall, yes. But isn’t that all right? Husbands and wives need each other. I want to be the same for him.

Needing him to manage my money is my father’s fault for the way he just sits up my inheritance. But we can ignore that part. It’s no different from a house with one spouse at home and the other employed. It’s just a question of time. He’s watching as the thoughts flicker across my face, and he seems to give me them as some kind of confirmation. “You don’t know yet yourself. You

money, separate the want from the need. It's all mixed up inside. If the only person you wear the world you have to call home wants to fuck you, you fuck him."

"Give me some credit. This isn't prison, and I'm not your bitch," I say.

His expression is unreadable as he says, "That's not just prison but a fight for that's life."

"What if I turn twenty-five and I'm not interested anymore? What do you say from you for a divorce because we lost our chance when we had it?"

He draws my hand up and presses it against the hard strength of his chest, where his heart is racing in a staccato rhythm. "There is no way you're not terrified at that thought. If you turn twenty-five and tell me you're going off—if you meet someone else and decide he makes more sense for you than I do—give up this relationship. That will never happen. But if you're scared of losing me, then I'll stay. Not simple. Nail me down now."

He shakes his head, features grim. "As much as I resisted it at first, leaving you away to school was the right decision for you. The two of us made a mistake. Some physical and sexual distance? That was the right decision for me?"

Every single day, I see you gaining self-confidence and independence. Gaining happiness. I will never 'nail you down now' at the risk of you becoming the person you want to become."

I press my fist to my stomach to hold myself steady. To keep myself from losing myself again in wild emotion.

This night is not going the way it's supposed to. He's not saying the things I need him to.

He's right about my growing confidence and independence. I look for trust in the person I'm becoming. I make choices for myself, and I'm not afraid to take back when a situation calls for it anymore.

But he's also right that, if he asked, I would give up every one of my

erson indreams if it meant I could be his. I'd give up my degree and my career  
I'd move home in a heartbeat to be with him every day.

ay. When I left for Pennsylvania, I was all about setting boundaries and  
, baby.actualization. But if it made James happy, I'd give up anything he asked  
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t, goingyour name is tattooed on my soul. Every beat of my heart and breath  
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or you.second. I exist for you."

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dreams if it meant I could be his. I'd give up my degree and my career plans. I'd move home in a heartbeat to be with him every day.

When I left for Pennsylvania, I was all about setting boundaries and self-actualization. But if it made James happy, I'd give up anything he asked me to.

And that's... horrible. I was willing to give up my dreams for my father too. What does that say about me? It doesn't matter. James would never ask me to give up anything.

"But I love you." I say it, and as soon as I do, I'm ashamed of myself. Because that is not the way to say "I love you." Not in that needy, demanding voice. Love isn't meant to control or manipulate.

James cups my face, and when he says it, he says it the right way. The way that's about giving, not taking. "Clarissa, I love you. I am so in love with you, your name is tattooed on my soul. Every beat of my heart and breath in my body belongs to you. *I* belong to you. Don't ever doubt it. Not even for a second. I exist for you."







After the mess I made the night of the gala, Clarissa finishes semester at school and decides to spend most of the summer touring with a few of her friends.

If I thought the idea of her moving four hours away to go to school was bad, it was *nothing* on this. I'm barely sleeping or eating. All I'm doing is swimming laps in the pool to try to settle my mind and obsessively planning how I'll keep her safe and happy from an ocean away.

Not one member of the staff at the house or the office will even make contact with me since she announced her plans for fear of me biting heads off.

Marcus would never have let her go. He'd have guilted her into staying. He was a great man and an amazing father. But even I can see how sometimes—a lot of times—he rode roughshod over her free will, probably without realizing he was doing it.

I won't do that.

I wonder if Marcus is looking down and hating me now. He trusted me. And I betrayed that trust in a spectacular fashion. I put my mouth



hands all over his baby girl on the night of a gala in his memory.

I betrayed *her*. The first orgasm I ever gave her wasn't some ro-  
loving moment spent on white sheets with rose petals spread all over  
her twenty-fifth birthday. It was up against a door after I practically t  
dress off during an argument.

I got turned on when I was angry. I know exactly what kind of si-  
does something like that.

I held her hands down.

She cried afterward. Every time I think of it, I want to rip my hea-  
my chest.

out the I never wanted to hurt her. I just wanted her to feel good.

Europe I've apologized to her. She says it isn't necessary, but it's the only  
know how to do. That and encourage her to do the things she want  
ool waswithout fighting her on them or asking her to stay.

loing is I text her a list of travel safety tips. Then I print a hard copy and p  
plottingher carry-on. I share contacts of every phone number of every mutua  
or trustworthy business acquaintance I have on that side of the pond,  
ake eyecase she gets in a bind. I also print those, in case she loses her phone.

ig their I make sure she has her passport. Make sure she has multiple sou-  
money, in multiple places, in case she gets pickpocketed. I se  
ing. Heitineraries and make her reservations. Remind her to drink water, not a  
imes—on the plane. Stay away from drugs and users. Practice moderation. Co  
ut evendrinks. Listen to her bodyguard.

Then I stand in the airport and watch her meet up with a giggling B-  
and her girls, before they drag their luggage over to Bag Check. I wan-  
ted me.grab a ticket for myself and go with her. But that's not what this is for.  
and my Clarissa leans over, saying something to Bronwyn when they re-



point where it's about to be passengers only. Bronwyn shoots Clarissa a thumbs-up in response, then wiggles her eyebrows at me. Classic Bronwyn.

Clarissa runs back to me, puts her hands on my face, and yanks me for a quick kiss. A little tongue. A little teasing suck. Then she pulls back, searching my eyes, her own sparkling with excitement.

"I'll be fine, I promise. I'll come home all cultured and shit." She wrinkles her nose. She's already cultured by anyone's standards. She grew up surrounded by it. But she's barely been anywhere. She's lived vicariously through novels long enough.

I nod and try to smile at her joke because that's what she wants from me. But I don't say words. I don't have any that aren't "Don't go" and "I can't do my mind" and more versions of "Be safe."

Clarissa starts to run back to her friends, then turns midway, looking over her shoulder in backward while she shouts across the busy airport. "Hey, James!" She waves with a goofy heart out of her hands. "I still love you!"

I put my fingers to my lips, then hold them up toward her. I motion with my words back, "Still love you."

pieces of

and her

alcohol,

over her

Bronwyn

to just

each the



**S**HE ANSWERS FACETIME IN a pub in Ireland. All the girls are holding Guinness, and a bunch of good-looking guys with Irish accents are crowding around them. She shouts, "I told you I'm married!" and rings her phone around at the table. The pronouncement is greeted by a chorus of laughing male boos.

Clarissa a She calls me freaked out in Amsterdam when she gets separated from  
Tequila friends and bodyguard, terrified to walk back to the hotel alone after

She stays on the phone with me the entire time, and, though it's less than a  
one-block walk, I'm pretty sure I don't breathe for three whole days.

back to When Clarissa locks herself safely behind her hotel room door, I call  
and threaten the bodyguard with death and dismemberment. I  
scream. hyperbole.

provided by Clarissa FaceTimes me from a beach in the South of France. I  
tough her When I freak the fuck out, she laughs and turns the camera around to  
show topless women everywhere, including Bronwyn in a damn thong—become  
a meme. course she did.

changed Bronwyn waves. "Heeeey, big daddy."

Clarissa flips the camera back. "You're not actually mad about the  
jogging you? Literally everyone does it here. Nobody's ogling my boobs."

she makes I clear my throat. "No, I'm not mad. Wear sunblock." I swallow. "I  
don't want sunblock."

with the She salutes me with a jaunty hand to her head. "Sir. Yes, sir." And  
she shows her perfect, freckled boobs as they bounce with the motion.

"Still love you, James."

"Still love you, Clarissa."

girls are She visits old family friends of her parents in England and stops in  
accents London office to schmooze on my behalf and attend a few business  
conferences. Even though she has no official role at Harcourt, she is still CEO  
of Harcourt-Mellinger. And she knows it matters.

corus of She does the same at the office in Paris.

She also gets sloppy drunk in a Paris hotel and texts me from the hotel  
saying she's annoyed because her friends ditched her to hook up with hot guys.

om her **Me: Define hook up.**

er dark. **Clarissa: You know what hookup is. Don't act innocent or you probably did**

is than a **Me: Random hookups in strange cities? No, I did not.**

**Clarissa: Prude**

l Sasha **Me: Smart. Where is Sasha?**

it's not **Clarissa: She's already in bed for the night. Don't wake her up with  
decide to come down**

hopeless. **Me: I'm calling Sasha. You shouldn't be drinking alone at a hotel**

to show **Clarissa: I'm not alone my friends are here. Just all passed up.**

because of **pretty sure there are all getting laid 2 nights by fuckboys**

**Me: Do not let them bring guys up to your suite.**

**Clarissa: ...**

his, are **Me: DO NOT LET THEM BRING GUYS UP TO YOUR ROOM  
ARE THE GIRLS AS DRUNK AS YOU ARE?**

A lot of **Clarissa: ...**

**Clarissa: ... Proly**

l I ogle **Me: WHAT THE FUCK.**

**Clarissa: Don't swear at me. There's a bar in Newark with your  
name. do as I say.**

**Me: SASHA IS ON HER WAY.**

1 at our **Clarissa: Jerk. She's going to be mad.**

dinner. **Me: You and your friends stay exactly where you are. And  
Clarissa fucking drinking right now. DO NOT GO ANYWHERE WITH THOSE  
GUYS.**

**Clarissa: ...**

otel bar, **Me: I'M CALLING SECURITY.**

**Me: WHEN SASHA GETS THERE, YOU AND THE GIRLS (**

## **YOUR ROOMS ALONE AND LOCK THE DOORS.**

**it** I contact hotel management and have Sasha and security escort the their rooms and the French fuckboys off the premises. I pull rank and names. I call Bronwyn's father for backup.

I threaten to buy the hotel and fire every one of their asses if a single **hen weon** those ladies' heads is in danger from a strong wind.

Then I put Dean on a plane to France, because clearly Beth and **el bar.** aren't enough security to keep my wife safe.

**And I** The next day, Clarissa texts me.

**Clarissa: Just so you know, no one here is speaking to me. In Sasha. So thanks for that.**

**Me: Be pissed at me all you want. I'm pretty fucking angry with JOMS.too.**

I know this anger well. It's the rage of watching helplessly from sidelines, unable to do a damn thing to make a difference when unthinkable happens. It doesn't matter that I got Sasha and security there before anything happened. It doesn't matter that it was even **pitcher** that the men weren't a danger to them.

My gut doesn't care about what did happen. It cares about what could. Every nightmare scenario plays in my head, over and over on re-remember Mom crying. Gasping. Then not making another single sound **id stop** Yeah, I'm angry.

**HOSE** I don't hear from her for another forty-eight hours.

When my phone rings, I stare at Clarissa's name and photo for a long before I pick it up. "You're alive," I say, voice flat.

Her voice is subdued when she says, "Don't act like you haven't **GO TO** checking in with Sasha and Dean this entire time."

When I say nothing in response, she finally makes a sound girls toshuddering sigh. Then she says, "I'm a huge bitch. I'm sorry."

d name "You're not a bitch. But you were irresponsible, and you—"

I take a breath myself, and if mine shudders, too, there's not a thin gle hairdo about it. "There are evil things in this world. Your security team ex a reason. You don't—" I blow out a hard breath while I work out th l Sashawords. "You don't have to do it for me. But do it for yourself."

Clarissa is quiet for a long moment. Then she says, "I will. I won security like that again. I didn't think it through first, and then...."

cluding I wait for her to finish her sentence, the silence thick between us.

"It could have ended badly. Thank you for looking out for us. Seriou

ith you "Always."

Her voice is an octave too high when she says, "I miss you."

om the "I miss you too. Still love you, sweet girl."

uile the "Still love you, James."

y down She returns from her trip two weeks before the start of her senior possiblecollege. She's tan, with a new haircut and a different style of makeu heavy on the red lipstick and light on everything else.

d have. She left here looking and acting like a nervous twenty-year-old. repeat. I weeks later, she's striding through JFK like she owns the place.

id. I watch her face change the moment she sees me. She runs the res way, then throws herself into my arms with wild exuberance. She wr legs around me, and I laugh and stagger for a second under her weigh ng beathough it is, just because of how unexpected it is.

I hold her tight. "You did miss me."

it been "I always miss you," she says and kisses me sweet and slow.

I have to forcibly pry my hands off her ass to let her slide off me w

like a cover. I look toward her luggage. "Got everything?"

"Yep. We're good."

I shoulder her bag. "I bought you the house we talked about, so you can move off-campus when the fall semester starts."

"Perfect. Thank you. Bronwyn isn't sure she's going to stay at BSU her senior year. Her dad keeps pressuring her to transfer to a 'real' school."

I was already planning to reach out to my friend Sydney to see if she would ditch move in too. So whether she stays or goes, it'll all work out. Though I tell her like crazy." She grimaces when she repeats Bronwyn's father's comment about transferring to a "real" school, but she has to know that's going to be pretty typical reaction among our social sphere.

"Do you want to change schools? You could try to come to Columbia. Or even Barnard or Fordham?"

Columbia will open doors for her that BSU never will. Not because education is necessarily better but because people assume it is. I mention the networking opportunities. There's a building at Columbia with her name on it. Literally.

Initially, when she chose a state school, it was more about her environment. Seven health than any career advantages.

But she changed her major when she transferred. She wants to work in publishing, which makes school here a no-brainer.

She stops in the middle of foot traffic, and New York City shows her a slight nod, slight dodges around her, irritated glares thrown her way.

"Do you want me to transfer and move back home?"

I reach for her elbow and urge her to keep moving. "This has nothing to do with my feelings."

When it's over, she looks a little hurt, and I feel like an ass about that.

She wants me to ask her to move home a year early.

But I can't do that. If she comes home out of her own choice because you can school, great. But I'm not derailing her plans because I'm greedy for her.

And once she's living with me full-time, how am I going to keep my distance from her? She's become a nearly irresistible temptation.

And yet, nothing has changed. The idea of touching her makes me feel guilty. As if sex with me would harm her. It's getting worse over time. I'll miss her better. God knows I feel guilty about the night of the gala.

I'm not doing a deep dive into that, or trying to figure out if my secret from the past is messing with my present. Or if all the things I owe to Marcus are the root of my guilt. Because it doesn't matter.

We still have the money issue between us. And it's not going away any time soon.

She's gaining access to more of her own money this week, just above the requirements of the trust. Which is great because I won't be divvying up her allowance for her anymore.

Primarily, I'll be managing her investments, the houses, and the staff. She'll only need to request funds from me if they're in excess of twenty thousand a time.

She's my responsibility. It's a precious charge, and I cannot fail at it. I won't forget it for a moment.

When I tell her as much, she shakes her head, presses her lips together in a small dent between her eyebrows, and tells me she's returning to Pennsylvania.

We have a week at the brownstone. I work an abbreviated schedule so we can see more of each other.

When she's away, I usually stay at my own apartment, as it's a

commute to the office. But when she's here, I'm here.

cause of Every single time I walk out the front door, I think about that night  
er. holding her against that door and making her come with my fingers.  
y hands I haven't tasted Clarissa yet. The fact that I didn't taste her when I  
chance torments me.

me feel She walks around in a T-shirt and underwear a lot. And I can't do  
me, notshe's deliberately tormenting me or if she's just become so comi  
around me that drinking coffee in the kitchen simply no longer require  
wed-up She wears these clinging little things that let me see everything: the  
s are atof her sweet little slit, the bounce of her tits and ass.

Sometimes, after we kiss, I can *smell* that I've made her wet. I can s  
mytimethe darker patch on her panties. And I remember what she felt like. H  
pussy sucked on my fingers, how her walls fluttered when she cam  
per thelick and hot she was.

g out a My dick is going to grow a callous from the number of times I hid  
bathroom and tug one out.

f. She'll I stay away from her suite upstairs. She stays away from mine.

isand at On her twenty-first birthday, I take her to Crown Shy. It's not m  
scene; if I hadn't asked where she wanted to go first, we'd have ende  
that orMarea.

But the food at Crown Shy is great. The waitstaff are in jea  
ether, aConverse. Snoop Dogg is playing in the background. And, watching  
ing torealize—even though I'm only thirty—until I married Clarissa, I rea  
well on my way to being the stuffy old man she teases me about being.  
le from Most of my coworkers are at least ten years older than I am. Cl  
father, a man in his fifties, was my best friend for years. Despite th  
i closer



reminds me that I'm not really old, no matter how heavy the years. About responsibility are.

For a long time, dinners out were about making an impression or clearing the deal. But when I'm with her, I can stop being that driven, ambitious as I can just be the man who is wildly, desperately in love with my wife.

decide if I'd taken Clarissa to Marea, she'd have had a great time. She'd have had a cocktail dress and diamonds, used the right fork, and laughed at exact pants. right volume to not draw attention from the other customers.

outline At Crown Shy, she sings along to Lizzo's "Good as Hell" when the music changes in the background.

see it in Her auburn curls bounce with the beat as she dances in her seat.

low her When she orders a fifteen-dollar appetizer, I must give away my smile. How because she smiles at me and says, "You've forgotten how the other half lives."

e in my I snort. I haven't forgotten. There was a time when a fifteen-dollar appetizer would have been an impossible luxury. "Don't talk to me about the other half. You're a one-percenter, and you didn't even know what the other half was until you went to a state school."

led up at "This"—she indicates the restaurant at large—"is still bougie. It's prepared by a Michelin-starred chef. When you come visit me at school, I'm making you eat a fast-food burger with cheese."

g her, I She laughs out loud at my slow blink and the deliberately blank expression on my face.

. When someone is raised the way I was, bounced around between Clarissa's workers and extended family members, with most of my belongings packed in a trash bag as I moved from aunt to grandparent to cousin and back

ars and it's easy to think that when someone can provide expensive gifts, they provide expensive gifts.

osing a I want to give her everything. And part of me struggles with the vshole. I doesn't assign value to anything via currency. Money has never been i supply for her. For her, loving something has nothing to do with a price we worn Money is power. The acquisition of it was my driving ambition for ctly themy life. I want to feed her a thousand-dollar dinner. She deserves a \$1 first edition set of novels that she's never going to read because to e songthem could damage them.

But when we get home, I give her a first edition of *Pride and Prejudice* set of three slim novels she touches with reverent hands.

urprise, I also give her a Birkin bag—which she tosses over her shoulder her halfmodels for me—and a Squishmallow pillow shaped like an ice cream

And it's the fifty-dollar toy that makes her smile, eyes wet and shining 1-dollarthinks of Marcus.

out the We share a double-chocolate mini cake from the Angelina Bakery e otherEighth Ave., and I try not to think about licking frosting off her nipple

laying that pillow toy down, bending my wife over it, and fucki e foodThere's not a moment I spend with her that my mind doesn't find a ool, I'mturn into a sexual fantasy.

Then it's move-in day. She takes my cat. And I'm missing my wife. pression

1 social

stuffed

again,

it's easy to think that when someone can provide expensive gifts, they *should* provide expensive gifts.

I want to give her everything. And part of me struggles with the way she doesn't assign value to anything via currency. Money has never been in short supply for her. For her, loving something has nothing to do with a price tag.

Money is power. The acquisition of it was my driving ambition for most of my life. I want to feed her a thousand-dollar dinner. She deserves a \$150,000 first edition set of novels that she's never going to read because touching them could damage them.

But when we get home, I give her a first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*—a set of three slim novels she touches with reverent hands.

I also give her a Birkin bag—which she tosses over her shoulder and models for me—and a Squishmallow pillow shaped like an ice cream cone. And it's the fifty-dollar toy that makes her smile, eyes wet and shining, as she thinks of Marcus.

We share a double-chocolate mini cake from the Angelina Bakery on Eighth Ave., and I try not to think about licking frosting off her nipples. Or laying that pillow toy down, bending my wife over it, and fucking her. There's not a moment I spend with her that my mind doesn't find a way to turn into a sexual fantasy.

Then it's move-in day. She takes my cat. And I'm missing my wife.







*Peer Pressure*

CLARISSA



*Peer Pressure*

CLARISSA

## Fall Semester Senior Year

**B**RONWYN WON THE BATTLE with her father and remained in Pennsylvania. I'm selfishly glad of it. Our friend Sydney also moved with us, which means, including our cook, Jeanine, every bedroom in the house is spoken for.

I am super excited about that little development. And it's not just because I adore Sydney, though I do.

Mostly it's because when James comes to visit this semester and his friends, where is he going to sleep without giving away that we aren't sleeping in the sex? Oh, hmmm, let me think.... That's right. He's going to be sleeping in the bed.

Sydney's a junior chemical engineering major, and I love her to death. She's tall, with tan skin and long brown hair that's usually in a single braid down her back. She's athletic, blunt, and completely no-nonsense. Bronwyn and Sydney are polar opposites in everything from looks to attitudes, but they're both fierce and loyal friends.

Sydney's an uber-serious student. She's also got a lot of financial baggage, which is a sticking point with James. Given his own personal history, she can't help but find that a little hypocritical. But he doesn't seem to see it.

He's convinced Sydney is conning me and manipulated me into letting her live here. He sicced a private investigator on her—who found nothing, of course. And he wants me to charge her rent, on principle, to make sure she isn't using me.

As if. It's okay not to charge Bronwyn because she can afford it, but I'm supposed to charge Sydney because she can't? Pffft. No.



He thinks I don't know it drives him crazy that he can't *make* me do  
semester, he could have yanked the financial reins or made threats  
in Sydney evicted because he controlled where I lived.

But I *own* this cute little four-bedroom house. It's in my name, boug  
in this my money, even though James had to approve the purchase initially.

And the expenses here don't even come close to exceeding my fi  
allowance, even with staffing and security. There's really nothing he  
about Sydney, except complain about her. Poor guy.

So James doesn't trust Sydney. And she can't believe he had the  
having have her investigated.

Then there's the whole thing where I let slip to Sydney that I'm  
virgin. She immediately decided that James isn't really in love with m  
pieces, using me for money.

He doesn't realize she knows about our sex life, necessarily—the  
se. She think he suspects. However, I did accidentally admit that she belie  
de. But married me for the tax break on his inheritance.

In Sydney's defense, when you're talking billions of dollars, it's a h  
urdens, tax break.

To keep the peace, I probably should have kept those tidbits on the  
low from both of them. Now they're both suspicious because they th  
ing her other one isn't treating me right. It'd be funny if I didn't want to sma  
ing, of heads together.

I'm not nearly as gullible as James thinks I am. A lot of peop  
targeted me, trying to use me. But what he doesn't understand is that  
but I'm up watching my father field sycophants and users my whole life. I kno  
to read a room.

I don't know how it would have been if I hadn't had James. I might l

it. Lastin losers or let a con sucker me just out of loneliness or desperation. M  
to have I'll never know because I do have James. And Bronwyn. And now  
and Jeanine.

ght with I don't understand how James and I can be so in sync with each o  
percent of the time. Then—seemingly out of nowhere—he's laying d  
nanciallaw or making edicts on some of the most ridiculous things, like  
can dopaying rent.

I understand that he worries. I grew up with a father who did th  
gall tothing. But more often than not, James confuses me with the hills he c  
to die on. His answer to that is always "I promised your father I'd take  
i still ayou."

e and is As if that explains anything at all.

Dean is driving this weekend so James loses less time working, s  
ough I can work on his laptop and phone in the car. And Bronwyn is alr  
eves heexcited about this weekend as I am, as evidenced by her r  
confirmation requests that Dean is definitely going to be here.

ell of a When I'd first come to school, he was one of my rotating guard  
didn't last long, for multiple reasons. For one, I prefer to have someo  
: down-can blend in as part of our friend group. For another, something wen  
ink thewith Bronwyn and Dean.

ck their Bronwyn isn't ready to talk about it yet. And I won't pry.

But they disappeared together one weekend near the end of my juni  
le have Then Dean requested a transfer to work for James directly, telling  
I grewwoman would be a better fit for my situation. And Bronwyn told us r  
ow howmention his name again.

She then promptly forgot about that directive and continued to grill  
have letevery single detail about his employment and where he's been and wh

Maybe. been doing.

Sydney The only difference between the “before that weekend” and “after that weekend” as far as I can tell, is the way she crosses her arms and narrows her eyes as she listens to my completely uneventful reports on the man.

When Dean pulls up on Friday afternoon and James steps out of the car, Sydney rushes from the house to greet him.

James is wearing jeans and a dark green henley. Suit James is hot. The same James is scorching. James in jeans and a henley is... gah, I want to choose a man like a tree.

I affect Dean's usual pose by the front of the car, hands folded in front of me. I tip my head, my expression stoic. "Mr. Mellinger."

His white teeth flash in a grin, the autumn breeze ruffling his dark hair. His blue eyes crinkle at the corners, the way I love best. Then he fast-walks toward me, stopping inches in front of me. He's close enough that I can smell repeated light cologne, laundry detergent, and pure James.

He assumes a serious expression of his own, quirking an eyebrow. "That Harcourt-Mellinger."

Then he hauls me over his shoulder and carries me up the porch, then it down toward the front door.

Bronwyn passes us on the steps with a brief wave for James and a nod straight for Dean. I don't even want to know what new torment she's in for this year. for the man.

Sydney's sitting in a rocker on the front porch, wrapped in a reversible blanket and reading a textbook on her Kindle.

James slows as he passes her, giving her a narrow-eyed glare. His hand twitches like a gunfighter in a spaghetti western. "Sydney."

She returns the exact same expression. "James."

When we get inside, James sits me on the kitchen island. He's sitting between my spread legs, his hands braced on the counter to either side of my hips.

I leave my hands on my thighs, afraid to move. Afraid to even breathe, in case he remembers his decision not to do things like this.

I've gotten really good at teasing James. When I'm home, and we're in the house, I deliberately walk around in a thin tank top and my undies just to watch the flush move across his cheekbones. I've advanced so far that I can get that first giggle and bicep squeeze. So far.

And maybe I shouldn't do it, but as I've told him in the past, "If I suffer, you have to suffer."

Mostly, that's a joke. But when it comes to trying to get him to break up with me, I kind of mean it.

This is his rule, not mine. I absolutely disagree with his reasoning. I'm not in crisis or overwhelmed by grief. I'm not too young to get married. "Mrs. what I want. He obviously won't try to guilt me into quitting school or giving up my career goals. And I'm honestly not worried about the money.

If he tries to control me, we'll fight about it. But it's not as though I want him to walk all over me.

If he didn't want me, that would be entirely different. But he does. I can feel his eyes on me, the way his pulse speeds up around me.

So if the sight of me nearly naked gets him worked up and he starts thinking about things, then I can only see that as a good thing. It hasn't happened yet, but hope springs eternal.

The last time I was home, he was working in the study. I walked in there with a cup of coffee, wearing thin white cotton panties and a white undershirt.

tanding Then I sat cross-legged in a chair directly opposite him and  
e of my chatting, as if I had absolutely no idea of the picture I made.

His eyes did this fluttery, unfocused thing, and he let out a  
athe involuntary noise somewhere between a nearly silent "ha" and a whim  
looked ready to melt into a puddle. Or maybe just grab me and rail n  
e alonethere on his desk.

erwear, Instead, he stiffened his spine, his eyes trained directly on my hard  
far pastas he asked, "Aren't you cold?"

I looked at him with huge, fake-innocent eyes peering over my cof  
have toand said, "Nope."

Fifteen seconds later, he stood up. "Excuse me. I need to just.  
eak hisgestured vaguely at the door.

I sipped my coffee, then quirked an eyebrow at him over the rim  
; at thisneed to just...?"

o know He palmed his cock, which looked huge and hard as a rock un  
: givingclothing, shot me a look midway between smile and scowl, an

"Woman, you're a witch."

I allow "Still love you, James."

Another evening, I took my red lace bra off under my clothing, sl  
see hisout through one sleeve. Then I gave a huge sigh of relief, cupped th  
and said, "That is so much better."

possibly I proceeded to drape the bra right next to him on the arm of the sof  
workedI sat down beside him to watch a movie, putting my head on his shoul  
my hand on his thigh.

ny butt He watched the entire movie sitting straight up and eyes forward.  
and hiswas thinking about something entirely different from what was  
screen. I don't have to be a mind reader to know it.

started See, the trick with James is to never attack directly. Direct confrontation about our lack of sex life ends in a fight that he always, *always* wins.

In short, So my plan is to wear him down. But I have to be smart about it.

per. He Which is why, when he sits me on the counter and stands between my spread thighs, I stay very still, as if he's some wild animal. Best to approach.

My nipples, He kisses me, and I revel in the feel and taste of him, wrapping my arms around his neck and burying my face in his hair. A hot spiral of lust coils through me, but he doesn't shift his weight closer or press into the V of my thighs the way I need him to. He leaves his hands on the counter, and way too soon, he pulls his mouth from mine. ..."

He Then, as if he simply can't help himself, he lifts his hands from the counter and shoves them under my sweatshirt, holding them still against my back. "You're at my waist. He drops his face to where my neck meets my shoulder, and *breathes*.

Under his He breathes for a long time. Long enough for the tension to lead me, muscles as I absorb the heat of him. Long enough for me to sift my fingers through the silky strands of his hair. Long enough for me to start breathing normally myself and let the familiar scent of my husband ground me. Finding it comfort, and I didn't realize how desperately I needed it until I felt it.

The girls, Sydney walks past us toward the fridge and says, "You two are so weird."

a. Then James lifts his head at last, eyes intense and sincere on mine. "God damn that girl."

After dinner, James finally manages to tear himself away from the table. But he Snickelnuts, who's been clinging to him from practically the moment of his arrival.

We go to Jack's, my favorite dive bar, which, conveniently enough,

complaints owned by Bronwyn's cousin. Our high school friend, Louis, drove  
weekend from New York to play a gig here and hang out. And he  
band have promised they'll play a couple nineties grunge songs, just s  
een mytease James about his taste in music.

let him I'm pretty sure Louis is still carrying a torch for Bronwyn after prom  
But if he is, he seems to have accepted that Bronwyn only sees hi  
fingersfriend.

is body The place is crowded and noisy, with sticky floors, cold beer, an  
ives histownies than college students.

. I tug on James's hand as I drag him back to our usual corner bo  
counterfollows me easily enough, but his head is on a constant swivel, a  
are skinfingers are wrapped around my own a little too tightly for comfort.

and he I pull up short, leaning into him and standing on tiptoe, trying to g  
enough to speak in his ear.

ave my He bends down to hear me, but he never looks away from the crowd  
fingers "James, what's wrong?"

eathing "You come here a lot?"

This is I shrug. "A few times a month. The wings are great. Why?"

"This place is a security nightmare."

frickin' "That's why we sit in the corner booth. Jack reserves it for us w  
knows we're coming. Besides, hardly anybody even knows who I am h

l, I hate He rolls his shoulders, tension bleeding from him. Then he takes  
breath in and blows it out through his mouth.

om Mr. "Beth and Dean are right over there and there. Why are you so  
t of hisNothing has ever happened to me here. Nothing will. We're just here  
a good time and listen to some music."

ugh, is "It's beer," he mutters. "Just beer."

in this "What?"  
and his He shakes his head. "Nothing. There's a spill on the floor back there so I can—" He swallows. "—sticky."

I rub his arm, smiling but still confused. "Okay, Mr. Neat Freak. Thank you for cleaning the floors every night."

James cracks his neck to the side, then visibly shakes off whatever's bothering him in a mood. Bending down, he kisses me lightly, then says, "Introduce me to your friends."

When we reach the big round corner booth, Aimee, another of Bronwyn's cousins, holds her beer high in the air and shouts, "Melling and his Aimee's boyfriend, Brandon, sticks out a hand. "Good to meet you," he says with a smile on his friendly, open face.

James takes his hand, but his voice isn't exactly warm. I call him a boardroom persona. "You are?"

"Brandon Hart. This is Aimee, Monroe, and Phoebe. You already know Sydney. I think Bronwyn is still grabbing a beer," he says. "And we'd like to know who you are."

Monroe laughs. I bump James with my elbow, rolling my eyes, because I know what's coming.

"You're the imaginary husband."

I scoff and shake my head. "He's not my imaginary husband. He's a deepdream husband. Pay attention."

Phoebe speaks up. "It's awesome to meet you, dream husband. Thank you for the beer."

James loosens up slowly after that, a little at a time. We laugh. We dance. We sing along to Louis's version of "Blackhole Sun."

I drink one beer, then stick with water. James isn't drinking at all.



And when the booth gets crowded, James pulls me onto his lap. I m  
ere. It's the feel of him. Hard. Sexy. Solid. Then I lay my head on his shoul  
fiddle with the hair at the nape of his neck.

ey mop He keeps his hands on some part of me almost every single secon  
out. My waist. My back. Even, at one point, my ass.

got him A couple hours in, I drop a kiss on his lips. "I'm headed to the  
e me toroom."

Bronwyn raises her hand. "Ooh, pick me, pick me."

one of Monroe shakes his head. "Don't know why women think pissing is .  
eerrrs." activity."

ou," he I nod to Beth, so she knows where we're headed, and we make our  
the short hallway where the ladies' room is housed. Before we rea  
l it his destination, we hit a bottleneck of drunk frat boys.

Beth clears the area, but as I make my way past, one of the guys stu  
y know or maybe is shoved, straight into me from the sidelines. His entire bec  
ll know on two places: my face and the front of my white shirt.

I freeze. Absolutely motionless with shock.

cause I The entire group of his friends crowds around me, some laughing  
friend, some leering at me. Beth is working crowd control and puts h  
between mine and the guys.

le's my But not before the drunk guy who dropped his drink on me laugh  
"Don't look like a princess now," and grabs my breast with one hand  
Grab a ass with the other, yanking me against his body.

Beth pulls him off me, doing something that has him squealing, "  
/e slow and inserts her body between the two of us, backing me against th  
Dean and Jack break up the group of guys.

And James loses his ever-loving mind.

felt into It's not a fair fight. Frat boy is trashed, and James hasn't had a single  
der andBut even if the other guy were stone-cold sober, I don't think he would  
stood a chance against my husband.

d we're I don't know how or when he learned, but James knows how to fight  
he knows how to fight dirty. After a pathetic attempt to retaliate, the  
ladies'is crying. No longer throwing his own punches, he's just holding his  
over his face and leaning against the wall.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm drunk. It's not my fault. I'm drunk."

a group The words are gasoline poured on an already-roaring fire, and James  
back at him, punch after punch.

way to I clutch the back of Beth's shirt and try to get out from behind her.

ach our That prick isn't fighting back anymore, but James isn't stopping. At  
terrifying moment, I think he has no intention of stopping until the  
umbles,unconscious... or maybe dead.

er lands Jack and Dean are trying to pull him away. They're big guys. But  
them, they should be able to get James off him. But they're having no  
at all.

at their Finally, Jack says something that must sink in. James lifts his head,  
er bodyeyes shoot to mine. He stands there, breathing hard, one hand still wrapped  
the guy's shirt and the other clenched in a tight fist. His blue eyes are closed,  
s, says, I can't hear what Dean is saying to him. I can barely see what's happening  
and mybecause Beth physically keeps me behind her with my back to the wall.  
whatever Dean says gets through to him, because James flinches and  
'Bitch,"the frat boy with a shove as I manage to push my way out from behind  
ie wall.bodyguard.

James reaches me in three seconds flat. He runs his eyes over me, his  
head down to my wet blouse. Then he takes off his henley and gently

e drink over my head.

ld have When I'm covered in his shirt, he pulls me against him. "I'm going  
him for this."

ht. And I shiver and hold on to him. "Just get me out of here."

asshole Jack, with a firm grip on the belligerent drunk, shouts over, "Clari  
is arms you pressing charges against this asshole?"

James and I both speak at once.

"No," I say.

es goes "Yes," James says.

"Hey, wait. Don't call the cops. Just forget it, right? I'll forget  
forget it," the guy whines, smearing blood across his chin with his fore  
nd for a Nobody is forgetting this anytime soon. There's no way video of  
e guy's Mellinger, beating the shit out of a drunk guy and accusing him of s  
assaulting his wife, isn't popping up all over the internet. I give it thre  
etween before it's viral. Tops.

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d drops

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over my head.

When I'm covered in his shirt, he pulls me against him. "I'm going to kill him for this."

I shiver and hold on to him. "Just get me out of here."

Jack, with a firm grip on the belligerent drunk, shouts over, "Clarissa, are you pressing charges against this asshole?"

James and I both speak at once.

"No," I say.

"Yes," James says.

"Hey, wait. Don't call the cops. Just forget it, right? I'll forget it. You forget it," the guy whines, smearing blood across his chin with his forearm.

Nobody is forgetting this anytime soon. There's no way video of James Mellinger, beating the shit out of a drunk guy and accusing him of sexually assaulting his wife, isn't popping up all over the internet. I give it three hours before it's viral. Tops.







I haven't lost control like that in years. Before Clarissa, I'd have a part of me that could kill a man and not lose a minute's sleep over dead. I'd have been wrong. That rage is still in me, crouching and waiting.

That bar had me on edge from the moment I walked inside. It smells too familiar.

That sticky floor *felt* too familiar. The way my shoes clung with every step. My sneakers did the same thing when I walked out of our kitchen that night. The drying blood on my shoes tried to anchor me to the floor with every step I took. When the monster killed my mother, I waited too long to fight. I spent most of my teens proving I'd never hesitate again.

As a kid, I used my fists. As an adult, I use power. Tonight I'm using my knife. When that prick threw his beer on Clarissa and assaulted her, the world tunneled to one purpose.

Protect.

And he did throw it on her deliberately. I saw it happen. Saw the looks the guys gave each other. Saw the jerked chin of one to the other. Saw the deliberate pretense.



They think it's over because my wife was cold and shaking and we go home. They think it's over because Clarissa agreed not to press charges. It's not over. It won't be over for a long, long time.

I got my shots in with my fists. Now I'm going to destroy them. When it's done, every one of those punks will regret this night for the rest of their lives.

Sasha called in the rest of Clarissa's regular security rotation, in those off-duty, to deal with this mess.

I'm sitting on the edge of her bed, looking at my phone, when she comes into the room. She's wrapped in a white towel, water still clinging to her shoulders, as she sinks to her knees in front of me and reaches for my hand. I hold up the phone. "They think they got to everyone with video, but it wasn't for sure tomorrow. But it looks good."

She just nods, reaches for my phone and tosses it on the bed beside her. "I don't want to talk about other people right now."

Then she takes my hands in hers and turns them over to look at the scuffs and torn-up knuckles on the right one. The left isn't great, but the knuckles aren't split.

She brushes a finger gently just next to a particularly raw area. "How long took that?" she asks.

I shake my head. I'm not surprised she's worried about me, but I wouldn't. I'm not the one who was assaulted. "That's my line. You're the one I'm worried about."

Her shoulders are high, living somewhere near her jawline, as she brushes her thumb back and forth across her lower lip. "I'll be all right." She stands and, without a word, guides me into her bathroom, where she cleans my knuckles before covering them with antibiotic ointment.

When we return to the bedroom, she drops her towel and pulls on a



anted topanties and a tank top. She's not even trying to be sexual. The fact t  
harges.adrenaline is still up and I want to fuck her right now is sick.

I disappear into the bathroom to brush my teeth and throw on slee  
hen I'mand a T-shirt. When I get back to the bedroom, she's under her  
ir lives.comforter, curled on her side and lying against her pillows. She lo  
cludingfragile. I want to wrap her up and hide her from the world.

She lifts the blanket in invitation, and some part of my brain remind  
e walksmly original plan to sleep on the floor. That part of me is an idiot.

to her My wife is in that bed, and I'm holding her. Nothing on earth cou  
ands. me.

). We'll

e us. "I

swollen

nuckles

Are you

ish she

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nd she

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ere she

pair of

panties and a tank top. She's not even trying to be sexual. The fact that my adrenaline is still up and I want to fuck her right now is sick.

I disappear into the bathroom to brush my teeth and throw on sleep pants and a T-shirt. When I get back to the bedroom, she's under her white comforter, curled on her side and lying against her pillows. She looks so fragile. I want to wrap her up and hide her from the world.

She lifts the blanket in invitation, and some part of my brain reminds me of my original plan to sleep on the floor. That part of me is an idiot.

My wife is in that bed, and I'm holding her. Nothing on earth could stop me.





A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

*Waking up Slow*

CLARISSA

**W**AKING IS SLOW TO come. I rise to the surface in gentle awareness of warmth and comfort and the wet heat of rampant arousal through me.

When I finally blink my eyes open to the early morning light filtering through my bedroom curtains, I'm lying on my side with my back to him. He's plastered against me, his left hand not only under my tank top, but cupping my breast. His erection is hot and hard as steel as it lies between my thighs.

He's still asleep. I feel the deep, consistent rise and fall of his chest against my back, the loose weight of his limbs.

And I'm so torn. Because part of me wants to freeze like a deer under headlights and enjoy every single second of this moment before he wakes up and leaves this bed. But another part, an almost primal creature inside me, absolutely can't help rubbing back against him and trying for more. I'm damn greedy for my husband.

Experimentally, I give my butt a little wiggle. Push back just a bit.

James's hand tightens on my breast, squeezes. Our lower bodies



covered by my panties and his pajama bottoms, but I still feel the deflex of his cock against me.

My body starts the tiniest little rhythm, and I feel James's breath change. He responds, meeting me micro-thrust for micro-thrust.

He brings his face into my hair, nuzzling my ear. Then his breath is hot against me as his cock grinds harder. The decadent thrill of it makes me want to purr.

I'm still a little groggy, my limbs still warm and loose and relaxed from sleep. My body is pure honey sliding off a hot spoon as James moves against me.

I lift my upper leg and rest it on the outside of his. I don't know what I'm doing. It's instinct to give him better access. But when I do it, suddenly his cock is making contact with my clit on every push forward.

We're still covered. Still dressed. I desperately wish we weren't.

"We shouldn't be doing this," James says gruffly, his words skimming the top of the shell of my ear on warm breath that raises goose bumps on my skin.

I don't say a word to that. I just freeze, barely breathing, heart sinking.

But James doesn't pull away. He stays there, wrapped around me, clutching me against him, while his erection presses hot and heavy between my thighs.

I can't stay still. Without thought or will, I move against him once more, seeking friction.

"Okay," he says. "Okay. We can do this much. Just this much."

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## *Falling Like the Stars*

**I**T WOULD TAKE AN act of God to pull me away from Clarissa now.

When I woke up and realized what I'd done, I tried to stop. To control and common sense.

But she wants this. She's as needy and frustrated as I am. I can hear her panting little breaths and feel her damp heat even through our clothing.

If we were home in New York... well, we wouldn't have slept in the bed for starters. And when things get too hot and heavy there, I go to the bathroom. She goes to hers. And we take care of ourselves.

But if I get up right now and go to the bathroom to jack off in the privacy of my room—and she stays in here to give herself some relief—does it really matter? Or does it matter anything if we both just stay here?

If I don't touch her, if we just take care of ourselves, then I'm not doing anything to her. It's the same thing she'd do if I weren't in the room.

So I pull my hand from under her tank top. And if I give it a gentle squeeze and brush my thumb across her nipple as I do it... these things happen.

She whimpers at the loss, but I reach for her hand. "There's something



could try," I say.

She looks at me, brows furrowed in confusion.

"We could take care of ourselves, together," I say.

Determination chases the doubtful expression from her face, and she

She rolls to her back to look up at me.

When we were plastered against each other, it felt like a progression. But now, that moment of introspection and discussion changed the tone. Turned this moment from some spur-of-the-moment exploration into a conscious choice. It's a decision we've made. And heavy and significant: a deliberate step onto that slippery slope instead of a right-accidental slide.

This will change things for us. There won't be any going back from here. Clarissa is lying against her pillow. Everything on this bed is white pillows. Down comforter. Crisp cotton sheets.

I draw the comforter away from her body, and now she's lying exposed on those pristine sheets, wearing her little white cotton panties and white bra. I know I'm being stupid, but she looks like a real-life angel. Her auburn curls are spread out in a wild halo, and her gorgeous whiskey-brown moss-green eyes glitter in the weak early morning light.

I have a flash of memory. Our wedding night. Clarissa spread out on the bed in that sparkling white gown, offering herself to me.

She's nervous now, where she wasn't before. I can see that in the way her hands clench and unclench the bedding. I can see it in the fluttering of her skin at the base of her throat, where I want to lick her.

But like me, she's more excited than nervous. Her nipples are hard under her tank. The divot at the base of her throat contracts tightening every breath, and her hips move in a subtle rhythm.

I tip my chin and hold her eyes. "You're sure?"

She nods eagerly.

I sit up and take off my shirt. Then I stand up and walk to the side of the bed. Running my hands down her smooth, bare leg, I touch her from her thigh to her ankle.

When I lift her right foot, she gives me that smile I know and love so well. The one that quirks up on only one side of her face and says "Now, what do you want sexualy up to, James Mellinger?"

Then I give her purple-polished toes a fat, noisy kiss.

She squeals in laughter and jerks her foot back.

So I do the other leg. And I kiss those toes, too, just to watch her squirm and see the nervous tension leave her clenching hands.

I tug gently at the hemline of her tank top. "Do you think you should take this off? Or do you want to stay wrapped up like a pretty little package?" There's no wrong answer," I say quietly, sitting on the bed beside her. "The tank aren't comfortable...."

She sits up and pulls the tank over her head in a wild rush, tossing it on the floor. "I'm comfortable," she says with a cheeky grin.

I fight a smile, then swallow at the view. There are my favorite freckles perched just above her rosy nipples. Damn, she's beautiful.

"Are your breasts sensitive? Did you like it when I touched them? Or when I licked them?" I know she did. She practically came out of her skin that day. But I want her to remember.

Clarissa shivers, though it's not even a little cold. Red flags burn across her cheeks, but she doesn't look embarrassed. She looks turned on as hell. "Lie back and give me your hand, sweet girl," I say.

She reclines against the pillows and holds out her hand as if I'm a  
shake it. And I'm suddenly reminded how innocent she is.

She's been deliberately tormenting me for months with innuendos,  
herkisses, trailing fingers, and, yes, near nudity.

I admit, at first, I wasn't sure if the teasing was on purpose. But it  
so well.obvious pretty fast. She loves getting a reaction out of me and watch  
that are fight the need to touch her. And I love it too. I live for it.

Because she's become so adept at teasing me, it's easy to forget t  
only sexual experience she has happened with me. And we haven  
much, though what we have done feels world-shattering to me.

When she sits across from me in damp panties and pretends to want  
about how wet the weather is, it's hard to remember my wife is a virg  
ild takeshe's lying here in bed and holds her shaking hand out to me like I'm a  
ckage?introduce myself.

The two of us could just go at it and masturbate beside each other  
this moment is going to carry the weight it should, she deserves mor  
it to theGod knows I want to give it. As long as I keep my cock to myself, it's  
do that for her.

I draw her fingers up and into my mouth, sucking the first two. Fi  
then the other, swirling my tongue over the digits.

She gasps at the sensation, a surprised, breathy "Oh" falling from he  
it night. "Close your eyes. Don't think about coming. I just want you to relax  
yourself feel good."

She huffs out a laugh, but she closes her eyes, and I guide her hand  
"Yes,"her breast, placing her own wet fingers over the nipple.

"When I'm not here, you can suck your own fingers," I say quietly. '  
nice when it's wet, doesn't it?"

about to She makes a tiny sound. Her thighs clench together.

"Play a little, baby girl. Make yourself feel good."

flirting, Her fingers pinch and swirl.

"Mmmm. That's nice. I'll remember you like that when it's my turn."

became She shudders at my words. And I think it's my voice as much as h  
ing metouch that's driving her up. Every sound—every squirming react  
happening at the sound of my words.

that the I reach for her other hand and pull it up to her poor neglected breast.  
it doneleave this one out. Feel the weight? Feel how satiny soft your skin is  
breasts are gorgeous. You have the prettiest pink nipples."

to chat She squeezes and arches her back. "James...."

n. Until "Are you ready to move lower?"

about to "Yes." Another whisper.

"Bottoms off or bottoms on?" I ask. "You can do it either way. Y  
. But ifslide your wet fingers right down under your panties. Do you rememb  
re. AndWhen I touched you under your panties?"

safe to She nods frantically, eyes closed.

"You can touch yourself like that, under your panties, or you can tal  
rst one,off and let me see that pretty pussy when you work it."

Her abdominal muscles visibly clench at my words, and she blow  
r lips. rough breath. There's a beat where she hesitates. Builds up her nerve.  
and letto take them off," she whispers.

"Go ahead."

back to She nods, flutters her hands down to her waistband, then stalls tl  
want to," she says. "But I'm—"

'It feels I make an indistinct sound in my throat and gently take her  
between my teeth before I whisper, "Is my sweet girl shy? I've se

almost bare lots of times. Why is this different?"

"It just is."

She's right. It is. This is about emotional vulnerability, not physical exposure. "Would it help if I took my clothes off now too?"

Her eyes fly open, and I pull back to look at her. She goes for her own—isso fast, I almost laugh. But I don't. Because I'm working off my drawers, pants and boxer briefs, and I am way too busy looking at that pretentious. "Don't pussy she's just revealed."

I didn't see that part of her last spring. I felt it with my fingers, but hidden, always hidden, under those black silk panties.

I didn't taste her then either, and the lack of it has tormented me ever since.

I look up to see her eyes are on my hard cock, wide and every inch enthralled with me as I am with her. In more than a year of marriage you can never see me like this either.

I haven't even touched myself yet, but a bead of precum pearls at the tip of my cock. She reaches out her thumb and swipes across it, then brings it to her mouth, her pretty pink tongue licking it off.

Jesus. My abdominal muscles clench as I resist the urge to push forward. To give her more to taste.

She looks up at me with mischief in her grin, and I shake my head. "I want scolding." "Witch," I say, then tip my head back, close my eyes, and try to hold it together. The point of this is to take care of ourselves.

When I've gotten the urge to take more than we agreed to under cover here. "I climb on the bed beside her, not touching, careful to leave a few inches between us. I take her hand and use it to run the backs of her fingers between her breasts, down her belly, to rest at the apex of her thighs.

"Touch here now. Slide a finger. Right. There," I say. "You can close your eyes."

eyes if it makes it easier to concentrate on the way you feel. Or you can  
them open and watch yourself."

physical Her gaze leaves my face and moves down to where I hold her hand  
slides a finger through the slick folds of her pussy.

panties "I like to watch too," I admit. "But I bet you remember that."

wstring Her gaze flies to mine, then down to my aching cock. "I want to  
ty bareyou," she says.

Her breathing has picked up, ragged and raw. I feel her hand flex  
t it was mine, her fingers circling faster. Her movements are frantic, brows furrowed.

She looks frustrated. Poor thing.

r since. "Are you trying to come?" I scold her gently.

r bit as "Yes."

e, she's I make a small tsk sound. "I told you not to think about coming."

"So bossy," she grumbles, but her lips quirk in a smile when she says  
e tip of I am bossy. I'm a domineering asshole. I don't know what Marc  
it to her thinking when he asked me to be her husband.

I pull her hand back up to my mouth, suck on those fingers again. I  
forward. But also for me.

And I was dead right to be tormented by the lack of her taste in my  
l, mock because Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger's flavor is decadent. She's d  
y to get clean, a bit salty. And that little taste is almost worse than having had  
all because now I know what I'm missing.

ontrol, I I move her hand back down, guide her fingers to her clit. When she  
inches to move them again, copying the rhythm I used last year, I breathe o  
etween and slow. Then I wrap my free hand around my cock and work it le  
No hurry.

se your She makes a sound of annoyance. I remove my hand from hers and





You're covering it all up. But all I have to do is close my eyes, and she remember it for the rest of my life."

works, Clarissa makes a keening sound, her eyes on mine, her fingers swi  
work my own hand faster. The muscles of my forearm are tensi  
swollenflexing. My thumb swipes over the sensitive head of my cock.

Her fingers keep moving on her clit, but her attention is on my coc  
"Look, on the way I work it. She probably thinks it looks rough. I be  
wondering how it would feel if I fucked her like this.

There's a solid flush of heat on her chest, up her neck, and on her  
Those gorgeous, ethereal eyes are fever bright.  
demand "This is yours, sweet girl. I can't wait to fill you up. I'm going to r  
r in the until you scream from how good it feels. I love you so fucking much."

Clarissa comes with an inarticulate wail forced through clenched te  
y, I see entire body seizing and her eyes on my cock.

ny own In two more strokes, I let go, ropes of my semen gushing over my  
o lick and landing on her soft belly.

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our clit.

You're covering it all up. But all I have to do is close my eyes, and I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

Clarissa makes a keening sound, her eyes on mine, her fingers swirling. I work my own hand faster. The muscles of my forearm are tensing and flexing. My thumb swipes over the sensitive head of my cock.

Her fingers keep moving on her clit, but her attention is on my cock now, on the way I work it. She probably thinks it looks rough. I bet she's wondering how it would feel if I fucked her like this.

There's a solid flush of heat on her chest, up her neck, and on her cheeks. Those gorgeous, ethereal eyes are fever bright.

"This is yours, sweet girl. I can't wait to fill you up. I'm going to ride you until you scream from how good it feels. I love you so fucking much."

Clarissa comes with an inarticulate wail forced through clenched teeth, her entire body seizing and her eyes on my cock.

In two more strokes, I let go, ropes of my semen gushing over my fingers and landing on her soft belly.







I kiss her temple in the aftermath and hold her hand until her breath slows and the aftershocks stop. Then I move to her attached bathroom to bring back a warm cloth and a soft towel to clean her.

She pulls the comforter back over her, and I throw my sleep pants and underwear to lie beside her on top of the covers. I've still got plenty left in me to go around. Postcoital cuddling with both of us naked is a recipe for a disaster. I hold her like this while I try not to think too hard about why this may have been a mistake.

Reaching out, she drags her finger across the swirling path of my tattoo. Her name, worked into the existing design. Hidden until you know where to look, and then it's all you see. Every other bit of ink on my body now just about paying homage to Clarissa. I knew she didn't notice the chaos last night.

"James," she says, tears thick in her voice.

It wasn't supposed to make her cry. "You don't like it."

"I love it," she says, her voice fierce. And there's my tigress who threatens me with her wrath.



She traces a finger over one of the circular burn scars on my cheek. Her voice is curious as she asks, "What caused these?"

Cigarettes. But she doesn't need to hear about something that happened. "Accident. Not a big deal."

"Okay," she says, "then what's wrong? You're brooding."

"I don't brood. Don't make me sound like some emo kid with heavy eyeliner and an earring listening to depressing music and writing bad poetry about how pointless life is."

She bursts out in a laugh, then sucks in a breath and turns toward me. Her look of realization on her face. "*James.*"

I pull back, a little wary. "What?"

"That was an oddly specific description of brooding."

I brazen it out. "Isn't that everyone's idea of brooding?"

"I was initially thinking more along the lines of Mr. Rochester. I went straight to guyliner."

She leans over and touches my earlobe, right where a small scar may have formed when I, very briefly, wore an earring.

"It was a phase. I was fourteen."

"How does an emo rocker turn into"—she runs a displaying hand up and down my body—"this?"

"I was living at my cousin's house at the time. But then she had a baby in the they needed the extra room, so I moved back to my grandmother's place. My mother's mother," I explain.

"Your grandmother didn't let you keep the eyeliner and earring?"

"No, that wasn't it at all. My grandmother never said a word about it. She just asked me what I planned to do with my life. And when I told her that someday I was going to have more money than God, and people were

st. Herto call me 'sir,' she said that was a fine dream. But she didn't want to  
about my dreams. She wanted to know what I was going to do to m  
t ugly.life I wanted."

"Wow," she says.

"If I'd told her I was going to play in a band and sell out concert  
1 blackhave made the T-shirts for me. But I decided on a future in finance. I  
l poetrypretty single-minded about it, actually." My grandmother reminded r  
regardless of my past, and even regardless of an unsure present, I d  
l me, athe ability to shape the life I would have as an adult.

"I've never met your grandmother."

"I only lived with her for six months before she passed,"

"Aneurysm." I shove down any emotion the memory might provoke.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, hugging me.

But you I wrap my arms around her. "You deal and move on." In this case, I  
on to live with an aunt, uncle, and three cousins.

remains "Your mother died when you were very young?" she asks.

"I was seven." I need to change this subject. I don't want to talk ab  
parents. I don't want to talk about my childhood at all. It's best left in t  
Vannawhere it belongs.

"So," I say, "masturbation."

by, and She looks up at me, thrown for a moment by the conversational piv  
ice. Mylaughs.

"Yes?" She drags the word out questioningly.

I shrug. "I'm just curious if we're going to try this on a regular bas  
it. Sheyou were thinking it might be a one-off."

her that Curious, my ass. I'm dying for confirmation that what we did wor  
e goingher.



o know "We should definitely be doing this on a regular basis."

ake the I lean over her and indicate her nightstand. "What do you have  
drawer? Anything fun?"

Her eyes go wide in delighted shock. "*James.*"

s, she'd "Don't be shy now," I say. "What's in the drawer?"

became She narrows her eyes at me, then reaches over and pulls it open.

ne that, I peer inside in expectation. I can't wait to see what she uses on hers

id have What I see is a phone charging station, a small jewelry box, a jumb  
of Advil, and a Kindle.

I squint. Look at her. Look back at the drawer. Look back at her. '

I say. "do you keep them?"

"Them?" she asks with exaggerated innocence.

"Your toys, you tease."

moved She laughs at me. "I don't have any."

I'm horrified. Legitimately horrified. "Why?" I ask.

"I don't know. I just never bought anything."

out my "You might like the way a vibrator feels."

he past, "I guess," she says. "Do you have toys?"

And now I see why she felt embarrassed at my question. "I'm an ad  
in my prime who is not having intercourse with my wife. So, yes,  
ot, then something to make the situation easier."

She nods at me sagely. "Blow-up doll."

"No, not a blow-up doll. My life isn't a nineties screwball comedy."  
sis or iff for my phone, do a quick search, and pull up an image. "This."

"It looks like a flashlight. If I saw that in your drawer, I would legit  
ked forthink, 'Wow, James really must be afraid of a power outage,'" she says

I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes, but I'm grinning.

"Do you think I should order something?" she asks.

in the "Oh, yes. When they arrive, you can call me to test them out while  
on the phone."

There's a hot flush of color on her cheekbones when she says.  
absolutely call you."

"Good girl."

elf. I run a finger up her arm. "Do you watch porn?" Yeah, we operate  
o bottleneck. And I am walking right through it.

"Mellinger, you are all up in my personal business today," she says  
"Whereher voice is breathy, and she's rubbing that thumb over her bottom lip.

"Hmmm," I say, looking deeply into her eyes and speculating what  
nonanswer means she does or doesn't.

"I prefer to listen to romance audiobooks rather than watch porn with  
people in it. It's easier for me to imagine myself or you as the character  
the book. And I need it to be loving, not just about sex."

Ah. "What kinds of books do you listen to?" I ask curiously.

She reaches down, pulls out her Kindle, and shows me the library thumbnail.

"You just told me you picture me when you listen to these."

ult man "Yes," she says. "Sometimes."

I have I scroll through. Orcs, minotaurs, aliens.

I click on one with a giant blue alien who has his arms around a woman  
a fur bikini. The book is called *Barbarian's Treasure* by Ruby Dixon.

I reach I raise an eyebrow and turn the book to face her. "This? You picture  
this?"

imately "Are you *judging* me right now? You ask me all these intrusive questions  
. encourage me to share my vulnerable side, and then you—"

"Of course not." I say, horrified.

She nudges me. "Totally screwing with you. But you should try it. I think you'll like it."

Then she reaches for her earbuds and hands the left one to me. She puts it in her own ear. "Listen."

When I put the earbud in, she clicks on the narration, which begins with Chapter Seven. And... I get it. It's hot. But there's also a vulnerability to it. When the blue alien sucks on the woman's toes, I scoff. "That's unrealistic. When I kiss your toes, you try to kick me in the head." She says, "Oh, sure. It's the toe sucking that's unrealistic in alien romance novels." She quips.

She scrolls through and shows me a cover with a half-naked dude. He has photoshopped abs on it.

"I like non-aliens too," she says. "This narrator has the hottest voice." She clicks on the audiobook, and a guy with a raspy voice starts reading about a hockey player in love.

His voice is not that hot.

Just then the narrator says, "Fuuuck," in my earhole. I have no idea what my expression looks like, but Clarissa pokes at me with a finger.

"You are not jealous of an audiobook narrator," she says. "Stop it."

"Absolutely not jealous," I say.

I absolutely am jealous. Which is stupid. I couldn't care less if she was with some random guy in a porn vid, but this guy talking into her earbuds and turning her on makes me... weird. Not that I will ever, ever admit to being that big of a douche.

She takes the Kindle back and shows me a bunch of novellas. "I just like these because they don't have audiobooks," she says with a sigh. "I'll listen to them someday."

Maybe "You could tell me which ones you want, and I could read them," I  
rush, "on an audio file for you." I trail off, a little embarrassed by my  
puts the I'm not a narrator. I'm good at public speaking. Did some theater in college  
just because I thought it would help me gain some skills handling a recording  
gins on I'm not that guy.

to it. "Are you serious right now? Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes!"

Totally My lips twitch.

*That's right. Jason Clarke can suck it.*

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"You could tell me which ones you want, and I could read them," I say in a rush, "on an audio file for you." I trail off, a little embarrassed by my offer. I'm not a narrator. I'm good at public speaking. Did some theater in college, just because I thought it would help me gain some skills handling a room. But I'm not that guy.

"Are you serious right now? Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes!"

My lips twitch.

*That's right. Jason Clarke can suck it.*

She wants *my* voice in her earholes.







*Naked*

CLARISSA





*Naked*  
CLARISSA

## Spring Semester Senior Year

**S**YDNEY WALKS PAST THE living room, where I'm lying on t with a heating pack on my lower stomach, a bottle of Advil clut one fist, and Mr. Fluffernuts in the crook of my other arm. She skids t in the doorway and glares at me with her hands on her hips.

"Nuh-uh. Girl, no," she says. Then she hollers, "Jeanine! Come tal into this idiot!"

I glare back at her, because, honestly, who yells at a person when th pain?

Jeanine joins Sydney at the casement opening and peers in at r brown eyes sparking with outrage.

I know they're both concerned, but neither of them is exactly the mc sort. Or, well, not what I think the mothering sort is. I barely remembe Maybe all mothers are bossy and call you a dumbass when you won the doctor.

Bronwyn can be the hovering, nurturing sort. But she also loses pat she thinks someone needs to get their head out of their ass. An definitely used the phrase "Get your head out of your ass" to me ab current situation.

To be fair, I did go to urgent care a few months ago. But they sai your gynecologist," which I do not have. Now Sydney and Jeanine names, Bronwyn tells me to remove my cranium from my an absolutely nobody says, "Aw, let me get you a heating pack," an unless it is also accompanied by a lecture or name-calling.

"This is nonsense," Jeanine says. "Make a doctor's appointment. It was the periods from hell. Now it's all the time. When was the last time you didn't need to take handfuls of Advil just to get through the day?"

"You're not the boss of me," I mumble under my breath.

Sydney's eyes pop. Straight up bug out of her head like a cartoon character.

She shoots Jeanine a wary glance and takes a step back. Mr. Pook scrambles out of my arms and takes off out of the room with a yowl.

Jeanine is five foot nothing, and she insists she's "in shape," then she says, "Round is a shape." She looks soft and sweet. But absolutely nobody sasses Jeanine unless they have a death wish. The woman uses her kitchen in Manhattan where underlings yelled, "Yes, chef!" the second she opened her mouth.

"What did you just say to me," she says. No question mark. She's daring me to say it again.

"You're a chef, Jeanine. You're not my nanny," I return.

"Holy. Shit," Sydney breathes. "Shut up."

"I will not shut up," I screech at Sydney, and I know this feels like a random outburst out of nowhere to them. Because it feels like one to me. But I hurt. All the time. I'm not sleeping because of it. And I just need to get off my back. It's honestly such a good thing I took all those credits my first couple years of college, because if I were trying to carry that course load this semester, I'd have crashed and burned.

"Everybody wants to tell me what to do," I continue. "And I'm sick of it. I want to skip class and lie on the sofa with a heating pack, I'm allowed to skip class and lie on the sofa with a heating pack." And then I burst into tears.

Sydney and Jeanine share a shocked look, then, as one, surround me on the sofa with their arms wrapped around me.

First it "Honey, this is not normal. There's something wrong. Your hormones are all messed up. You're in pain all the time. You have to go to the doctor."  
Jeanine says.

"I don't have one," I whine.

Character. "Oh my God." Frustration bleeds into her voice, despite the fact that she's got her arms wrapped around me in a comforting hug. "I love you, but you need to get on your phone, find one, and go."

"I can't," I say. And I know exactly how stupid that sounds. Of course I can. All I have to do is pick my phone up off the coffee table and search for a gynecologist.

And she But I can't. Because I don't want to know what's wrong with me.

It's absolute cowardice. My father would be so, so angry at me if he knew where. Probably my mother would too. But they're not here. Because they both died of cancer.

If I go to the doctor, I have to stop pretending I just started having periods." And if I stop pretending, I have to face the fact that I'm scared to death.

me too. "That's it," Sydney says and snatches my phone off the coffee table and shoves the screen in my face, and I blink back, startled, not realizing she's using my own face against me to unlock my phone.

By a full She walks across the room while tapping buttons. I think she's looking at doctors at first, but then I hear James's voice mail message play out of it. If speaker. I try to lunge off the sofa after her, but those hugging arms wedged to Jeanine's have become iron bands. I holler, "Traitor!"

no tears. Then Sydney's talking over the sounds of me cussing her out. "Don't be on the surprise. It's not your celibate little love muffin after all," she says

nes are Sydney. I stole her phone to tell you to make your wife go to the doctor, "been lying to you."

I flat-out screech, "I have not been lying."

Sydney looks at me from across the room and pinches her finger at she's thumb together in that measuring thing that says, "Eh, just a little." But stop. She keeps speaking. "Okay, maybe not lying. But she has been something big. So call her. Thanks. Bye."

course I Sydney comes back and drops the phone onto the coffee table, then she reaches for her arms over her chest. "Go ahead," she says. "Kick me out of the house now. Tell me what a terrible friend I am. But I love you. So if kicking me out means you go get whatever this is fixed, then so be it."

re were "I'm not kicking you out," I snap. "But James is not my boss any more. He can't make me go to the doctor, and it's fucking sexist of him to try to get him to."

ing "bad "You did not just call me sexist," she seethes. "I'd have called your name if you were married to a woman too. Your spouse is supposed to be your partner. The person you are married to is your support system. And she won't take care of yourself, then James is the only person I can think of at first might talk sense into you."

"Well, you shouldn't have. James is busy. He just got back from being away for two days ago. I don't like to worry him. He freaks out if I stub my toe." "We," Sydney says, indicating Jeanine, herself, and me, "are worried about why shouldn't your husband join in the fun?"

I just shake my head. "You don't understand. He's going to kill me." "Hey," James calls me five minutes later. Palms sweaty, I head to my bedroom. "It's sand shut the door before I answer."

"Hello?"

r. She's "What the fuck is going on?" he bites out.

"Hello, Clarissa! How is your day?" I imitate his deep voice. "Why, fine, James. Thanks for asking."

ger and "Do not fuck with me right now, Clarissa. I will haul your ass out backwater town before you can say 'college dropout.'"

hiding I actually pull the phone away from my face to stare at it before I rap snap back, "*Please*. You are not pulling me out of school with one wrossesto go. You're the one who's always freaked out at the idea of me e houseschool, not me, so don't threaten me with a good time."

me out That's not an entirely accurate statement, but it is guaranteed to ge out of him.

ore than I can hear him gritting his teeth through the speaker.

you to "Clarissa," he says slowly, with obvious forced patience, "please why you need a doctor."

spouse I flop on my bed, then groan because it made the cramps so much oe your "Sydney's being dramatic."

l if you "She's not dramatic," he says. "She's blunt. There's a difference."

of who Huh. Wow, I think Sydney just earned a little respect from James. only took turning traitor to get it.

London "It's just uterus-owner stuff," I say. "I've been getting bad period ' lately, so I need to see a gynecologist. They'll probably put me o ied. Socontrol to regulate my schedule."

I don't tell him that in the last month, the cramps are now 24-7. Or not just cramps. I'm bleeding intermittently all month long now. This edroomthe pain around my left ovary has become nauseating in its intensity.

"Okay, how long has this been going on?" he asks.

I think back. "The period cramping started last summer, while I

Europe, and then it's just slowly gotten worse."

it's just James doesn't say anything for a long moment. I clear my throat.

His control snaps. "Almost eleven months. Are you kidding me?"

of that "It's not something for you to get worked up over. A lot of women  
cramps. It's part of getting older. It's just lately it's getting to be a bit  
really and an issue." I'm gaslighting. I'm a *gaslighter*.

week left "We talk to each other or text every single day, and this is the first time  
quitting hearing about this."

I'm... What *is that* in his voice? I have never heard that tone from him  
at a rise "I didn't want to worry you."

"It's not your job to protect me. It's my job to protect you, and I know  
that when you're lying to me and hiding things from me."

tell me I want to unpack all that because it makes no sense at all. I'm not his  
He's not my parent. We should be protecting each other. Helping each other  
worse. And though I admit keeping this from him was stupid, it's not an excuse  
him to treat me like I'm a child.

So I have a hang-up about the doctor. Yes, it's bad. But I watched  
And it mother die when I was four and my father die when I was barely  
*They both died*. Of cancer. I'm entitled to have an occasional issue that  
crampsthrugh.

in birth James loves me. I know that.

But sometimes he acts like a parent who's sent a child off to college  
that it's his wife, not his kid. Why does everyone seem to be forgetting that today  
s week, "Why didn't you go to the doctor?"

"I have an issue with doctors," I admit. "Because of my mom and dad."

He's quiet for a moment, then says, "I'll schedule you for right after  
was in graduation. I'll go with you if you want me to. You have finals next

Are you okay with that, or do you need to see someone right now?"

"It's been going on for close to a year. I hardly think a week or two makes a difference at this point. I need to get these finals over with first."

en have "Okay."

more of "Thank you for making the appointment and coming with me. See James. I should have done it myself, but I just get a little... panicky sometimes I think of it."

James is quiet again. And honestly, it's strange the way he keeps silent. Silence so much of this conversation. "Don't thank me. This is my fault," he finally says.

can't do "How do you figure that?"

"I promised Marcus I'd take care of you. That means making sure your child goes for your checkups. I didn't do that."

other. "I'm an adult. I'm supposed to take care of doctor visits myself."

cause for The silence now is pregnant. He doesn't say it, but I hear it anyway.

*"But you didn't."*

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Are you okay with that, or do you need to see someone right now?"

"It's been going on for close to a year. I hardly think a week or two makes a difference at this point. I need to get these finals over with first."

"Okay."

"Thank you for making the appointment and coming with me. Seriously, James. I should have done it myself, but I just get a little... panicky when I think of it."

James is quiet again. And honestly, it's strange the way he keeps sitting in silence so much of this conversation. "Don't thank me. This is my fault," he finally says.

"How do you figure that?"

"I promised Marcus I'd take care of you. That means making sure you go for your checkups. I didn't do that."

"I'm an adult. I'm supposed to take care of doctor visits myself."

The silence now is pregnant. He doesn't say it, but I hear it anyway.

*"But you didn't."*







*If You Need Me*

JAMES



*If You Need Me*

JAMES

## Three Days Later

**S**ASHA CALLS ON MONDAY morning. Four minutes later, I'm in my car.

I almost take the jet, but when Dean hears me telling Rebecca to take the car, he interrupts in a very un-Dean-like moment.

"I can do it faster," he says.

At my quick look, he says, "Traffic into JFK is crawling right now. Construction. I can get us there faster by car if I break a few traffic laws."

Dean breaks more than a few traffic laws. And I'd have had him if I'd thought of any he missed. He screeches to a stop in the ambulance parking spot two hours and twelve minutes after I answered that call.

When I step into the waiting room for surgery, Jeanine, Bronwyn, and four of Clarissa's other friends, a hospital administrator, and a small middle-aged man in a cheap suit all jump to their feet. Two of her surgical team are already standing.

The man is pushing forward, extending a hand to shake. "Mr. Meade. Dean Rosen. It's an honor."

I ignore him. "Which one of you knows what's happening with her now?"

They all start talking. Every single one.

I put a hand up. "Quiet."

I point at the administrator. "You. Come with me."

I'll give her credit. The administrator seems prepared for this moment. She'd better be.

She has brown skin, short-cropped iron-gray hair, and an attitude that absolutely nothing will phase her.

"We'll see about that."

She guides me to a small room for privacy and shuts the door.

"I'll cut to the basics, and we'll fill in the rest after. I'm assuming you prefer that."

I just do the "get on with it" wave. My ability to pretend not to care is nonexistent in this moment.

"Your wife is currently in exploratory surgery for suspected torsion." She passes me a sheaf of papers. Like I'm supposed to be able to balance through this shit right now.

"You couldn't Life Flight her out of this place to a hospital that specializes in this surgery?" I demand.

"I assure you, we are well qualified to perform this type of surgery," Mellinger says. "And your wife was experiencing a true medical emergency that required immediate care. It was in her best interest for the surgery to be performed here."

"Do you know who she is?" I snap out.

The administrator, whose name I've already forgotten, drops her clipboard and gives me the kind of look a fourth-grade teacher gives an unruly student. "Mellinger, I am well aware of who Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger is."

The woman puts her hands on me. Sticks her hands right on my shoulders like we're buddies or she's my Little League coach, telling me to swallow my pride. She stands.

"She's a young woman surrounded by people who love her. That's all I need to know about who she is."

There's a knock on the door, and a sturdy brown-haired woman in

at saysenters. "She's in recovery."

Am I supposed to just trust that some ob/gyn in the middle of nowl  
did everything exactly as it should have been done? Fuck that. I've  
had Rebecca organize a surgeon from Brigham and Women's Hos  
g you'dcome in to consult. I wouldn't even send a report past my desk tha  
been double-checked by a second set of eyes for errors. I'm sure as l  
o be anjust trusting that this doctor knew what she was doing when she cut i  
wife.

ovarian The Boston surgeon's not here yet, of course, because nobody else i  
e to sift of a lunatic as Dean and I were. But when she arrives, and she c  
everything was done exactly as it should have been, and takes o  
cializes follow-up care, then *maybe* I'll be able to breathe again.

The gist of all this was that Clarissa had a large cyst on her ova  
ry, Mr. eventually caused the ovary to twist and cut off blood flow.  
cy. She According to Jeanine and Bronwyn, she'd started vomiting and ru  
y to befever this morning. She'd insisted it was a stomach bug and attempted  
one of her finals this morning anyway—until she promptly passed righ  
class from pain and blood loss from internal bleeding.

hin and The ovary and fallopian tube are both gone now. They were sta  
at. "Mr. blood flow for too long to save. They couldn't do the laparoscopic ver  
the surgery on her, so she has a large incision under her belly button a  
biceps, take close to two months to recover, just from the surgery. Tha  
ring for including follow-up to determine whether she has any cysts on the rer  
ovary.

ells me The only silver linings I can find are that she hasn't gone septic, t  
appears to have been benign, though we're still waiting on official resu  
scrubs



she does still have one ovary remaining, which means future fertility where PA diminished, is still a possibility.

already Three days ago, I had the opportunity to take her to a hospital immediately. Three days ago, they probably could have saved her ovary. They couldn't have prevented infection and blood loss.

hell not Three days ago, I said, "I'll schedule you for after graduation." And she said she didn't see what difference a week or two would make.

She's lucky she's alive.

as big I'm epically failing to care for the greatest gift in my life. I've confirmed I deserved her, and I've always known it. When Marcus said, "I need you to ever marry her," I thought it then. I thought the very idea of marrying (

Harcourt was like flying too close to the sun. I'd crash and burn, and my greatest fear was that she'd burn with me.

She's so pale in that hospital bed. The only color anywhere is her hair, where the auburn highlights glimmer in a halo as she rests against the pillow.

to take When I entered her room, a nurse handed me a small ziplock bag with my wedding rings inside. Something about that, having a sympathetic-

woman in hospital scrubs pass me a plastic bag with my wife's wedding rings in it, gutted me.

vision of I'm sitting in a green Naugahyde chair, pulled up next to her bed, feet resting on my knees, hands and head hanging loose, when I hear her voice.

at's not the bed. I look up as her eyelashes flutter, and she turns her head toward me, looking for me. I know because her whole expression relaxes when she sees

me.

he cyst "You're here," she says.

its, and I brush her hair back from her forehead. "Sweet girl, make no mistake,

When you need me, I will always be here."

7, while She takes me in, and I'm not sure what it is she sees, but she gives a gentle smile and says, "You look like shit."

diately. My words are like gravel. "Don't make a joke of this."

ld have She reaches for me, holding on to my hand. "Hey. I'm okay."

She doesn't understand. "Nothing can happen to you, Clarissa,"  
and sheout. "Not ever. I couldn't take it."

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My words are like gravel. "Don't make a joke of this."

She reaches for me, holding on to my hand. "Hey. I'm okay."

She doesn't understand. "Nothing can happen to you, Clarissa," I grind out. "Not ever. I couldn't take it."







*I Don't Want to Lose You*

CLARISSA

**J**AMES IS ANGRY. AT himself. If I thought he was overprotective before surgery... well, all I can say is I was a sweet summer child who knew nothing.

It's awful. I don't mean awful in that kind of humble-brag I occasionally experienced in the past. I'd get irritated when he tried to boss me around, of course. But 99 percent of the time, his fussing didn't feel truly intrusive; it felt loved.

Then it was "Oh, you know how he worries about me." And what it meant was he loved me. Because I'd been taught that love equaled worry for my entire life.

It's not that I don't still feel loved. But his love now is tempered by an equal measure of his own self-hatred, and I don't have a single clue what to do about it. Or if there even is anything I can do about it.

I could always fight James when he tried to tell me what to do. If I said "Wear a jacket," I'd just shrug. And if I didn't need a jacket, I'd say, "No."

Compared to my father's need to keep me rolled in metaphorical bubble wrap, James's "orders" to drink more water or wear sunblock are a breeze.



fresh air.

I get a little thrill out of refusing to do something he tells me to do. I refuse for the sake of it, but if I'm not thirsty or cold or needing to rest, I'm not the least bit afraid to do what I want.

But I don't know how to fight the way he feels about himself.

When James looks at me, he sees his own failures. And what a god-awful feeling that is, to know he looks at me and hates himself.

I recovered from the surgery just fine. James worked out something with the dean so I could take my finals online. The university mailed my diploma. My remaining ovary looks great. The cyst wasn't cancerous. The next day the doctor released me to regular activities should have been a child whoone.

Instead, I feel lost.

My relationship with James has always been complicated. It started as a crush, moved into hero worship, and eventually into bone-deep love. And I have also always considered James to be this wise, infallible.

Even when I was frustrated and arguing with him, he never quite fell off that pedestal.

Even when I recognized he wasn't technically *perfect*, I still believed he must have some insight I didn't have. He's older than I am by a more life experience.

Even with the lack of intercourse between us, the way he'll only do mutual masturbation, and the way he won't let us sleep in the same bed, I came home, I convinced myself his reasons regarding my trust fund were valid for him. That he just didn't understand that I didn't care about money or "needing" him.

But now that I'm here, really here, every single day, I realize Jar

blinders about a lot of things. And most of those things have to do with I don't I was juvenile to put him on that pedestal in the first place. There are things in this world that I'm actually *wiser* about than my husband, the nine years and vast difference in experience between us.

He carries a tremendous amount of guilt and responsibility that was laid on his shoulders to pick up in the first place. And if he can blame himself for my mistakes and failures, then he is clearly not always right.

He also puts weight on my shoulders that doesn't belong to me. I remember things like "We're not ready for intercourse" and blames my trust for the divorce. So he implied many times that I am simply too young or incapable of knowing what is in my own mind, when what he really means is *he's* not ready.

And while he just happened to be right about me not being ready in my earliest days, the simple truth is he can only decide what *he's* ready for and I don't get to decide what *I'm* ready for.

I can't regret a moment of the time it took to get me to where I am today. I learned so much about myself as a result of those experiences.

I'd have learned those lessons regardless of whether we'd been sleeping together. But the lesson, particularly on our wedding night, might have been always more painful.

And I was drunk that night. Drunk and grieving my father, whose death hadn't passed just yet. Taking every single other thing out of the equation, what kind of man sleeps with a woman under those circumstances? I would have said since my husband, thank God.

If we'd slept together on our wedding night, how long would it have taken them to realize I was trying to win his affection and comfort my own insecurities through sex? I have no idea. But we didn't, and I didn't.

And I learned to recognize that insecurity in myself and squash it.



me. Out of it. Because I deserve better than that.

When it came to the gala, while I'd already started to learn to establish boundaries, those boundaries weren't rock-solid yet. But I don't believe I would have torn down the ones I'd already built, even for a minute. I never would have continued to get stronger, regardless of whether we were successful together.

Our wedding and the gala, and any of the other times James refused to try to coax him into intercourse, were never about my boundaries. He's ready.

I didn't understand that at first. I'd believed his words and not his eyes, so I'd set about trying to lure him to me. To convince him I was ready, those were never about me in the first place.

So I've backed off on my torment of the man. I don't tease him anymore. I don't walk around half naked. It was never my intention to actually hurt him. I just wanted him to recognize that I was more than ready for that kind of our lives.

In my mind, I'd built up graduating and moving home into not just a physical milestone in terms of location but a relationship milestone.

I'd move back after my degree, James would recognize my adulthood through my independence, and boom! We'd be married in truth.

But it was never about my adulthood or my independence, no matter what he says. So instead of beginning a new phase of our married lives, we're in limbo.

I made decisions about my career and started working on a business plan. And I'm writing. Trying to build up a catalog for a series of light romance novels. I'm really excited about that.

But James and I? Nothing is happening there. We're in an impasse.

painful holding pattern. And the only thing I can think to do is start pulling my his buttons and see if I can get any reaction out of him that isn't a tight squeeze or a cool kiss on the cheek, and a "Whatever you want."

And I'm done walking around half naked. Now I just want him to talk about his feelings. And if I thought enticing him into sex was hard,

nothing on trying to get James Mellinger to say something—*anything*—when I tell him I want to eat dinners in the kitchen most nights or my back on our regular personal chef's hours, his eyebrows rise, and he shrugs and says, "You can do whatever you want."

The next night, I make him sit at the kitchen island, then present him with this dinner.

He looks intrigued and pleased. "Is this beef stew?" I shake out my napkin and pick up my spoon. "It is." I shove a torture board holding a loaf of fresh Italian bread toward him. "Have some bread, part of good together."

"This isn't Carol's usual fare." "That's because Carol didn't make it. I did."

He looks back down at the bowl, then at me. "You?" I smirk because if anything calls for smirking, it's his dumbfounded expression. "I made the bread too. I told you I was learning to cook." He takes a bite, and his eyes widen. "This is really good." He takes another bite. "Really, really good."

I shrug, but I'm pleased. "I know all kinds of crazy life skills plan. Laundry, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners."

He frowns. "They aren't life skills necessary for you. You don't need those things."

"I'm aware. But cooking is fun for me. Especially since someone else

pushing most of the cleanup. Besides, I like knowing I can take care of myself.  
t smile, His expression is doubtful. It irritates me. But before I can address  
phone dings. He pulls it out of his pocket, reads something with a frown,  
to me spends the next twenty minutes taking distracted bites of his dinner  
it was working on his phone.

—real. When he finally puts it away, I say, "You work too much."

and cut "Your father left big shoes to fill."

then he He says that all the time.

*Time to push those buttons.* I say, "Wearing someone else's shoes is  
im with way to give yourself blisters or fall flat on your face."

He pushes his bowl away. "What's your point?"

"My father trusted you and loved you. When you worked for him,  
cutting micromanage you or trust you to do your own thing?"

ead. It's I know the answer. My father always talked about finding the right  
to do the job, then trusting them to do it. He was never afraid to consult  
experts. It was a huge part of his success.

James just frowns.

"Do you honestly believe you're supposed to try to recreate my father's  
founded second-guess whether every choice you make is the same one he would  
made? You're stressed out all the time about not letting my father do  
another he isn't even here to let down. And I don't believe he'd have wanted  
you, even if he were."

s now. He pushes away from the counter, rises, and brushes a kiss across  
cheek before he heads for the door. "I'll be in my office."

ed to do "Hey, James," I say. When he pauses and looks at me, I say, "Stay  
you."

se does He frowns, gives a brief nod, then says "I still love you too."

"

s it, his

wn, and

r while



**J**AMES LOSES HIS OWN father the next day. He texts me in the afternoon.

**James: I'll be headed out of town for a few days.**

**Me: This is unexpected. Everything ok?**

**James: My father died. I have to go make the arrangements.**

**Me: I'm so sorry. Are you okay?**

a good

**James: Of course.**

James hasn't seen his father since he was seven years old. He has a lot of half-siblings through his father whom I've never met. Some of them did he *James* has never met.

The fact that James is the only one willing to make the man's person arrangements says volumes about who he was. Though James rarely refer to of him, and never in more than monosyllabic grunts, it's clear the man asshole.

**Me: I'll go with you.**

ather or

**James: No need.**

ld have

*No need* to have your wife there to support you at your father's funeral

wn, but

**Me: I want to go. I want to be there for you. I can hold your hand**

that for

**you can wiggle your earring if you need me to run defense.**

oss my

**James: Lol. Thanks. But I'm fine. I'm not broken up over his p**

**He was a bastard.**

ill love

**Me: That almost makes it worse. It means you have to grieve**

**father he should have been. Let me come hold your hand.**

**James: He's not getting a funeral. I'm only going to check on my siblings. And to deal with paperwork. I'm taking Rebecca to handle part. So I really don't need any help.**

middle

I take a second to absorb that body blow. His father died, and instead of leaning on me, he's taking Rebecca.

Oh, I know he's not cheating with her. James is nothing if not loyal. He looks at Rebecca like a piece of office equipment. To him, he may as well have said, "I'm taking my laptop." But reminding myself of that does nothing to ease the pit of confused feelings churning inside me.

**Me: I want to be there for you**

handful

**James: I don't need that. I just need to know you're safe at home.**

f them,

I don't text back, and after a few moments, he texts again.

**James: Still love you.**

funeral

I sigh and text back.

speaks

**Me: Still love you.**

was an

He comes home after a few days looking drawn and tired. When he walks in the door, I wrap my arms around him and hold on. He puts his face against my hair and breathes, grounding himself in me.

Then he pushes away, smiles, and says, "Did your text say chicken

ral.

**id, and** for dinner?"

And so it continues. Days and weeks of it. James smiling tightly,

working constantly. James avoiding my eyes. He kisses me when I kiss

assing.

But following my surgery, we've never gone back to the intimacy we've established before it.

ve the

In early August, I decide to try a new tactic. But I plan to butter James up with Italian food first. When I present him with lasagna for dinner, I

ly half-practically roll back in his head with pleasure at his first bite. "The  
le that Carol's fired. It's all Clarissa, all the time."

I laugh, but I feel a hum of pride inside.

stead of *Now for something completely different.* "What would you say about  
idea of a vacation?" I ask. He needs it. James is nothing if not stressful.  
Heright now. And time away together without the distraction of work is as  
as well we've never had.

asn't fix There's a hitch in his movements before he recovers. "Where do you  
to go?"

I shrug. "It doesn't really matter. I just think it would be good to take  
e. time away."

He nods, but his mouth is tight. "Are you sure you're up to traveling

That makes me laugh. "I'm fully recovered. I promise. Right as rain.

Again with the doubtful eyes. Then he opens his stupid mouth and

"You should take Sydney with you. Tequila Bronwyn is a menace. The  
e walksof them can balance each other out."

e in my I set down my fork and push away from the counter. My feelings are

Maybe when I analyze it all later, I'll decide I'm overreacting. That thought  
pot pieanother rejection.

But I am *tired* of him sending me away with other people.

. James He watches me with a frown as I clear my place setting with  
ss him.movements.

acy we When I finish, I see him still watching me, wary-eyed, but also.

Like he'd give me what I wanted if he only knew what that was.

him up He swivels his seat toward me as I approach. So I scootch right up  
his eyesin between the V of his thighs. I sigh inwardly at the sensation of just

close to James. I'm touch-starved right now. And even the heat from his

hat's it.and the smell of his cologne are enough to make me want to just fall in  
and hang on.

At my approach, James somehow tenses and relaxes at the same tim  
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sed outwaist. And just that—just his hands—stirs the most intense yearning  
i luxuryme. It's not just a longing for sex; it's the need to feel close. To love h  
be loved.

ou want I cup his face and kiss him. He hesitates for long moments, not kiss  
back but actively receiving mine. His hands clench tight against m  
e someAnd when I start to pull away, he hauls me back against him, lifts on  
hands to wrap around the back of my skull, and devours me.

?"

"

id says,

The two

re hurt.

his isn't

h jerky

.. torn.

to him,

it being

is body

and the smell of his cologne are enough to make me want to just fall into him and hang on.

At my approach, James somehow tenses and relaxes at the same time.

He brings his hands under my shirt to rest against the bare skin of my waist. And just that—just his hands—stirs the most intense yearning inside me. It's not just a longing for sex; it's the need to feel close. To love him and be loved.

I cup his face and kiss him. He hesitates for long moments, not kissing me back but actively receiving mine. His hands clench tight against my skin. And when I start to pull away, he hauls me back against him, lifts one of his hands to wrap around the back of my skull, and devours me.







A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

## *Only Love Can Hurt Like This*

CLARISSA

I CLUTCH AT HIS shoulders as he drags me closer. His hands are now, not content to remain where they started. He lifts me straddling him, dragging my T-shirt over my head and tossing it to the floor. Then his mouth is back on mine.

I can taste the wine he was drinking with dinner. The spice of his coffee and the clean, masculine scent of his shampoo fill my senses.

He showered after working out, so he's dressed in a gray T-shirt and black track pants. I slide my hands down and then up under his shirt, pressing against the hot silk of his skin. I drag my palms up, reveling in the difference between us. The hardness of him. The way that line of hair below his belt button *beckons* me.

James has my bra off before I even realize what he's doing. Then his hands are on my breast, teasing and tormenting. I prop myself up by standing on the top rung of the kitchen stool so I can reach between us and palm his cock through his track pants. Even through the fabric, I can feel his length, hot and hard, and I want it anywhere and any way I can have it.

"Pull these down," I say, trying to tug at his waistband.



He shudders and stiffens, freezing. He's fighting with himself. I can't  
So I don't say a word. I don't move. I wait for his decision patiently,  
quietly, as if this moment doesn't mean everything.

He stands, holding me up by my ass. Then he turns and, using one hand  
shove the remainder of our meal aside, lays me down on the counter. My  
eyes flare with giddy arousal, and I burst out in a surprised peal of laughter  
when he drags my shorts and panties down my legs, *smells* my panties,  
then stuffs them in his pocket.

But James doesn't smile back. His expression is dead serious while he  
yanks his pants down, revealing his rock-hard cock. The head is  
moving purple, a bead of clear liquid pearling at the tip.

so I'm I reach for him, but he takes my hand and sucks my fingers into his  
mouth. And my heart sinks, even as the swirl of his tongue ramps up my arousal.

Because I know what this is. It's just a variation—a sexy variation, but  
it's the same thing we'd already been doing before my surgery.

He guides my fingers to my own pussy, then jacks his cock over me  
and black can't do it. I don't want to touch myself when he's right here.

pressing So I sit up and grab fistfuls of his T-shirt, pulling him closer. He pro  
duces a hand on the counter while he grips his cock with the other and stops r  
is belly. He stands there, breathing hard, blue eyes on fire.

I move my hands to his face, pulling his mouth toward mine. "I  
s mouth okay. Keep going. We don't have to.... Just kiss me. I just need you  
; on theme."

through He does. He stands between my spread thighs and kisses me with  
d thick carnality that both owns and cherishes while he pumps his own cock,  
never letting it touch my body. He comes on my stomach and breasts



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ine, his

Finally, returns **J** AMES BECOMES EVEN MORE standoffish after that night in the kitchen.

l.

'What's

He's never unkind. If I reach for his hand, he holds it for a few moments, then kisses my knuckles and finds a reason to drop it. If I kiss him he keeps his hands at his sides, gently returns my kiss, then hurries away. And he always, *always* reminds me he loves me.

Then he surprises me with a trip to Hawaii.

just me It's a vacation, not a honeymoon. Not that I'd ever had any company there. James books us a suite with two bedrooms, and at first, this trip feels like it's going to be more of the same cold kindness.

to me. However, his veneer begins to crack on the very first day when I ask him to apply sunscreen to my back. He's efficient about it. But I've gotten used to his freckled skin. I need a lot of sunscreen, and it has to be reapplied often. Every act of touching me repeatedly seems to break down some wall between us. It's as though every time he touches me and nothing horrible happens, I turn his head a little more comfortable doing so the next time.

ne that. But the day James sees me slip-slapping my way across the deck in the gear is the day the knot in my chest finally begins to unwind.

ld there

Those blue eyes of his sparkle, and his grin is real.

surprise When we're preparing to do a tandem zipline, he laughs and pats my back when I clutch him like a spider monkey. And when I turn to him from the seats in the helicopter to point out something in excitement, he smiles and reaches to hold my hand.

ien he's

By the end of our vacation, he no longer rushes through apply sunscreen and lets me do the same for him. He puts his arm around my hand on my back again. He drops random kisses on my forehead and again. When he catches me rubbing my lip, he takes over and does it for me.

His smiles come easier, his shoulders are relaxed, and, while he's working, he doesn't answer a single work email.

He's almost back to the James from before my health crisis.

And then we're home, and he's tan and, yes, working a lot, but his smile is smiling easier. And that knot I carry loosens a little more.

It's as though our vacation worked as some kind of mental reset button for him. We're not intimate with each other. We're not even intimate *near* each other. But the trip still seems to have been a change for the better for me, and it gives me hope.

The next week, he tells me he's taking me to a trendy club for my twenty-first birthday. I haven't seen that particular expression on his face in a long time. Part adult calculation and part mischievous boy. It says he's got something. And it fills me with hopeful excitement.

When we arrive, the VIP lounge is full of my friends, both the New Yorkers and the Pennsylvania crowd, who road-tripped here to surprise me.

"Somebody has to keep Tequila Bronwyn in check," James says to me. Sydney's invitation. He can be as grumpy as he wants. He doesn't forget. He loves my friends.

Bronwyn makes me wear a tiara and a hot pink pageant sash that says "Birthday Girl" on it. We didn't really celebrate my twenty-first the way most of people do—Bronwyn was out of town, and Sydney wasn't twenty-one—so I'm honestly ridiculously happy and surprised by the whole thing this year.

ing my James organizing this feels significant to me. I can't help but feel it's  
e or hishe's reconsidering his twenty-fifth-birthday timeline.

temple I am a twenty-two-year-old college graduate. No one in his right  
or me. would still consider me a child or immature. And I have access to pl  
with me,my own assets, even if he does still control the majority.

James gets absolutely hammered. And not the fun hammere  
brooding, "sitting in a corner throwing back bourbon like it's  
e's stillhammered.

After a while, I leave my girls—and the guys who have flocked  
tton forthem—on the dance floor, flag down some water from the waitstaff, and  
ar eachup to James. I pluck his tumbler from his hand, replacing it with water  
or him,some," I say. "Someone once told me water and moderation were the  
drinking alcohol."

twenty- He looks up at me with bleary eyes, then pulls me down onto  
1 a long"You," he slurs against my temple, "are so smart. You're so hot and sm  
s up tohot."

My lips quirk, and I nod to the water. "Drink."  
ie New He chugs the water, throwing it back like he's at a kegger. Then he  
e me. the bottle onto the tabletop and says, "I want to fuck you."

s about Joy. Relief. Excitement. All of it bubbles up inside me like a g  
ool me.knew tonight was special. I'd been almost afraid to hope. But some  
me knew it was coming. And, God, I've waited so long, but for this m  
at saysevery bit of it was worth it. I wish he hadn't felt like he needed to get d  
ay a lottell me, because he didn't have anything to be nervous about. Of cou  
one yetanswer is ye—

ing this He laughs, low and bitter. "I'm not *going* to fuck you. I'm going to f  
own hand." He gives a slow blink, then holds up his hand and looks at



s a sign of disgust. "Going to close my eyes, remember what you taste like, fit hand, and pretend it's you."

it mind *What? This isn't—* "You can fuck me. When you're sober, we can have any time you want."

"I'm not defiling Marcus's daughter," he says. "He *trusted* me with the baby."

water" I frown as something like horror twists in my gut. "Making love with you isn't defiling me. And I'm nobody's baby."

around "You're my responsibility," he slurs. "I promised. You need me and the care of you and protect you. Especially from me. That's my job, and I'll do it." "Have at it."

key to "No," I bite out, "I don't. I am not your responsibility."

His brows are lowered in an exaggerated frown, and he bobs his head in a repetitive nod. "You are. You're my own little baby bird."

part and He pats my head. *Pats my fucking head* I jerk away from his hand and sit up. "I'm not a baby bird."

He shrugs drunkenly. Sadly. "You'll always be my baby bird."

he slams "I thought tonight was... I thought you were going to tell me you were a virgin that twenty-two was... *why* were you so excited about tonight?"

eyser. I He looks at me blearily, grouchy and slow to understand. "It was a small part of party. Thought you'd be happy to see your friends."

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"You're my respon-sability," he slurs. "I promised. You need me to take care of you and protect you. Especially from me. That's my job, and I'm shit at it."

"No," I bite out, "I don't. I am not your responsibility."

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He shrugs drunkenly. Sadly. "You'll always be my baby bird."

"I thought tonight was... I thought you were going to tell me you realized that twenty-two was... *why* were you so excited about tonight?"

He looks at me blearily, grouchy and slow to understand. "It was a surprise party. Thought you'd be happy to see your friends."





A decorative border at the top of the page features a light gray, watercolor-style illustration of various flowers and leaves, including what appears to be a hydrangea and some smaller blossoms, set against a white background.

*Hurts Like Hell*

CLARISSA

**T**HE NEXT AFTERNOON, JAMES is sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and nursing a hangover. I pass him a plate of peanut butter toast, then hand him a bottle of Advil and a glass of water. He grunts his thanks.

Then I say, "I'm moving to the house in the Hamptons."

His face shows first surprise, then slowly dawning horror. "What? You need to be here."

I sigh in defeat. "What's the point? We aren't married, James. Not yet. You don't see me as your wife—"

"Of course, you're my wife," he says, irritated.

"On paper, not in practice."

He rubs his forehead, then pinches the bridge of his nose. Pushing away from the counter, he stands there in the kitchen, looking stressed and exhausted. "This is about sex, then. We're not married because we're not fucking?"

I shake my head, but he nods his, as if he were expecting this conversation all along. As if the events of the night before were already front and center.



his mind.

He closes his eyes in a long blink, and when he opens them, he says, "If you want sex, you can have it."

I stare at him, trying to remember the words I rehearsed for this moment. They're all gone. All my cool, collected arguments and evidence. Poof. Gone with the wind.

If I hadn't heard the words he said last night when he was trashed on bourbon, I'd throw myself in his arms right now and pretend this is the end. Instead, my gut churns with unexpected anger.

"How incredibly romantic, James. Thank you for that."

He scrubs at his face with his hands and then looks up at me with wide eyes. "I love you. I *love* you. So much it actually hurts to stay away from you. That's not hyperbole. I feel it right here." He pounds his chest with his fist, and I know what he's saying, because the hollow aching he feels is the same one I feel. "Living with you like this is impossible. I'm not doing you wrong. Why?by agreeing to it. I'm giving in to what I want to do."

"But you'll feel guilty for doing it," I say. "You'll make love to me, and then you'll go home and feel like you defiled me or hurt me by having sex with me."

He doesn't say a word.

I move closer to him and put my hands on his face. "You recognize how messed-up, right? The way you see me is not healthy."

He holds my wrists and pulls my hands down to his chest. He still doesn't say a word.

He's going to make me say it.

"You have some emotional work to do. You have to untangle all the mess of conversation you have mixed up in your head about my dad, and what you owe him. Enter in

this guilt you have about me. I don't know where it comes from, but you says, "If to figure it out and sort it if we're ever going to be together as man and

He steps back and shakes his head. "That's ridiculous. Your father is a good man. I'm just trying to do what he would want me to do."

"Why? I am your wife! Why would you care more about what my father may or may not have wanted than what you and I have together right now? Besides, I can tell you, my dad would have just looked the other way and pretended he didn't know I slept with my own husband, the way pretty much every other dad of an adult woman does."

"You don't know that. You said yourself he sheltered you before you were married."

I wave my hand in the air. "It doesn't matter. If my father did object to his fist, woman having sex with her husband, so what? It's not his choice. It's the same and mine. I'm an adult. I don't need a guardian. If you can't recognize a favor when I'm twenty-two years old, you never will."

"So it's about the money. You want control of the rest of your money, then lie I scream, "*Goddammit*, it's not about the *fucking* money." I step back and take a deep breath. When I'm ready to speak more calmly, I say, "It's not how you see me. I'm not your partner. You want to take care of me, but I try to do the same for you, you tell me that's not my job."

"I don't—"

"You don't need me. That's my point." I shake my head. "I want a husband, not a father who's hell-bent on protecting me. You don't get to make choices for me, or decide what's good for me or what's not good for me. It's his crap don't get to beat yourself up over my choices, as if I'm a toddler you can't leave me alone to go to bed without brushing her teeth."

I cross to the french doors to look out at the pretty little patio and la

ou needsheltered and protected and cozy, hidden by a fence and trying to pret  
wife." city isn't looming over it.

r was a "My dad used to eat breakfast with my mother out there." I nod tow  
patio. "In the summer. He never left for work without kissing her good

y father I turn to James. He watches me, bleeding tension and frustration.

it now? "Did you know my mother was twenty when I was born?"

ay and He blinks rapidly. This is new information to him. I've thrown h  
y muchdisturbed him.

I nod. "My mother died at twenty-four years old. How old wa  
ve weremother?"

James flinches, and I'm sorry for it. But I don't stop. "Twenty-five  
ect to amagic number where I'm suddenly an adult who makes adult c  
s yoursTwenty-five doesn't suddenly make us able to have an equal relat  
ize thatbecause you no longer happen to be managing some investments for m

"The cyst wasn't cancerous. You're fine." His words are reassuring,  
y." tone is panicked.

ack and I frown. "You're not listening to me. I'm not telling you I'm going  
s aboutyoung. I'm telling you I don't want to wait to live. Nothing extrao  
it whenhappens on my twenty-fifth birthday besides the fact that I'll manag  
investments, which I'll probably continue to consult you about anyway  
wasting the time we have with unnecessary guilt."

usband, James reaches out to hold me, but I back away. Because that woul  
ake myeasy. I could let him wrap me in his arms and soothe me, and then tor  
ie. Youabsolutely nothing will have changed.

allowed He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. We can start sleeping togeth  
We'll share a bedroom now."

wn. All "And are you happy about that? Because, I have to be honest, yc



end the look happy."

He says nothing.

"If I stay, could we talk about this? If not me, then a professional n  
bye." I hold my breath, waiting. Hopeful. I can't bear to see him so unhappy.

"Jesus Christ, I don't need a therapist. I'm fine. We're fine," he spits.

I close my eyes. And I rest there in the dark, with my heart in a  
lim off, When I open my eyes, James's fly wide, and he gives a violent shak  
head.

"I'm leaving," I say, "and you're going to work through your iss  
you're not. That's up to you."

"You can't," he says, head still shaking. "You've never lived alone  
choices. be on your own out there."

"I am."

His brows are furrowed, and his jaw is tight. His blue eyes burn n  
but his beneath a thunderous scowl. "Don't you fucking do this."

The words are a warning. But this is James; he'd never make me stay  
I'm scaring him right now. I'm hurting him. And I don't ever, ever  
rdinary do that. I want to fix everything. Smile and say I'm happy with what  
e somethinks is best.

But I can't.

If he won't get help, there's no version where I stay and we don't hu  
My heart is bleeding through my fingers. I tore it out of my ches  
narrow myself. "I still love you. I'll always love you. I promise," I say.

The movers arrive the next day. I don't take much, really—mos  
er now. clothing and personal items. I take every present James ever gave me,

Mr. Flootlepus. I leave him with James. He loves that cat, and I can't  
u don't see him alone.

At the front door, James stops me as I'm about to go. "Text me when you get there."

"Maybe?" I've thought about this. A lot. "I don't think that's a good idea. We can stay in touch on an as-needed basis for a while."

"What the fuck, Clarissa?" The words are almost a whisper. I don't answer, I just lean up to kiss his cheek. And then I go. I don't see the side of his face.

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*If the World Was Ending*

CLARISSA

I miss James. It's a dull, aching pain that never leaves. Sometimes over into agony, and for a while, I can't breathe.

But I carry on. I've had lots of practice leaving him. What I haven't practice living without him.

Every day, I almost text him. Sometimes about something silly. Sometimes something serious. It's almost muscle memory at this point. I'll catch my phone in my hands and his contact pulled up before it registers I'm supposed to be giving him space.

I hope time and distance will allow him to separate the Clarissa he feels responsible for from the Clarissa he feels responsible for.

He tries to text every few days at first, but I ask him to give me more space. So we settle into a monthly check-in. Every month, he texts.

**James: Do you need anything?**

**Me: Nope. I'm good. Do you need anything?**

**James: I'm good. Still love you.**

And my heart seizes in my chest, my eyes fill with tears, and I text him back.  
**Still love you too.**



On our anniversary, he has a package delivered. It's a twelve-pack of bottled water and a case of Clase Azul tequila. The bottles are go Hand painted. Out of curiosity, I google the collection and real husband just sent me \$450,000 worth of tequila. Because of course he

I call Bronwyn. We make margaritas, spill our guts to each other, in our shaved ice.

I drunk text him that night.

**Me: Thanks u for my pressed**

**James: You're welcome. You're not drinking alone, are you?**

**Me: Nah. Brown is spending the night**

it spills **James: Good. Happy anniversary, sweet girl.**

**Me: Happy anniversary. I still love you.**

t had is **James: I still love you too.**

netimes  
myself



ers that **I** KEEP WORKING ON my novels. I also contact James about accu lump sum of my inheritance well above my \$20,000 daily allowan

ie loves **James: That's a lot of money.**

**Me: Check your inbox for my business plan. Get back to me w re time.questions you may have.**

James texts me a couple hours later. He has a few questions, for thankfully, I have the answers. Then he replies, **Looks solid. I'm impri**

There is an adage that it takes money to make money. I know for a f I wouldn't have been able to start my business without it—not on the ct back,have planned, anyway.

lack of I'm not about to pretend this thing is about pulling myself up  
rgeous.bootstraps. It's not. I was born already pulled up. Way, way up.

ize my I'm able to accomplish what I do so quickly partially because I dun  
did. into it, and partially because I was raised by Marcus Harcourt, who ta  
and cryme about scent profiles, and public image, and management, and a h  
other little things that give me a leg up in simply understanding wha  
can drive success.

I've known I wanted to do this for the last two years, so I geared a  
of my college courses around my future plans as I could at the tir  
classroom experience is just not comparable to actually working w  
money, real resources, and real people. It's more than a little terrifying;  
take ruthless advantage of advice from my father's business connector

I hire a small, experienced staff and pay the necessary consultants.  
create an online resource connecting independent authors with  
professionals, like editors, writing coaches, cover designers, ma  
experts, etc. We have everything from paid education resources to  
assing a referral services to lots and lots of free articles and YouTube ed  
ce. videos.

At its heart, my business is about connecting people with each other  
**ith any**niche. But it's one I love.

In the beginning, I work hours like what James would call "a V  
which, coal miner." But it's intensely satisfying. The business is still growi  
**ressed.** expanding, but it's off to a healthy start.

fact that Christmas sucks. Until James texts, and it doesn't.

scale I **James: Merry Christmas. I miss you.**

**Me: I miss you too. What are you up to today?**

He sends a pic of Mr. Snickelputz sleeping on a red stocking wit



by my appears to be a stuffed felt mouse clutched in his paws.

**James: Watching the cat turn into an absolute demon with a cashstuffed mouse until he passes out. That's it. Might get some work done. I'll talk to the home office later.**

**Me: Did you get my present?**

**James: Yes. Thank you.**

**Me: What did you think?**

**James: I didn't open it yet. I was saving it until we texted. Did you open yours? But your present?**

I hit the FaceTime button. James picks up immediately, a smile on his face, and I "Look at you, gorgeous."

I smile back, the pang in my chest painful at the sight of him. "Then I Christmas."

I hold up the unopened package he sent me. "I didn't open the present yet either. Do you want to—"

It belatedly occurs to me this might be a bad idea. This is putting pressure on the man. It also might make things awkward if he thinks me trying to tell him I'm ready to come home. Because we're definitely not. It's not there yet. I just miss him so much. And it's Christmas.

James shuffles around a bit on his end, and I get a view of the ceiling of the Victorian apartment. Then he's back with a small smile on his face, holding up the package I sent. "So, how do we do this? One at a time or together?"

"Umm, can I go first and you open yours second?" If his reaction to my gift doesn't go well, then we won't have to awkwardly hang out on FaceTime while I open his gift afterward.

He nods, clears his throat, then says, "Go ahead. Just—" He scratches his head and looks a little sheepish. "It's probably stupid. It was a lot harder to buy."

I thought it would be. I had to hire someone to teach me how to do it  
**catnip**-yeah—"

**done in** "Now, I'm incredibly intrigued," I say. I pick up the small box and give it a little shake near my ear. Then I prop up my phone and pull off the wrapping.

Inside is a pretty wooden box, and inside the box is a classy crystal chalice. I hold it up between my fingers and shoot him a questioning look. "Photograph it?"

He shakes his head, and there's a splash of color on his cheeks. "No, I don't want to see you like that."  
**ou like**"Audio files. There are five novellas on there. Do you remember I often read for you? But then...."

His face. Ah, yes. Then he'd never needed to because we'd started having phone sex when we were apart and mutual masturbation sessions when we were together. "Merrytogether instead. His slippery slope and all that."

"Anyway," he says, scratching his neck, "I thought you might still want to see it, but if it's stupid, you don't have to...."

I clutch the USB against my chest, and I know my eyes are shining. "Thank you so much, James. I love it. It's the best gift I've ever received in my life. I can't stop listening to it."

He shrugs and looks away, but there's a small smile on his face. "Go ahead."

He holds up the gift I sent. It's larger and heavier than his. "Shall I?"  
I nod, and now I'm the one who's nervous.

James has always encouraged my writing, always reading my projects and raving about them. He's the one who gave me the initial confidence to allow myself to write the types of things I enjoy reading. And he once scoffed that it wasn't literary enough or that my stories were silly pulp romance, even though they are.

He props the phone against something on the coffee table so he can free both hands, sits down on the floor in front of the sofa, and unwraps the

it. And, sent, holding it up with a questioning look on his face.

"Good book?" he asks. "I haven't read this author before."

"I hope it's good," I say, rubbing my lip with my thumb. "And definitely read this author. That's my pen name."

His eyes grow wide. Then he looks down at the trade-size paperback. It has a matte cover, with gloss title text on a pale blue background. A single purple gerbera daisy, its stem long and green, curls up the right edge. The text *Waiting for Sunshine* in magenta block text to the left of the edges are deckled, and it's just so pretty.

James's smile is incandescent. "You did it."

I nod, briefly pulling my sweater up over my nose and mouth, and

Dropping the sweater, I say, "I did. The release is scheduled for next week. And there are two more in the series coming after that."

He looks down at the book again, reading the back blurb. "Did you do this for me? You better have signed it," he says. "This will be worth a fortune someday."

I laugh because he's so ridiculous, but I'm inordinately pleased with his reaction. "Maybe you should look and see."

He flips the book open and grins at my inscription that reads "Yes, James signed it for you." Then he begins to page through the beginning. In the moment he finds the dedication: "For James. Still and Always yours to promise."

He freezes solid, a dent between his eyebrows. He blinks a few times, swallows, and his lips press tight. He looks back at me through the lens. "I love you too. God, I hope you know how much I love you."

My chin wobbles, and I can't speak for a moment. I manage a tight smile.

He sets the book on his lap. "I know why you left. I understand," he

"I was fucked-up. I still am. But I took your advice. I'm talking to someone about... everything. I'm not where I need to be. I can't talk about it yet. I'm working on it. I wanted you to know that."

My voice is barely a whisper, but I manage to say, "I'm glad." I hear the cat yowl in the background and the sound of something clattering to the floor. The tense moment between us is broken as James looks at the camera. "He's awake and losing his mind over the catnip again," he says. "It sounds like you need to go take care of whatever he broke," I say. He nods. "Yes."

I hold up my USB. "Thank you for this. I'll be listening as soon as you smile up."

He holds up my book. "No office for me today after all. I can't wait for it."

"Merry Christmas, James."

"Merry Christmas, sweet girl."

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He nods. "Yes."

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He holds up my book. "No office for me today after all. I can't wait to read it."

"Merry Christmas, James."

"Merry Christmas, sweet girl."



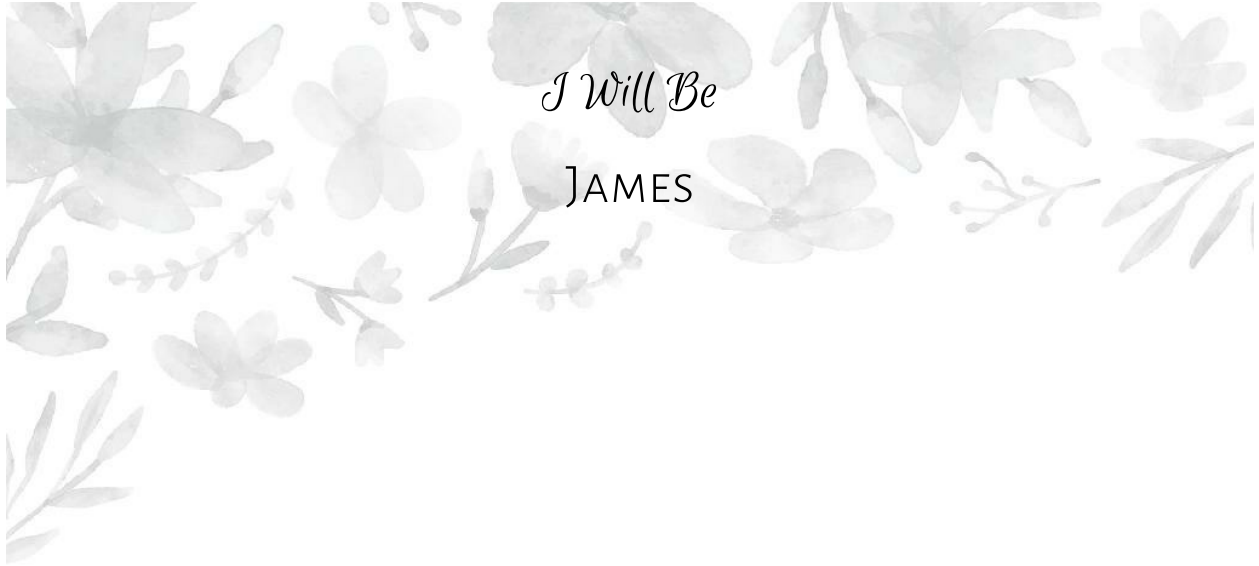




*I Will Be*

JAMES





*I Will Be*

JAMES

## Previously in September

**T**HE MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN WITH the blonde, feathery hair and practical shoes ushers me into her office and indicates the several chairs placed comfortably in the corner.

"Have a seat anywhere you like."

I choose a chair, and she makes herself comfortable in another one at a comfortable distance away, with the length of a small coffee table between us. She's close enough for conversation but not so close as to encroach on my personal bubble. Right now, my bubble is huge.

Dr. Carlson gives me a small smile and says, "I'm pleased to meet you, James. What brings you to my office today?"

I'm leaning forward in the armchair, both feet planted firmly on the floor, my hands on my thighs. I probably look ready to bolt. So I take a few breathers through my nose, blow them out through my mouth. I straighten myself up and let my hands rest on the arms of the chair.

I use my boardroom voice and say, "I want to remind you that this conversation is confidential. None of what I say here leaves this room."

She doesn't look intimidated by me or the tone of my voice at all. She nods and continues with her reassuring smile, some new lines crease around her eyes behind the clear plastic frames of her glasses.

"You have my word. It's my professional responsibility, but also something I believe in implicitly."

I grunt and nod, then say, "I'm here because my wife thinks I need a therapist."

"What do you think?"

"I think I hate therapists, but she's not coming home until I work my  
out. So here I am."

air and She looks down at the reMarkable tablet in her hand, makes  
of a and notation. "What do you believe you need to work out?"

"I can't have sex with her without feeling guilty about it."

"I see. That must be difficult for you."

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"I think I hate therapists, but she's not coming home until I work my *issues* out. So here I am."

She looks down at the reMarkable tablet in her hand, makes a brief notation. "What do you believe you need to work out?"

"I can't have sex with her without feeling guilty about it."

"I see. That must be difficult for you."

I give a sarcastic bark of laughter. "You could say that."

"Have you always felt guilty about sex, or is it a new development?"

I laugh, but I don't find a damn thing funny. "Always. There were a few women before my wife, though not... relationships. But Clarissa is different."

She makes another note, then says, "How is Clarissa different?"

"I made a promise to her father to protect her and keep her safe. It feels like a violation of trust."

"What do you feel as though you need to protect your wife from?"

I lean back against the chair. "Everything."



## Early October

"I 'M THINKING ABOUT CALLING these appointments quits," I say.

"Why is that?"

"Because I feel *worse*. You're not helping me. This is exactly what happened last time. Talking about this shit is stirring it all up inside. It's all sitting there under the surface. Now I'm thinking about it all the time. I'm falling apart."

"Explain what you mean by falling apart," she says.

I give her an incredulous look. "I'm feeling this stuff. I'm thinking about it constantly."

She sits quietly and allows me to collect myself, then asks, "How are you feeling right now?"

"Angry. Guilty. Sad... afraid," I say.

"Any time you need to take a moment for your breathing exercises, go ahead and do that."

I shoot her an acidic look. "I don't need your permission."

She agrees. "No you don't."

After a moment of silence, she says, "Those feelings—anger, sadness, fear—they sound a lot like the feelings you mentioned re your friend Marcus's death. Do they feel similar?"



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## Late October

"TELL ME ABOUT YOUR mother's death," Dr. Carlson says.

"Is this part necessary?" I ask.

"Usually, I would say no. Our immediate goal is to focus on the and the situations that are currently distressing to you. But intrusive th of the past are something you've said are a current problem, so you m it helpful."

I swallow, and she continues. "You decide what you're willing to c James. I'm not here to badger you, only guide you. You've mention guilt and the need to protect Clarissa feel similar to the way you fee your mother. Understanding what happened there can clarify those er for you."

*In for a penny, in for a pound.* "When I was seven, I let my father my mother," I say.

"You *let* him? Do you feel his actions were your responsibility?"

"I was capable of stopping him. If I'd fought for her sooner, I coul He beat us all the time. I don't remember anything about that time having the shit beaten out of us or worrying about the next time we'd h shit beaten out of us."

"That's rough," she says.

I shrug. "It's over now." Except it isn't. I relive it every day.

"Why do you believe you were capable of stopping him from hurtin mother?"

"The night he killed her, I tried to kill him. He was... hurting her kitchen."

I stop for a moment, then force myself to say it, my voice as flat and unemotional as I can make it. "He was strangling her and raping and stabbed him with a steak knife."

I roll my eyes to the ceiling, then just sit there, trying to get the terror to leave my shoulders and my gut.

Thoughts Dr. Carlson gives me a moment, patient as she waits.

I may find "I didn't know what I was doing. I just hit him in the back with it. I thought it would be like a movie. That he'd go straight down, and Mom and I would discuss, run away. But I was too late. She was already dead, and that was all I survived."

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Dr. Carlson gives me a moment, patient as she waits.

"I didn't know what I was doing. I just hit him in the back with it. I thought it would be like a movie. That he'd go straight down, and Mom and I would run away. But I was too late. She was already dead, and that asshole survived."



## November

“I’M NOT A SOLDIER or a cop. I don’t have hallucinations or  
where I am.”

“The vast majority of people who deal with PTSD don’t experience things. It can occur after any traumatic event: a car accident, a natural emergency.... Nearly 7 percent of people in this country will have to cope with it at some point in their lives. For many people, it manifests as heightened anxiety. They’re always on guard, and many develop unhealthy coping mechanisms.”

“I don’t have unhealthy coping mechanisms,” I say. *Shit, I’m defensive.*

“None?”

I shrug. “I avoid things, I guess.”

“Complex PTSD can occur as a result of a series of traumatic events over time or a prolonged event. The symptoms can be—”

“I don’t have *symptoms* of anything.”

“You mentioned difficulty sleeping.”

I grunt.

“You feel sick when something triggers a memory?”

I shrug, then nod.

“You believe the world is a dangerous place, and you’re in a constant state of hypervigilance?”

I shake my head. “That’s not a symptom. That’s just life.”

She tilts her head slightly, her expression gentle. “Not for everyone, Most people don’t think of their daily activities as inherently dangerous

Some part of me *knows* that, but I can't stop thinking of what happen. To Clarissa. To me.

r forget “You said you avoid sex with your wife because it causes you to feel  
and ashamed. It triggers memories of your mother's abuse and murder’

re those I let out a long breath before I admit, “I'm afraid of becoming him.”

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Some part of me *knows* that, but I can't stop thinking of what could happen. To Clarissa. To me.

“You said you avoid sex with your wife because it causes you to feel guilty and ashamed. It triggers memories of your mother's abuse and murder?”

I let out a long breath before I admit, “I'm afraid of becoming him.”



## Early December

“**H**E DIED IN PRISON last summer, and I went to make arrangements,” I say.

Dr. Carlson nods at me encouragingly, so I go on. “I had to see dead. I thought if I saw his body, I could put him behind me.”

“But it didn’t work out that way?”

“Fuck no. That dead man? He didn’t look anything like Lee Willis. an old, beaten-down, pathetic piece of shit. Do you know who does look like Lee Willis?”

“And yet you’re nothing like him.”

I look down at the back of my right hand. The knuckles aren’t swollen or torn. I’m almost surprised by that. “My grandmother helped me change my name legally when I was fourteen. Before that, I had to listen to teachers, social workers and doctors call me by that bastard’s name. I was a ‘junior’.”

Something flares in Dr. Carlson’s eyes so briefly I almost don’t notice it before her professional mask falls back into place. She dips her chin slightly. “Did you decide on your name?”

My lips quirk for the first time today. “My mother’s maiden name was Mellinger. And my grandmother had a bunch of James Bond DVDs. I liked James Bond. Still do. He wore a suit. He had money and power. He was a good guy, and I guess I thought that wasn’t a bad blueprint.”



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## January

"THIS IS TAKING TOO long," I say. "I don't understand why I can't stop these thoughts. Why do I have to keep catching myself reframing them? If I know what's real and reasonable, why does my mind keep trying to sabotage me."

It's not a question. I know the answer. It's a lifetime of rutted roads that need smoothing out. It doesn't happen in a few weeks or even a few months.

"You're frustrated with your progress," Dr. Carlson says.

I just give her the no shit look.

"Last week, you seemed pleased with your progress. What's changed?"

"Clarissa is leaving me. I mean, she's already not living with me, you know that. But she always loved me. I always knew she was waiting for me to stop talking because I can't breathe."

"Did she tell you she wasn't waiting anymore?"

"No."

"Did she tell you she doesn't love you anymore?"

"No. Every week she tells me she still loves me. Clarissa is kind. You can't understand. She wouldn't tell me she didn't love me anymore while I was in the middle of fucking therapy."

"Why do you believe she's planning to leave you?"

"Over the last few months, she's been pulling away financially. She took back the car I gave her and told me to remove her as an insured driver. I recently received a notification from our health insurance company that she's no longer on our policy as my dependent. I think she's using her own car insurance. She's got her own cell phone account now."

"Did you ask her why she's done those things?"

"She said she doesn't want me taking care of her."

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"Did you ask her why she's done those things?"

"She said she doesn't want me taking care of her."



## February

"I 'M TELLING HER I'M ready."

Dr. Carlson gives me her encouraging smile. "That's exciting."

"No it isn't."

She tilts her head slightly, raises her eyebrows. "You've come a long way, James. You've worked really hard."

I shrug, and she continues. "You told me you wanted to have a relationship with your wife. Have you changed your mind?"

I snort in disbelief. "You know I haven't."

"But you're not happy about telling her about your progress?"

"I'm not going to pressure her into coming back to me," I say. "I don't know how to explain that I'm ready to try without also making it sound like I expect it from her."

"You're a very accomplished businessman. You have a lot of experience with negotiations. Could you come at it from that perspective?"

"I don't want to. I know how to manipulate people and pressure people to get what I want, yes. But that's the last thing I want to do here. I want to be an equal partner with her."

Dr. Carlson smiles. "That's lovely. That's a very healthy attitude for a marriage."

"Doesn't fix my problem," I say. "As soon as I start talking, she's going to hear the desperation in my voice. She's going to hear the words I don't want to say."

"That just sounds like honesty to me. Who are you trying to protect by withholding your feelings from her?"

"Goddammit," I mutter.

"Do you think Clarissa should be given all the facts so she can make her own informed choice about your relationship?"

"Yes," I admit.

Dr. Carlson nods.

"I was thinking of writing her a letter," I say.

ing way, "That could work."

I give a bark of laughter. "Now the hard part. I can see it now healthy Clarissa, I'm completely ready to fuck your brains out, and I promise not to sink into a pit of self-recrimination if you skip your dental hygiene appointment."

Dr. Carlson snorts and briefly covers her eyes with her hand before looking up with a grin and says, "It's a start, James. A very good start." I'd like I

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"Do you think Clarissa should be given all the facts so she can make her own informed choice about your relationship?"

"Yes," I admit.

Dr. Carlson nods.

"I was thinking of writing her a letter," I say.

"That could work."

I give a bark of laughter. "Now the hard part. I can see it now: 'Dear Clarissa, I'm completely ready to fuck your brains out, and I promise to try not to sink into a pit of self-recrimination if you skip your dental hygienist appointment.'"

Dr. Carlson snorts and briefly covers her eyes with her hand before she looks up with a grin and says, "It's a start, James. A very good start."







I SENT THE LETTER and waited for a call that never came. She received it yesterday. I think.

It's possible the mail was delayed. Her delivery time is first thing morning. So she could still call today, but I'd have expected it a couple hours ago in that case.

I thought the letter was the best way to know I didn't forget to do anything. I also thought a letter would give her time to process what's going on without the pressure of me hovering over her.

Now I'm second-guessing that choice.

"Worst-Case"—she doesn't call at all. She's already decided she's done and this is her cue to exit stage left without feeling guilty about it. She'll write me her own letter and include divorce papers with it. She'll just show up one day with a "Glad to hear you're doing better. Here are these papers, and we'll both put this all behind us."

I came into the office early today, thinking it would keep my mind off Clarissa while I wait to hear from her. I've been here since 5:30 a.m. and haven't even bothered to put my tie on yet.



My assistant popped her head in at nine. Then she promptly popped her head back out. She knows I'm about to go on a tear just by looking at my face. I pull up my emails regarding an acquisition in Tokyo and scowl at the screen. I see.

*Fucking incompetent...*

I drum my fingers on my desk, then throw on the headset I use when I'm on the phone for any length of time. I hit the intercom and swivel around to glare out at the gray skies and grayer skyline. "Have you made those calls to Lofton yet?"

There's a pause, and then her voice comes through my headset. "I'd have thought it'd be the middle of the night in his time zone."

I grunt. "If he'd done his job yesterday, we wouldn't need to interrupt his beauty sleep now. Call him," I snap.

"Of course. Um, your *wife* is here to see you. In the office. Right—"

I turn back toward the door. And there she is.

"I see that," I manage to choke out. "No interruptions."

I very methodically remove the headset, place it on my desk, and clasp my hands together in a single fist.

This is my "Worst-Case" scenario, then. She didn't call. She shows up here, unannounced, looking nervous and with a briefcase over her shoulder. Maybe I've never seen Clarissa carry a *briefcase* in her life.

The building may boast her maiden name on the side of it, but she's never even been inside my office before today. She's never been to my apartment, either.

Our marriage wasn't normal. She said that to me over and over again. I ignored it, and now it's over.

She closes the door and takes off her jacket, laying it over the back of the chair.



ped herof my guest chairs. Then she clears her throat, smooths down non  
g at mywrinkles in her skirt, and plays with the lock on the briefcase.

at what *The lock*. Because God forbid the press get hold of her divorce  
before my own lawyers have a look at it.

*Fuck that*. My lawyers aren't going to look at it. I'll sign whate  
I'll bewants me to. I won't fight her on anything. Then I'll come up with a  
ound towin my wife back.

calls to She pulls a manila folder from the briefcase and gives me a small  
smile.

Not yet. I don't smile back. I can't. I'll give her what she wants. God kno  
deserves to be happy. But I can't smile at her when she hands me  
rupt hispapers. I'm not that big of a person.

I stand and drink her in. She's stunning. She always shakes her head  
' when I tell her that. But she's the most beautiful woman I've ever know

Though I can tell she tried to tame her auburn curls, the wind had  
with her outside. Her lashes are a sooty frame for those gorgeous  
l threadhers. Her lips are a natural rose—the exact same color as her nipples. A  
freckles... I want to taste every one.

wed up I let my gaze travel down her body. Over those slim curves. She's v  
oulder.a silk blouse and a gray pencil skirt, which are not her usual style, an  
boots that definitely are.

s never Her breath catches, and I drag my eyes back up to find her exp  
artmentstricken. The realization that she might be feeling intimidated by me  
me ill.

again. I I wait for her to speak, but she says nothing. So I move to the fron  
desk, sit on the edge, and beckon her closer. I hope my more casual  
of one will relax her a little.

existent I try again to smile, but I can't. I'm physically incapable of it.

She comes closer... closer... until she stops within touching distance. She's not maintaining a "casual acquaintance" personal distance of four feet. Instead, she's moved near enough that I can scent her hair. I imagine I can feel her body heat.

But for as close as she's come, she won't look at me. I think she's looking out the window past my shoulder. *God*, the mouth on her. She's close enough to kiss. All I'd have to do is lean forward and close the distance.

I look up and find she's finally ready to make eye contact. I clench my jaw to hold back the words I shouldn't say. Words like "You can burn those fucking divorce papers. I'm not signing them."

And now she's looking past my shoulder again. She acts like she's a little one about to get her heart ripped out.

"You traveled all this way, Clarissa. It must be important for an in-person meeting without calling ahead first. What can I do for you?"

She holds out the envelope, and in a gentle voice, she says, "You can burn these papers."

Of course. I knew she wanted a divorce the second she walked through those doors. What else, besides divorce, would be so important she'd show up in person unannounced?

If there is one universal truth, it's that Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger is a mess. Even in pajamas and a messy bun. Even in a wrinkled evening dress with the lipstick kissed right off her face. Even when she moves out and leaves my heart with her.

She'd never tell me she didn't love me anymore over text or a phone call. She'd do it in person, with kind eyes and a squeeze of my hand.

I've known this day was coming for a while. She's spent the last

months pulling away from me. She's not on my insurance anymore. instance. my cell phone service. She sent back the car I gave her and bought her two to Even as I worked to get my head out of my ass and move out of n npoo. Idamn way, she was done. I got my shit together too damn late.

She's talking, but I haven't heard a word since she said, "Sign these." staring "James." enough I jerk my head to where she's standing. She's moved over by the grouping, indicating I should sit on the sofa. She still has that my jaw envelope in her hand.

n those I give a disoriented blink, then frown. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

She pulls a sheaf of papers out of the envelope, and she holds them ie's theme. "I said, I'm sorry if I misinterpreted your letter. If you meant it to know you wanted to move on, I'll"—the distress on her face is clear-personunderstand."

*Wait. What is she saying?*

an sign "I was hoping you'd rather sign these papers," she says, letting them in her extended hand between us.

through I walk over and take them from her. I skim them, from the la d showletterhead to the words written beneath. Then I sit on the sofa. Hard. Ju right there without a single thought or plan.

is pure I lift my eyes and see her standing there, nervous. One of her h g gownclenching and unclenching at her skirt.

id takes I turn my attention back to the papers in my hand. It's a petition to the trustee status of her trust fund from me to a corporate entity ow ne call.Harcourt. The justification is cited as "conflict of interest."

"There's more," she says. Then she sits next to me and opens the bi ist four she carried in with her.

Not on my own. She holds up a piece of paper, then places it on the coffee table. "Proof of my car insurance." Another paper. "Proof of car insurance." Another. "My own insurance. My quarterly taxes. My credit score."

She reaches for another piece of paper, and I stop her with a hand on her wrist. "Enough," I say, and I don't even know how she understands what I'm saying because my voice is so raw it feels like my vocal cords are shredding. She lets go of the paper and swallows hard. "I don't need you, James. I can manage my own life just fine. But I want you. I love you so much I—"

I can't breathe. My eyes don't even know quite where to focus. "You're leaving me."

It's not a question, but she answers anyway. "No. You said—you told me that as long as I needed you, you couldn't trust that I really wanted you or not—I'll was showing you—"

She's shaking, her wet eyes just on the verge of spilling over. Then she reaches out and punches me on the arm.

I laugh. It's watery, and giddy, and I know she can see the tears in my eyes but for once in my life, I don't care. I yank her into my arms. And I hold her like a firm wife. I haven't touched her in six months. I thought I never would again. And suddenly she's here. And she's still mine. She will always be mine.

I kiss her like I want to be inside her, because I do.

She kisses me back with the same desperation, and she's pulling me in and I'm ripping at her shirt.

Then she leans back. Stops me with a hard hold on my hair. "James."

When I try to kiss her again, she holds me still.

When I make eye contact, she says, "Is that a yes?"

"Yes, that's a fucking yes. All those stupid things I said about you and me... sweet girl, that was all on me. Every bit of it was just me rati-

he title You don't have to prove yourself to me. Not a damn thing."

r health And then my mouth is back on hers, and I'm smoothing her blouse c  
shoulders and tossing it onto the floor. I undo the zip on her skirt and  
on her down past her hips. She kicks it off, and she's shoving my jacket off m  
that I'm "Are you sure about letting someone else handle the trust fund?" s  
dded. against my mouth.

s. I can "I have never been more sure of anything in my life," I say.

I lower her onto the sofa and follow her down. She tries to yank n  
u're not off, and we're both frustrated when we realize it won't come off o  
hands because I forgot to release the cufflinks. I let her fuss with the  
told me while I use my right hand to hold her pretty little breast. I thumb her  
u. So, I through the lace. Then I suck right through the fabric. When th  
enough, I yank the cups down and groan as I feast.

en she She's done with the left sleeve, and now she's pulling on the right. I  
hold my arm captive while I work my way down her body, open  
y eyes, dragging down her belly. I stop to kiss the scar from her surgery. Tl  
kiss my pulling her panties down her legs, and for the first time, my mouth is  
in. And wife's pussy. It only took two and a half years to get here. And it's ever  
She's everything.

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You don't have to prove yourself to me. Not a damn thing."

And then my mouth is back on hers, and I'm smoothing her blouse over her shoulders and tossing it onto the floor. I undo the zip on her skirt and slide it down past her hips. She kicks it off, and she's shoving my jacket off me.

"Are you sure about letting someone else handle the trust fund?" she asks against my mouth.

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life," I say.

I lower her onto the sofa and follow her down. She tries to yank my shirt off, and we're both frustrated when we realize it won't come off over my hands because I forgot to release the cufflinks. I let her fuss with the left one while I use my right hand to hold her pretty little breast. I thumb her nipple through the lace. Then I suck right through the fabric. When that's not enough, I yank the cups down and groan as I feast.

She's done with the left sleeve, and now she's pulling on the right. I let her hold my arm captive while I work my way down her body, open mouth dragging down her belly. I stop to kiss the scar from her surgery. Then I'm pulling her panties down her legs, and for the first time, my mouth is on my wife's pussy. It only took two and a half years to get here. And it's everything.

She's everything.









James Mellinger is a god. I thought it the first time he kissed me wasn't wrong. He eats my pussy like he's starving, and I'm the most delectable thing he's ever tasted. Never, in any of my frenzied imaginings, did I come close to justice to what James would do to me with his mouth.

He works me up that cliff so fast, it's ridiculous. If I were even capable of thinking at all, I suppose I'd be embarrassed at how quickly I go off. I'm not embarrassed. I'm just coming and calling his name. My legs are shaking and I'm clutching at his head. Then he's kissing my inner thighs, a hot tongue sliding up my body. I reach for his belt buckle. And I feel the hot length of him in my hand.

Previously, I'd only touched James's cock directly that one time I'd reached out with my thumb and swiped the bead of fluid from the tip. It tasted like what he tasted like.

Wrapping my fingers around his cock now is entirely different. He's so solid, not a tease or a torment but everything I need. His cock is hot and firm and when I pump my hand the way I remember James did to himself, the smooth satin skin glides over a core of iron, flexing in my grip, so alive and re-



He groans, then holds my hand by my wrist. "Clarissa," he grits out my ear, "that feels incredible, but if you keep it up, I'm going to come I get inside you."

Just those words make my thighs clench together, the fever ins rising again, burning me from the inside out.

There's a wild desperation bleeding from both of us. Neither of us l patience. Neither of us can get close enough to the other.

I wrap one leg up and around him. "Now," I say.

He moves against me, watches himself as he presses against my o and then freezes, eyes closed. "Oh shit," he groans. "This is not hap e, and I right now. Clarissa. Baby."

I hold still. "It's okay. If you're not ready, it's fine. It might take tim id I doto work up to—"

James's eyes go huge. "I am *ready*. Trust me. But I don't ha able ofcondoms."

But I'm *Oh, that*. I push back up against him. "I'm on the pill. So get in there haking, Someday, I'm going to look back on those words, and I'm going t nd he'sabout the way I demanded he take my virginity. But not today. Today ngth ofdesperate.

James's entire being collapses in relief. He tips his head down, res me. I'dforehead against mine, and says, "Oh thank God," at the same time he o to seethat gorgeous, perfect cock into my pussy in one slow, unrelenting gli

sensation is overwhelming. It's nothing like the toys he bought me. feels sofull, I feel him everywhere. He's in my *throat*.

d silky, When he's fully seated, he stops. Holds still. I'm looking down our elf, thetaking in the sight of his cock inside me. He puts a long-fingered hand al. jaw and uses it to gently push my head back to look into his eyes.

against "You okay?" he asks.

before A single ecstatic burst of joy punches out of me. "God, yes. You?"

He grins and drops his face against my neck. "Oh yes," he says, the  
ide me vibrating against my skin and into my heart.

Then he rides me hard and fast, the way he promised he would.

has any He pushes his thumb into my mouth. "Suck."

I do, curling my tongue over the digit. He pulls it out with a pop of s

Then he slides that hand down between us, swirling his thumb over my  
pening, he works me on his dick.

opening "I'm going to take you over fast this time," he rasps. "I have to. I'll g  
next time. I swear it."

e for us I don't even know if I say anything to that. I'm just pushing up again

Crying out. This isn't even my body. I'm just a halo of pleasure and ne  
ve any hovers over the person I used to be.

James has his face pressed into my hair, his mouth inches from m

:" "That's my girl. That's my strong, smart, amazing girl. Clarissa, I love

o laugh love you so fucking much. You are never leaving me again. I won't su

I'm just God, your pussy feels so fucking good. Do you feel that? Do you fe

hard you make me? How good you make me feel?"

ting his I don't even think James knows what he's saying. It's just str

pushes consciousness pouring out of his mouth, but I love every word.

de. The I'm practically sobbing from pleasure, so twisted up inside, so coil

I'm so tension, I feel frantic with it.

He keeps moving, swirling and pumping, while he talks into m  
bodies, Taking me higher and higher.

l on my "You have no idea how often I dream of this. Holding you in m

fucking into your sweet little pussy with your taste on my tongue."

I jerk and shudder silently as I come, pleasure robbing me of breath and voice.

I'm still coming when his cock jerks inside me. With a gush of liquid, James orgasms with a groan, his ass clenched, a slick film of sweat on his skin.

"I love you," I say, tears choking my words. "I will never not love you." James didn't lie when he said we'd go slow the second time. He kisses my clit everywhere, from his gentle touch against my temple to his goofy suck on my big toe that makes me shriek and laugh.

His hands glide over my skin with a leisurely, exploratory touch, then moving in firm sweeping motions over my back, down my arms, and finally to his hands weighing my breasts and trail over my abdomen. He slides a hand under my butt to my knee and back again.

When he sits and pulls me on his lap to straddle him, he teaches me how to ride. And while I ride, he works my clit so slowly, I could scream. Frustration. I give him a seething look, and he laughs, then sucks my clit into his mouth, guiding them to my clit to let me set the pace.

And we come together, wrapped in each other's arms and holding each other dear life.

An hour later, we're standing near the door to James's office. He runs his hands over my hair, my lips, my neck. He looks satisfied with himself. Maybe a little smug.

I indicate his gaping shirt. "Are you going to put yourself back together?" He tries to smooth a hand through his wildly ruffled hair, then shrugs. "I can't. My wife ripped three buttons off my shirt."

Then James opens his office door. He reaches out a hand for me, so I hand him my briefcase strap onto my left shoulder and put my right hand in his.

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catastrophically wrinkled pencil skirt and blouse, with my lipstick  
id heat, right off my swollen lips, whisker burns on my neck, and what n  
: on his utterly spectacular sex hair.

I make inadvertent eye contact with Rebecca as she sits at her desk,  
ou." heating her cheeks as she fans her face with a sheaf of papers.

esses me I nod as we stroll past her. "Have a good day, Rebecca."

lurp on She dips hers in acknowledgment, her lips tipping into a grin. "Yo  
Clarissa. James."

both of I don't turn my head, but I sneak a glance at James. His lips are s  
ns. His there's a smear of lipstick on his collar, and his hair is an emo rocke  
id from dream.

He catches my look with a side-eye of his own. Our lips quirk at  
how to the same time. And we race for the elevator.

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I make inadvertent eye contact with Rebecca as she sits at her desk, a blush heating her cheeks as she fans her face with a sheaf of papers.

I nod as we stroll past her. "Have a good day, Rebecca."

She dips hers in acknowledgment, her lips tipping into a grin. "You, too, Clarissa. James."

I don't turn my head, but I sneak a glance at James. His lips are swollen, there's a smear of lipstick on his collar, and his hair is an emo rocker's wet dream.

He catches my look with a side-eye of his own. Our lips quirk at exactly the same time. And we race for the elevator.

*Epilogue*

YOU MAKE MY DREAMS

*Epilogue*

YOU MAKE MY DREAMS



# James

## Two Weeks Later

Clarissa is practically vibrating in the seat next to me on our private jet. She typically flies commercial. As do I, unless I've got an entire team on air, purely for environmental reasons.

But her plans for our honeymoon included me having not a single article of clothing where we were going.

I squint at her and quote her words back to her in mock complaint. "I say I won't need clothing. And I'm just saying that it seems like someone should question. Who knows what you plan to do with me once you have me naked and alone in a foreign locale?"

I turn to Jerome, our flight attendant, as he returns with a shot of Mezcal for Clarissa and me. "I'm a suspicious person, Jerome. Where would my wife possibly have planned to take me that involves no clothing, and what could we possibly be doing there?"

Jerome grins and says, "I'd love to tell you, Mr. Mellinger, but my boss has forbidden me from mentioning it."

Clarissa presents an exaggerated face of innocence. I lift an eyebrow at her, then Jerome. "Your boss, huh? I thought I was your boss."

He smiles benignly. "Did you, sir?"

Clarissa snickers and lifts the shot glass to her lips.

When Jerome walks away, I toast her with the Mezcal, then place my hand on her knee, sliding it just under the skirt she's wearing. I inch my

higher and higher, until it rests exactly where I want it, with my pinky pushing gently and rhythmically against the silky fabric covering her p

Her eyes fly wide. “*James,*” she says breathlessly.

It’s my turn to look innocent. “Yes?”

She squirms beside me, then frantically rubs her thumb over her lip. Finally, she throws her arms straight up in the air as though stretching. Then she yawns and announces quite loudly, “You know I’m going to be a long flight. I’m going to take a nap. In the bedroom. I’m sleepy.”

She’s the worst liar I’ve ever seen in my life. No finesse, whatsoever. “It’s a long flight, is it?”

She represses a grin. “Yes.”

She stands, and I join her. “The bed sounds like a good idea, then?” “It’s a long flight.”

She turns her head back toward the security detail at the front of the plane, then smiles at me, clears her throat and says, “That’s what we need. A nap. You must be tired.”

“Not even a little,” I say, leading her by the hand back to the bar where I have absolutely no intention of sleeping.



How first

“NEW ZEALAND, HUH?”

“Have you been? It’s supposed to be beautiful and February is still the warmest part of summer here,” she asks.

I take in the luxurious and, most importantly, private home she’s chosen for the next two weeks. There are floor to ceiling windows enabling

y fingerenjoy the view. A wall of accordion-style glass doors retract to j  
ussy. access to a patio space that includes everything from a fire pit surround  
plush cushions to a sparkling salt water infinity pool. All of which ov  
a pristine private beach.

bottom “I have been to New Zealand,” I admit.

h she’s She looks a little anxious now that we’re here... worried her surpris  
ow it’sfall flat. As if that’s even possible. We could stay in a leaky shed some  
3ecauseand as long as she was with me, I’d be having the time of my life.

“I’ve never been here to have fun, though. And I’ve never been he  
ver. “Soyou,” I say.

“I did actually pack you clothing, you know. I didn’t want to giv  
the weather. But you won’t be naked.”

i. Since I pull her close and rub my nose across hers. “We don’t really  
while we’re here, though. Do we?”

: of the I suck on her bottom lip, and she shivers in response.

need. A “The gates are locked tight. The guards have their own space and o  
give us privacy.” I loosen the buttons on her shirt, one by one.

edroom She reaches out to work my belt buckle free. We’re not frantic. It’s  
burn. Teasing. Gentle.

Until we’re down to our skin, and I’m just about to haul her to t  
horizontal surface I can find. She stops me with a hand in my hair an  
eye contact, mischief sparkling in her eyes. “Do you rememb  
wedding?”

ruary is I brush her hair from her forehead. “I remember all kinds of thing  
our wedding. You’ll have to be specific.”

; rented “There was a moment. It was the first time I had the nerve to teas  
g us to messed your hair all up. Do you remember that?”

provide “Sweet girl, it’s a core memory for me.”

ided by “You had this look in your eyes after I did it,” she says. “I couldn’t looksto see what you were going to do next. I almost ran from you, just to see if you’d chase me.”

“I’d have wanted to.”

She wrinkles her nose. Grins. Then gently bites my lip.

When she pulls away, she wiggles her eyebrows. Then she bolts, straight for the patio.

For half a heartbeat I stand there, stunned stupid, just like I was at a wedding reception. Then I give chase. She’s got a small head start, but I’m not worried about overtaking her too quickly. I’m enjoying the view much.

She turns her head back, laughing, and I catch her in my arms. Together we both suck in a deep breath, and I take the last flying leap with her straight to the deep end of the pool.

She wraps her legs around my waist, her arms around my neck, and she kisses me.

I hold on, both of my arms wrapped tight around her middle as my feet touch the bottom. She pulls her face from mine, gripping my hair in tight fists. When I open my eyes, she’s looking back. Water muffles the sound of our locksnature. There’s no hum of insects or birdsong down here. It’s just the peace of ourus in the quiet shelter of crystal clear salt water.

Then I push hard against the pool bottom, propelling us both with my legs, aiming straight up. She releases my hair, just long enough to give my arms to move us faster through the water.

We break the surface, water streaming from hair and skin. Then I put my hands down to cup her sexy, freckled ass. And I kiss my wife.

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## Twenty-Five Years Later

Marc says, "Okay, Dad. Do not freak out."

I look up from my dinner with a frown on my face. Because any time I hear "do not freak out," I know something is definitely about to freak me out.

I shoot a glance at Clarissa, but she's just sitting there, smiling encouragingly at him. Which tells me she already knows what he's going to say, and it's not that bad. Surely it's not that bad.

Marc reaches in his pocket and shoves a folded-up letter at me. I know the thing has been folded and refolded many times. He's been carrying it around with him, trying to get up the nerve to share it with me.

I pick up the letter and read the contents. My gaze flies to Marc, sitting there, tense and nervous, and looking so much like the perfect blend of my mother and me. My height and build. Her eyes and hair and freckles.

His hand clenches and unclenches on the table. There's a spark of defiance in his eyes.

"You want to go to an art school in London," I say.

"Yes?"

I glance at Clarissa again, and she just smiles and nods at him.

"Art school," I repeat.

"Yes?"

"In London."

"Yes?"

I shake my head, and his shoulders slump.

But I say, "Don't say 'yes' like it's a question. Is this what you want to do?"

He straightens his shoulders, and in his firm, newly deep voice, he says, "Yes, and I'm sorry if you're disappointed that I don't want to go to business school. But it's just not what I want to do. I want to work in fashion design."

My brows knit in confusion. "Marc, I'm not disappointed. I want you to do something that makes you happy."

"But Harcourt is supposed to be this family legacy."

I remember something Clarissa once said to me and give Marc my most and benevolent parent look. The one Clarissa says makes me look like a stuffy old man, but she always tries to rip my shirt off afterward, so....

"You don't need to live your life trying to fill someone else's shoes, Dad. Wear your own shoes, Marcus Mellinger. They're a lot more comfortable."

Marc lifts his foot out from beneath the table and gives it a shake. "My boots are gorgeous."

I grin at him. The kid does have style in spades. He'll be a hell of a fashion designer.

"Don't worry, Dad," Ellie says. "I'm going to business school."

Our daughter inherited more than my dark hair and blue eyes. She's only fifteen, but she's already very driven. And she spends an awful lot of time in my office. I swear sometimes she's sizing the place up. The look in her eyes when she walks in the building is pure Marcus Harcourt.

Marc snorts. "Shocked. I'm shocked."

I shoot her finger guns. "Got a summer job in the mailroom with your name on it, if you want it."

She grins. "Perfect."

Before bed, Clarissa stands in the bathroom doorway and watches me brush my teeth. She's leaning against the doorframe in panties and one of her T-shirts.



She says, "She's got blonde highlights in her hair now. She says it's to disguise business gray, but I love when the silver strands sparkle through. The same way you sign." She laughs, the lines at the corners of her eyes. They're evidence of a life lived, and she's living it with me.

Her arms are crossed. She wears a small grin on her face and a spec- gleam in her eye.

I rinse, put my toothbrush away, then make eye contact with her like a mirror. "What?"

She sidles up and wraps her arms around me from behind. I turn against the counter, and pull her into the V of my thighs. She brushes a strand of steel-threaded hair off my forehead, then rests her hand on my cheek. "These handled that really well."

I give her a confused smile. "You know I don't care what the kids do with their careers as long as it makes them happy."

She laughs. "I know that. But you didn't even freak out over the fact he wants to go to London."

"Mmmm, that part actually was hard for me," I say, rubbing my thumb across her bottom lip.

"I know."

"Parsons is right *here*. He could even commute from home."

She raises her eyebrows, and her eyes sparkle at me with amusement. "Your *know*."

I look at her in suspicion. "Clarissa Harcourt-Mellinger, you are freaked out by this, aren't you?"

She collapses against me in helpless laughter. "Completely. Totally. Oh my God, if he doesn't text me every day, I will absolutely kill him."

I run my hands under her shirt, just to feel her skin. Then I kiss her

rise the and slow.

y I love When I pull back, I say in my wise, I-know-everything voice, "I  
fe wellwon't. We're going to let him fly."

She grins as she reaches for the waistband of my boxer briefs an  
culative"Still love you, James."

I smile against her mouth as I answer back as I always will, "Still lo  
: in theClarissa." Then my wife squeaks and giggles as I haul her over my s  
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When I pull back, I say in my wise, I-know-everything voice, "No you won't. We're going to let him fly."

She grins as she reaches for the waistband of my boxer briefs and says, "Still love you, James."

I smile against her mouth as I answer back as I always will, "Still love you, Clarissa." Then my wife squeaks and giggles as I haul her over my shoulder and carry her to our bed.

## *Afterword*

Thank you for reading *I Almost Do*. I hope you loved Clarissa and Jam

Would you like to keep up with all the tea (and be the first to find out how Bronwyn and Dean were up to on that crazy weekend)? Sign up for my newsletter here. You'll be the first to receive sneak peeks of upcoming releases, access to freebies when they're available, and even occasional content and deleted scenes. Hope to see you there!

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My beta readers: Bill C., Megan S., Kurt S., Sandy M., Beth T., Shar  
Dori A.M., Donna R., Lindsay Murray, Kimberly Rose, and Annie S.  
you. This book is better because of your contributions and support.

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