



REKINDLING  
THE  
*Spark*

CYNTHIA DANE  
HILDRED BILLINGS

# Rekindling the Spark

Cynthia Dane, Hildred Billings



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## **Rekindling the Spark**

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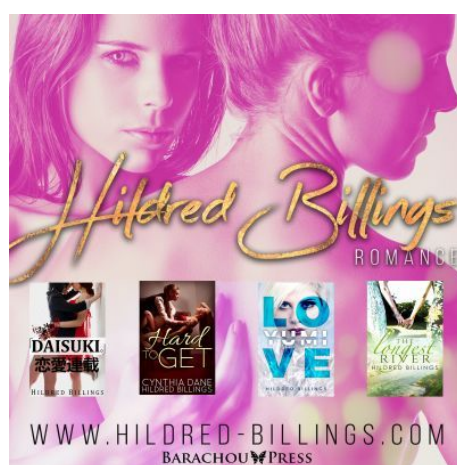
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# Keep Up With Hildred

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# Part 1

## **Rekindling the Spark**







## Chapter 1

Cruising from West Hollywood to Santa Monica was the epitome of “cool” to teenaged Paige, who once considered The 10 her “turf.” Whether in her mom’s Jeep, her dad’s Chevy, or her own Honda, chasing the sunset beyond the Santa Monica Boulevard was once the pinnacle of her adolescence.

Freedom. Fresh air. Release. That was what driver’s licenses were made of when that young, dumb seventeen-year-old named Paige Powell used to cruise by herself, with her besties, and with the girlfriends she snuck behind her parents’ backs – not that she had to, because Paige had some of the most understanding California liberal parents who “already knew” when she came out during college.

Honestly, it had been a disappointment. Paige had been ready for her father’s tears and her mother’s delicious screams of *“How could you do this to me?”*

Yeah, Paige remembered blasting down The 10 with no cares in the world.

“Get the *fuck* outta my way! What are you even doing?” Paige Powell, now aged 37, laid into her horn at a car that dithered between staying in the left lane or getting into the right. For the past half hour, Paige had been trapped on The 10, holed up like a kid with claustrophobia in a closet. Usually, the rush hour madness from her place of work in West Hollywood to her house in Santa Monica was a pain in the butt at best, and a downright nightmare at worst. Today, it somehow transcended night terrors and dove straight into the pits of despair.

She should have known better than trying to get anywhere on Memorial Day weekend.

Yet that was when most of her clients had time to physically come to her West Hollywood gym. Paige, a full-time personal trainer, knew that this was the time of year when the SoCal influencers wanted to chisel their summer bodies, baseball players became determined to be in top shape, and NBA stars grumbled about missing the finals and said, “*Next season, I’m tearing up the court.*” That was before the Hollywood A and B-listers sent their agents to schedule a “crash course to pecs” class for the next superhero movie to haunt Paige every time she opened a streaming app.

So here she was, stuck on The 10, a headache festering in her skull as she gave in to the urge to smack her forehead against the steering wheel of her SUV.

Her phone rang. Slowly, Paige lifted her head and saw her wife’s name on the screen.

“Answer it,” she grumbled to the AI that mediated her life.

Soon, Rhea’s voice pumped through the speakers. “Hey! Where are you?”

Paige sighed, her car slowly inching down the road. Eventually, she’d see the sign welcoming her to Santa Monica. *Eventually*. “I’m still stuck in traffic. Everyone and their furry offspring are heading to either Mexico or Canada for the holiday weekend. For some reason, that means they’ve blocked me in on The 10.”

Rhea didn’t respond for a few seconds. That gave Paige plenty of time to honk at someone else now attempting to slip through multiple lanes of freeway.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing,” Paige demanded of her wife. “I’m the one who’s late! Ugh, I should have left ten minutes earlier, but a Baldwin caught me on the phone and asked me a million questions about leg day.”

Rhea laughed. “Wild. Okay, well, I’m at the restaurant. Let me know when you’re five minutes away and I’ll order your drink for you.”

Paige wiped her wet bangs from her sweaty forehead. “I am a fucking mess. Didn’t have time to rinse off or stop by home first. I hope it’s okay if I show up in my work uniform.”

“Darlin’, half the people in this fancy restaurant are in their athleisure best. *No te afliges*.”

“Okay...” Paige drank another breath before sitting up straight in her seat. “It’s part of being Californian. Whenever you need to get somewhere quickly, there’s traffic.”

“At least it’s breezy in Santa Monica.”

“That’s why we live there.”

Paige cut the call. Too bad there was no respite from the sound of her wife’s voice. Because some jackass wanted to cut her off and he required a horn up his ass.



The waiter came back around two minutes after Rhea hung up on her wife. When she explained the traffic situation, the waiter sagely nodded, but Rhea was still compelled to order another cocktail for herself, lest she feel the crushing guilt of taking up a table in one of Santa Monica’s most romantic outdoor restaurants.

The reservation had not come easily, since everyone who fancied themselves in love (or lust) wanted a table at *La Mariposa*, the Latin-fusion restaurant that had been heralded as one of SoCal’s “top hidden gems of 2022,” which guaranteed it was the *opposite* of a hidden gem. For Rhea, it was a double-edged sword. She knew one of the chefs before his cookbook took off on the culinary nonfiction charts and he began making his living on the Food Network and Barnes & Noble circuits. She loved that the staff were making more tips than ever before, having their hard work acknowledged, and balancing the fact that most of them would never make it in

Hollywood. On the flip side? *Can't ever get a table.* The only way Rhea swung this reservation was by sitting on Google three weeks before she wanted one.

It was her and Paige's anniversary. They had to do *something* special, and Paige loved the crispy fish flautas (with house-made Chinese sweet and sour sauce) as much as Rhea fantasized about the sopapillas with honey drizzle. Right now, all Rhea had to keep her company was her phone, a margarita, and a plate of cheese and crackers that cost more than a Netflix subscription.

She opened her notes app and attempted to describe the terrace.

*"Couples delight in more than their love for each other,"* she quickly wrote with two thumbs. *"They are enamored with the appetizers that fuse Mexican staples with Italian sensibilities; Spanish tapas with Asian flourishes. The sweet breeze blowing from the Pacific is our only reminder of our vast, salty friend."* She deleted that last part and instead wrote, *"Our vast, familiar friend the sea."*

Somewhere, her agent was quite happy with Rhea for her initiative. It had taken most of the pandemic for the professional writer to get back to writing on the fly. Now here she was, waiting for her wife of fourteen years to show up to their anniversary dinner.

It was their wedding anniversary, right? Or was it the anniversary of their first date on the Santa Monica Pier? *Christ, I can't remember.* The dates were about one week

apart, and one happened only about a year before the other. It all blurred together.

Then again, it felt like only yesterday.

When she finally got a text from Paige that she was off the freeway, Rhea flagged down the waiter and requested a pina colada for Paige, as well as a Diet Coke. “A refill of my drink too, please.” She handed him her empty soda glass. “Thanks.”

He was already around the corner when she realized she forgot to tell him that she had a Coke Zero, *not* a Diet Coke. Oh, well.

When Paige finally arrived, it was perfectly timed with the cocktail set before her seat.

“Wow.” Rhea kept what prompted that to herself. *That bod. Hot damn.* Paige was *regal* in her skintight dusty rose leggings and the white sports bra that both suppressed her breasts *and* hinted at her generous cleavage. Yet it was the black overshirt, probably pulled out of her trunk, that tied it all together. Paige pulled a handkerchief out of her crossbody bag and dabbed at her forehead. Lifting her arm like that, Rhea noticed a glob of deodorant that had probably been hastily smeared on the moment Paige hurled herself from the restaurant valet, like an action star ejecting herself from a helicopter about to explode. “You made it.”

Paige fussed with her high ponytail before picking up the one-page menu that featured that night’s specials. The waiter placed a Diet Coke before her. Paige did not thank him. “Barely,” she instead grumbled. “Ugh. I’m sorry.”



“Like I said, no worries.” Rhea almost said that again in Spanish, but the very Hispanic waiter was nearby, and she didn’t want her accent to embarrass them all. *Your Mexican mom dies when you’re thirteen, and you forget how to roll your Rs within a year.* At least Paige didn’t make fun of her wife’s complete failures at Spanish.

She sipped her refilled drink. It was Diet Coke. Rhea didn’t have it in her to get it fixed, even though she liked Diet Coke about as much as she liked plain water. *At least one is free.*

Paige inhaled half of her soda before moving on to her pina colada. It was quite the sight, wasn’t it? The Instagram-ready gym trainer going to town on a pina colada, of *all* things, was exactly what Rhea loved about her wife. This was, after all, the woman who could do her hair and makeup just right to look like Ariana Grande. *Meanwhile, I look like Selena Gomez on the best day of my life.* That happened exactly once, and it was a “celebrity couples” Halloween party where Rhea and Paige lived in an alternate universe where the two former Disney stars had gone down a very different path. Rhea believed that the wig did most of the work for her... and shaving her facial hair that showed up with increasing vigor as she paraded through her thirties.

“At least you made it.” Rhea slid her hand across the table. Paige only noticed it after she glanced away from the menu. “The drive here from home wasn’t too bad for me.”

“Didn’t you take an Uber?”

“Yeah, why?”

Paige shrugged. “They know all the tricks for weaving through traffic. Saw more than one cutting me off on The 10.”

Rhea lifted her wife’s hand and gently kissed her knuckles. It did not have its intended effect on the woman attempting to relax.

They ordered their crunchy seafood flautas and arroz con pollo with American honey mustard garnish. Rhea asked for extra cilantro while her wife made a disgusted face. It tasted like soap to her, which was why Rhea went for it when eating out. At home, she had to carefully keep the cilantro away from the kitchen counters.

“Do you at least get to relax this weekend?” Rhea already knew the answer.

“Ha! No. I’m booked through Tuesday. That’s my first day off for the past eight days.”

“Your poor YouTube channel.”

“Please. Like I was getting more views after everyone decided to become a gym influencer during the pandemic.”

“It got you through the tough parts, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, well, the PPP loan carried the rest of the burden.”

Rhea *really* wanted to make a joke about Paige being the only business owner in all of Los Angeles County to use the government loan for its intended purpose but didn’t. “We all move forward now that we’re traveling and making out in public again.”

“Who’s making out in public?”

“Not us...”

Paige immediately disregarded that. “You’re working this weekend too, right?”

“Oh, yeah. My deadline is Monday. I’ve got to push through the last three chapters. I figure if I do one a day, I’ll make it.”

Paige shook her head. “I don’t know how you can approach writing a novel like that. Simply sit down and ‘pound it out’ like it’s homework. I could never.”

“To be fair, hon, I could never bench press double my body weight.”

“Took me years before I could do that.”

“Took me years to learn how to write a novel quickly.”

Paige grinned. “Guess we all have our talents.”

One of Rhea’s was correctly guessing how her food would taste. As usual, it was delectable at La Mariposa, the hippest, hottest new fusion restaurant in Santa Monica. What Rhea couldn’t foresee, however, was how Paige would feel after drinking a cocktail and stuffing her face with her “guilty pleasure” of the week.

“I have regrets,” she admitted at the end of the dinner when her wife was about to toast to their fourteen years of marriage. “You know what happened the last time we had Taco Bell?”

Rhea put down her glass. “Yeah.”

Paige made such a face that Rhea was also regretful that La Mariposa did not deal in kale smoothies and Imodium.

## Chapter 2

Rhea didn't put a time limit on things or add them to the calendar for future remembrance. Not like Paige, who knew everything in the macro, like her future appointments and when her period was due, *and* the micro, like what she was having for breakfast every day of the week and when, much to Rhea's continuous surprise, they were due to have sex.

That shit was penciled in for their anniversary, but due to Paige's stomach issues, they put it off another day. As soon as Paige walked through the door Saturday evening, she ripped her gym clothes off and walked by Rhea's office naked. That summoned the writer on a deadline like a moth to a flame.

By the time Paige stepped out of the shower, Rhea was already half-naked on the bed and ready to go.

"Oh..." Naked and straight from the hands of Michaelangelo himself, Paige stopped short of being within reach. "That's right. We skipped out last night."

Tension crept up Rhea's leg. "I mean... we don't have to."

Hair wet and toes soaring through the air, Paige crept onto their king-sized bed and rolled onto her back. "It's fine. Might as well get it out of the way."

Rhea must have made a *face*, because her wife was quick to reassure her that she wanted to have sex, and it was perfectly "fine" for them to jump into it.

To be fair to Rhea... she wanted to. A lot.

Her wife had barely aged a day since they first hooked up, after all. If anything, Paige was the perfect picture of the holy feminine, with the taut muscles and cautious diet befitting the personal trainer of professional athletes and Hollywood stars getting ready for set. Gone were the days when Paige relied on youth and a fast metabolism to keep her "cute," as she called herself. Now she was the queen of protein shakes, tofu, and fifty squats a day. The YouTube channel she started to keep herself sane during the pandemic had tens of thousands of subscribers, and agents around Hollywood were convinced that she could have had millions by now if she kept at it. Paige not only knew what she was doing, but she was *hot*. So hot that Rhea was sometimes afraid to touch her – she might burn her hand.

But there was one thing that had changed since their twenties. Something that Rhea frequently thought about, for better or worse.

Paige wasn't as interested in sex as she used to be. Back when they were college kids figuring themselves out, Paige

could hardly keep her hands off her girlfriend of the moment, and often playfully bemoaned that she went to sex so quickly that by the time she got to know her new girlfriend, the magic was gone. Which was why she had been so adamant about waiting with Rhea, who may or may not have been ready to go *right away. It was worth the wait.* Since that first date, it had only been Rhea and Paige – two kids who married a year after that fateful date on the Santa Monica Pier.

They had weathered poorly paying jobs, cranky parents, and the deaths of friends and extended family who had meant a lot to them. Paige was always a source of comfort on the anniversary of Rhea's mother's death, and Rhea was there when Paige's grandmother quickly declined from dementia to death. Rhea had taken a backseat when Paige pumped in hours at the gym to reach her level of professional success; Paige had encouraged her wife to keep going after a hundred agents had rejected her first finished manuscript. *She sweetly grilled her clients until someone finally hooked us up with a big five publisher.* Well, it was the big four now, but Rhea barely kept up with that.

They had gone from a beat-up studio in Los Angeles to a three-bedroom in Wilshire-Montana. Sometimes, Rhea could still hardly believe it. Their first real windfall, both as a bestselling author and as a heavily sought-after trainer to the stars, had afforded them that “fixer-upper” back before housing prices exploded exponentially. Over the years, they had completely changed the front lawn landscaping, fixed the façade, replaced the roof, and remodeled the bathrooms and

kitchens. Using nothing but her gumption and the advance for her second novel, Rhea redid her downstairs office and planted new bushes outside her window that both gave her some privacy and still offered a nice view of their small pool. *There's nothing like looking out my window and seeing my wife in a bikini.* During the pandemic, Paige had filmed fitness videos out by the pool when it wasn't her turn to use the gym in West Hollywood.

*Now she comes home to me again.* Their schedules were back to their old habits, and Rhea still couldn't keep her hands off the chiseled body that made her own look so... schlubby.

Yet Paige never said a disparaging word about her wife's slightly growing midsection, the extra hair on her upper lip, or the sag of the ass Rhea never knew she had. Over the years, Rhea had gone from stylishly boyish to genderless Bohemian, the kind of woman most of the supermarket checkers and restaurant waiters had no idea how to address. Except it was the 2020s, and few assigned genders to people anymore. Something Rhea was still getting used to after spending most of the 2000s asserting her womanhood to anyone who would listen.

So sometimes she was ma'am. Sometimes she was sir. Usually, she was the ambiguously ungendered customer who often came in with the rockin' hot femme from the YouTube videos.

Rhea was content with that. She loved knowing that out of everyone in SoCal, *she* was the one putting her hands all over



Paige Powell long after putting a ring on that finger.

Rhea knew everything about her wife's physiology. Such as how her left nipple was more sensitive than the right, and the exact way she liked to have Rhea's tongue sweetly circle her clit. Paige always required exactly two fingers to properly orgasm before losing interest. Her relationship with vibrators was cool – she didn't see much point to them, unlike Rhea, who loved nothing more than her favorite egg-shaped toy on her mound while her hot wife shook in pleasure beneath her. Or above her.

But it had been a few months since they last had sex like that. Honestly, they didn't have as much sex as they used to at all. Rhea rarely thought about it. Until recently.

Because it had been four months since she was last inside her wife, and she was crazy.

Sometimes, kisses before going to sleep weren't enough. Rhea craved physical intimacy like her family craved every fried food under the sun. *I want to be on top of her, inside her, and squirming beneath her.* The funniest thing was that while those desires had not declined over the years, Rhea also noticed that the frequency of her libido had also waned. It had been nice at first – to focus on other aspects of their marriage that weren't only the *sex, sex, sex* impetus of their twenties, but Rhea had also noticed that when she eventually turned on, Paige stayed off.

Her work was physically demanding and stressful. She dealt with high-intensity personalities every day. People were

constantly judging her physique both at work and online. While Rhea signed publishing deals and did mini-book tours, Paige had brands asking her to sponsor their products. Puma, Adidas, and Reebok had all bid on her likeness. When one contract ended, another magically began. Rhea could scroll through her wife's YouTube videos and see the change in clothes for herself.

*She's so hot, I might explode.* Rhea thought that before burying her face in her wife's naked breasts, still wet from the shower.

There were days, like that afternoon, when Rhea was convinced she could have enough sexual energy for them both. Paige could be a starfish on the beach while her wife strutted her stuff and made everyone feel good. *That's the spirit, Rhea.* She'd rip off her clothes and grind against her wife until they felt too good to continue.

Except all it took was for Rhea to gasp in pleasure *once* for Paige to adopt a face that said, "*Oh, is it over now? Thank God.*"

Rhea pretended she was finished. She asked her wife if she wanted something in return, but Paige was already up and getting dressed. The conversation immediately switched to dinner. Rhea agreed to make chicken and vegetables. No carbs for Paige.

Soon, Rhea was alone on the bed while Paige darted downstairs in nothing but pajama shorts and a loose T-shirt to check the mail. All Rhea could think about was chasing after

her like a huntress, catching Paige in the living room, and making her feel out-of-control sexual pleasure on the couch.

Yet even Rhea had to admit that required a lot more energy than she had right now. Dinner it was.



The next day, Rhea juggled two different phone calls that equally vied for her attention.

The first was from her agent, who was supposed to be scarce while Rhea finished up her manuscript for her editor. Except Jimmy had something *different* to share with one of his star literary clients – because someone at a popular streaming service was interested in optioning Rhea’s third novel for an on-screen adaptation.

“We’re talking serious paper here.” Jimmy had an uncanny way of sounding both like a professional agent and a smarmy used car salesman. “The only reason I’m calling you about this now is because that’s how serious it is. You and me, we’ve got it in us to seal this deal. All I have to warn you is that, well, maybe it won’t happen. More than likely, they’ll buy the rights, cut us both a fat check for existing, and it’s up to God what happens after that.”

Rhea’s hopes were not up at all. Hell, they had *lowered* since Jimmy interrupted her reaching the home stretch of her manuscript. “I know how this works, Jim. They buy the rights, I get a cut, and they sit on it for five years while farting around in development hell.”

“Yeah, so? What’s the alternative, do you think? *Nobody* buying the rights? That’s money on the table, Rhea.”

“We’d have more money if it was actually made, you know.”

“I don’t know anyone else buying the buzz of that book. Hulu is quiet. Paramount won’t even sneeze in our direction. You think Apple TV cares?”

Rhea rolled her eyes. “Jimmy, we can talk about this next week, *after* I’ve submitted my current manuscript. I don’t need you *and* Florence breathing down my neck.” She referred to her editor, her number-one contact at the publishing agency that put out one of her books every year. Jimmy got her foot through the door, but it was Florence who was responsible for Rhea’s novels showing up in the LAX bookstore. Rhea knew which one made her squeal harder than a teen girl at a BTS concert.

As soon as Jimmy hung up, Rhea’s father called.

She was apprehensive about answering. Not because she didn’t like her cantankerous dad, but because he had been a specific source of concern those past few months.

“Hey,” she said while leaning back in her office chair. Rhea stared out her window, past the bushes, and toward the pool. Paige was not out there, but Rhea remembered what that sight used to look like. “What’s up?”

After clearing his throat, Danny replied, “That goddamn news anchor is still styling his hair with horse shampoo. I can tell. He thinks I can’t tell, but I can.”

Rhea remembered everything her therapist had trained her to do whenever facing her father's incoherent ramblings. "How's the new helper working out?"

"Helper! Girl, I can't do a damn thing without her leaping up to wipe my ass. Does she think I don't remember how to do it myself? I've always done a good job. Even your mother couldn't complain about my hygiene, and I'm not exactly Hollywood chic."

*All right, you've got me, Dad.* Rhea laughed, which was exactly what her father wanted. "She's doing her job. You've got to take it easy, and that includes around the house." She referred to the bungalow near Malibu, the same town she grew up in. Unlike what '90s TV shows and Barbie media portrayed, though, Rhea's childhood was far from *chic*. Her tenure at Malibu High had been marked by the Incubus-famed views, but also *contaminated caulk*. She had gone straight from her journalism club to her part-time job at Cream Queen, where she made soft serve cones for her classmates. While the middle-class kids surfed on the beaches of Malibu, Rhea spent her weekends watching MTV and chatting with other girls online. *For fuck's sake, my first relationship was with a girl across the country.* It wasn't until she got a last-minute scholarship to the fanciest Catholic boarding school in SoCal that things turned around – but she was still working at Cream Queen the summer between her junior and senior years. "Don't be too hard on her, and she'll take care of you."

Her father grumbled right into his phone. "I don't need anyone taking care of me, least of all someone from outside of

the family. Even if your mom were alive, I wouldn't want her dealing with me in this state." Danny lowered his voice. "It's embarrassing."

At least he admitted that much.

"Uh-huh." Rhea did her best to not show her father her audible disdain for the whole situation. "Your insurance is paying for it, so might as well take advantage of having someone help with the laundry and dishes. You *do* have dirty dishes, right? Not just take-out boxes."

"Come on, now. The doc said to cut back on the Jack in the Box, so I have!"

"To how many times a week, Dad?"

"I don't have to take this from you. I'm the man who helped change your diapers, girl."

Danny must have realized that riling up his daughter was not the way to get what he wanted, for after only a few short minutes, he changed his tone.

"Anyway, are you guys coming to dinner this Wednesday?"

Rhea sighed. "Of course, Dad. Paige might be a bit tired, but we'll bring over some *healthy* takeout on Wednesday."

"Better not be one of those sad bowls full of horse food."

"I thought you liked quinoa now?"

The most noncommittal sound in the world blew over the phone line.

When Rhea hung up, she had completely lost her place in her manuscript. *If it's not one man bothering me, it's another.* Difference between the two, though, was that she loved her dad – and he was also the one who had survived a mild heart attack in recent weeks. *Not what I wanted to wake up and hear one spring day.* Danny had been so gung-ho about taking care of himself that his only daughter didn't find out about the heart attack until he was out of the ICU and suddenly thought, *"Suppose someone should tell Rhiannon."*

Because that was the name spoken over the phone when someone at the hospital called. Rhea had made such a face at the breakfast table that Paige immediately knew something was wrong. Rhea only held such a disgusted countenance when someone used her legal name.

*Would've been one thing if I hadn't been named after a famous song...*

"Rhia" had been her nickname growing up, and by the time she went off to college, Rhea had officially started going by the current spelling. It had felt right – and poignant – after moving on from her mother's death. It wasn't until long after her marriage, that Rhea learned her name came from not only her mother's love of Fleetwood Mac but that it had been the first song she and Danny danced to at their wedding.

Oh, well. Rhea had moved on.

She texted Paige a reminder that they were having dinner in Malibu in a couple of days. Paige texted back that she would be late again that night because of an accident on The 10. *"It's*

*Memorial Day. Shouldn't everyone be OUT OF TOWN?"*  
Paige had texted.

Funny. Rhea could have easily asked, "*Shouldn't you be at home on a holiday?"*"

Paige would work Thanksgiving and Christmas if she could get away with it. Not only because those holidays meant little to her, but because it was when many celebrities had enough time off to hit the gym.

Rhea turned toward her computer screen. After waking up the device, she encountered a large, blank page in her word processor.

*Only a few thousand words to go.* She was on the home stretch. After that, she could relax.



## Chapter 3

Paige only had one day off those past two weeks. *I can't do this anymore. Am I officially old?* Such thoughts plagued a woman who was “healthier” than most in her circles. *Certainly healthier than my own wife...* Yet if it wasn't for Rhea's sweet tooth, Paige would completely forget what a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie tasted like.

It was life's simple pleasures that made it worth it, right?

She had hoped to use her day off on Wednesday as an excuse to lounge on the couch or float in the pool with her favorite water flavor. Maybe read a book. Laundry? She had never heard of it. Instead, she was due at her father-in-law's house for takeout. Since he was eating healthy after a heart attack, that meant going out of their way to grab quinoa and black bean bowls. Paige's had extra avocado, and Rhea piled hers with cilantro.

Danny went down fighting when they walked through the door of his modest Malibu home, though. The man wanted hamburgers. Hell, he would take *turkey* burgers if his daughter

and the “health freak” wife insisted on it. Honestly? Paige didn’t care. Her relationship with her father-in-law was so tenuous that she would let him eat whatever he wanted if it kept him quiet.

Yet Rhea was invested in her father’s long-term health, which meant going along with yet another black bean quinoa bowl.

*I just want a nap.* Paige attempted stealing one on the couch while Rhea and Danny watched TV, but the noise from reruns *and* the street proved too much. Paige was trapped between barely being awake enough to participate in the world and falling asleep where she sat.

Yet the week trudged on. There was more work to be done at the gym, and more things going on at home.

Like on Friday night, when Paige came home half an hour early so she could get started on dinner for a gathering Rhea hosted. Paige didn’t usually mind cooking, especially since one of the friends was vegetarian and Paige knew how to whip up such meals that left everyone wanting leftovers. The deal, which included Rhea buying all the groceries and setting up the party, had been made before Memorial Day weekend. Paige came home, fueled by an energy drink, only to discover how much she wanted to crash on the couch once she was slicing and dicing vegetables in the kitchen.

It didn’t help that the guests arrived early, either.

“You’ll never guess who we’re about to sign!” Such a loud voice that dominated any room could only have belonged to

Jocelyn Greer, one of Rhea's friends and an old schoolmate from Catholic boarding school. Paige did not begrudge the woman in Gucci sunglasses who tossed her linen shirt over the back of a dining table and walked around the house in voluminous trousers and a bare midriff. Jocie was responsible for half of the clients that had been the backbone of Paige's business. "Freakin' T.J. Wright!"

Nobody in Paige's house followed sports, which was Jocie's wheelhouse. Yet Rhea politely asked, "Who's that?"

"Only the MVP for UCLA basketball this past season. The man was one of the players to watch out for during March Madness." Jocie joined Paige in the kitchen, careful to stay out of the way of the chef's knife currently cutting cucumbers. "He's about to sign with *my* agency. You know what this means, right, Paige?"

The woman in question allowed one fine eyebrow to arch across her head. Otherwise, she might lose her concentration with such a sharp knife in her hand. "Thinking about having him train at my gym?"

Jocie lightly smacked the kitchen counter. "It *is* the best one around Hollywood. Although if one of the guys has to train T.J., I am not opposed."

"I think Graham might have an opening coming up once one of the Chrises is done training for his movie."

"'One of the Chrises.' Listen to you. From Podunk neighborhood gym to training ground of the stars. You've come far in a few years."

“Don’t suppose you want to take credit for it.”

“Ha! Yeah, right, but if you want to give me a discount for bringing you so much high-end business, I won’t complain.”

“Do *not* listen to her,” said one of Jocie’s girlfriends, the academic vegetarian named Loren. “She’s been schmoozing and schmaltzing this new client all month, and she’s driving me *nuts*. She talks like a used car salesman.”

“*Babe*. Babe, babe, babe.” Jocie slung her arm around Loren’s petite shoulders and led her toward the dining table. “You knew this when you got with me.”

Rhea laughed from where she sat. “You guys crack me up. Like the old days.”

That instantly created a riot, since Rhea always knew how to punch her friends’ buttons. Paige continued tossing vegetables into a skillet. Her sigh was the quietest thing in the room.

*None of these people are my friends.* She thought that with the kind of lament that she knew it was her fault. Since graduating college, getting married, and starting her own business, Paige had been “unfriendable.” The few friends she retained over the years either moved out of LA or were busy with their own lives. *Some of them even have kids, the weirdos.* Paige couldn’t imagine it. She and Rhea never wanted kids, but even though she knew some of her friends did... shit, weren’t they still too young? Even when she reminded herself that they were all in their late thirties, it made no sense. *When did that happen?* Life went by way too quickly.

Paige liked her wife's old-school friends well enough. She simply wished she had some of her own.

The sounds of the skillet soon overtook Paige's senses. Behind her, she heard laughter and the scrapes of chairs, but all of her minute focus was on the food she was about to serve her guests. Between the vegetables and the faux meat from the freezer dancing against colorful produce and extra virgin olive oil was a severe feeling that Paige was losing her mind.

Her muscles ached from her own workouts and demonstrating to her clients what she wanted them to do in the gym. Her stomach was slightly upset that she wasn't getting enough rest and still attempting to eat. Her feet ached from standing most days. Paige had to stop everything to fix her hair before it fell in her face again. All she wanted was to turn off the burner and go take a quick nap upstairs.

Except that wasn't how cooking dinner worked. It wasn't how she conducted herself in front of her guests.

The last two visitors arrived a few minutes before Paige put the finishing touches on the food. Fellow married couple Roxy and Jeanette brought a bottle of wine and garlic bread for that night's meal. It enticed Rhea to jokingly ask what Loren and Jocie had brought, which prompted Jocie to say, "We brought dessert!"

"What the hell did we bring for dessert?" Her girlfriend asked.

"Why, us, of course."

Everyone laughed. Paige concentrated on serving dinner without spilling anything. She was rewarded with the first glass of wine poured from the bottle.

Even when she sat down to eat her cooking, all Paige could think about was closing her eyes and nodding off.

“You all right?” Rhea leaned in toward her to ask. “I’ve got some chocolate-covered coffee beans in the cupboard above the fridge.”

Paige waved her off. “I’m good. Really.”

She *wanted* to be involved with her wife’s party. It wasn’t every day that so many people came together under their roof, let alone to relax and reminisce about their adolescence. In older days, Paige would have joined in with her own “crazy college” stories that occurred before dating her one-day wife. She liked hearing about Roxy and Jeanette’s travels and she *liked* learning about Loren’s career as an associate professor of religious studies at a local private college. *I get enough of Jocie at work, but she’s had a wild life, too.* Rhea was so reserved compared to her old school chums, not all of whom grew up rich and privileged. *Again, like Jocie.* In another life, she and Paige were best friends. Unfortunately in this one, they had too much overlap in their careers to be anything but professional.

Or maybe that was Paige making excuses for herself again.

Everyone commended her food and asked for her secrets in making fake meat taste like “the real thing.” Paige used the last of her energy to gather the dirty dishes at the end of

dinner. If she had been more involved in the conversation, she might have let the dishes wait until later to wash. As it was, she liked the relative peace the sound of the sink and the clinking of the dishwasher gave her. Besides, everyone was finished with their first glass of wine, and some were working on their second. Paige hadn't even finished hers, instead passing it to her wife who continued to sit at the dining table and talk about her latest book she had sent to the editor.

Jeanette got up to stretch her legs. She wandered toward Paige in the kitchen, asking, "Need any help with that?"

"I'm good, thanks." Paige turned off the sink to let the dirtiest of the dishes soak in a tub of suds. "Besides, you're the guest. You should be drinking wine." She nodded toward the red wine in Jeanette's glass.

She laughed. "I admit, dishes are *not* my forte." Jeanette wagged her empty hand in front of Paige's face. "These delicate things, you know? My agent wants me to keep them fresh."

"Are you back in the modeling game again?"

Jeanette shrugged. Even that simple movement was captivating enough to almost make Paige drop a dish on the floor. *She was a born model, that's for sure.* According to legend – which was hearsay from Rhea on a *good* day – Jeanette's mother was a Ugandan supermodel who gave her only child a leg-up in the cutthroat Californian world. Yet most of Jeanette's biggest modeling days were behind her.

Marriage had been the perfect excuse to retire and do whatever she liked.

“I do a job here and there,” Jeanette said. “Right now, my agent has me *hand* modeling. I don’t mind it. As long as I keep my cuticles clean Photoshop takes care of the blemishes. It’s all about the shape of your hand and fingers, anyway.” She demonstrated with a flourish of her hand. “Although I miss the haircare modeling. It was how I found my stylist. The woman is a *magician* with afros.”

“You do have incredible hair.” Paige gestured to her flat blond hair as she wiped down the edges of the sink. “Sometimes I think about cutting all of mine off and being done with it. Always in the way.”

Jeanette leaned against the counter. “With your job, it makes sense to keep it simple... but I bet Rhea would be really sad to see you cut it *all* off.”

Paige snorted. “Why would she care?”

“She’s always going on about how pretty you are. The woman still can’t believe she bagged someone with abs. In LA! So silly.”

Paige instinctively touched her stomach. “It’s a lot of work keeping this thing flat enough so clients hire me.”

“You think I don’t know the trial of staying slim in Hollywood? Ha!”

They were both distracted by Loren vehemently denying something Jocie said about her. While Loren took a vote from



Rhea and Roxy about whether it was true, Paige returned to cleaning up her counter before she completely ran out of energy and passed out.

“Things good with you and Rhea?”

Paige was startled by that question. “Of course. Why wouldn’t they be?” She rethought that. “Is she saying something to you guys?”

“No. Simply consider me... observant.” Jeanette sipped her wine. “You guys have been married a long while. Straight out of college, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

Jeanette shrugged. “Roxanne and I have been together a long time, too. It’s tough being monogamous in this town. *So* dedicated to one person.”

“I swear to God, Jean, I’m so tired that if you’re trying to swing with us, you’ve gotta be blunter. Also, the answer is no.”

Jeanette was not put off by Paige’s confusion. “Not at all, hon. Love you guys, but not like that. I’m only saying that I know what kind of pressure this town puts on couples. It’s good to see people doing well. Gives other lesbos like Roxy and I hope.”

“Sounds like *you* guys are the ones on the rocks.”

“It could have gone that way a few years ago.” Jeanette pulled her wallet out of her dress pocket and searched for something inside. “We had a bit of a ‘come to Jesus’ moment

when I was considering going back to modeling. We decided to do couples counseling before things got worse. Best idea ever.” Jeanette slid a business card across the counter. “Dr. Seville is a dream.”

Paige didn't question why someone she only knew through her wife was suggesting couple's counseling. *In this town, people are always suggesting doctors and giving unsolicited advice about major life decisions.* Everything was about superficial upgrades and lateral raises. Every time Paige accomplished a new level in her personal life or career, she was instantly reminded by those around her that she could be doing *even better*. No wonder she was exhausted.

“Babe!” Roxy called from the table. “Come over here and tell Rhea about that photographer who thought you were his ex-girlfriend's sister!”

Jeanette was happy to oblige. First, she patted Paige's arm with a wink.



Paige should not have been surprised that the fervor of having people over put her wife in a certain mood after everyone was gone and most of the mess was cleaned up.

*You've got to be kidding me.* Paige had finally put on her pajamas and climbed into bed, yet there was Rhea, wrapping an arm around her and attempting to fondle her wife's breasts. A kiss on Paige's neck only sealed matters.

“Not tonight.” Paige felt like such a stereotype saying that. *Like a tired “wife bad” comic come to life. That’s me.* Her eyelids were so heavy that she almost forgot how to sound cautiously playful when she turned Rhea down. “Sorry.”

Rhea moved her hand to her wife’s side. “Sure thing. You get some sleep.”

“You too...”

The words were barely off Paige’s lips when she finally succumbed to what she had sought for so long. Yet she was still well aware of Rhea lying behind her, staring at the ceiling with her hands wrapped behind her head. What was Rhea thinking? Paige couldn’t ask because she was dead to the world.

## Chapter 4

When Paige finally had a day off that Sunday, she remained scarce. Rhea watched her wife eat a light breakfast before going for a run down to the store, where she picked up a few odds and ends for the fridge – and a few caffeinated beverages for herself. Rhea kept to her office, where she went over the updated release schedule her publisher sent her while playing ‘90s New Age music from her corner speaker. Every time Enya crooned about Orinoco Flows and how Only Time knew a damn thing, Rhea thought back to her childhood, when sitting on the beaches of Malibu and listening to music like this in her Discman headphones made sense in a chaotic world.

Paige had gone out to the backyard by the time Rhea went out to the kitchen for a snack. When pulling carrots and hummus out of the fridge, Rhea caught sight of her wife sitting on the edge of the pool in nothing but shorts and a tank top, her bare feet soaking in the cool water while she stared into the depths of her own imagination.

It was a time-stopping sight. Rhea knew her wife was beautiful, but sometimes she was caught off guard by the sunshine on golden hair and the natural tan Paige had acquired after a lifetime in Southern California. The woman had grown up in Anaheim, next to the world-renowned enchantment of Disneyland, and Rhea swore it showed.

As Paige continued to swirl her feet in the pool, Rhea sat at the dining table with her snack. She stared at her phone screen, carrots dipping into hummus while her elbow slid against the table and brought her attention to a business card left on the far end.

It was for someone named Dr. Seville, a couple's therapist in Malibu.

Rhea kept her questions to herself until the end of her snack. In the meantime, she looked up Dr. Seville on her phone and was immediately taken to the website of the woman's practice.

*"Here at Reconnections, we focus not only on the couple as a whole but on the individuals who make romance a wonderful experience,"* began the doctor's spiel. *"I firmly believe that any couple can make it work if they are willing to compromise and see eye to eye. That said, I also believe my patients when they say it's time to move on from one another, and I offer services in divorce counseling as well."*

Divorce?

Rhea knew she was reading too much into it, especially since she also knew that Jeanette and Roxy saw a marriage counselor who they claimed "kept them sane" in the ever-

changing world. Yet what else was the lizard brain in Rhea's head supposed to think when she saw the words "couple's therapist?"

Snack left on the table, Rhea stepped out onto the patio with the card in her hand.

Paige momentarily glanced up at her before recasting her gaze on the refraction of light on the pool water. She did not flinch when Rhea sat next to her, although those sandals were not coming off, and Rhea's feet weren't going anywhere near the water.

"Bit warm out here still, huh?" Rhea said.

"I don't mind it. I'm used to sweating all day."

Rhea flashed the card in front of her wife's face. "Know anything about this?"

"Jeanette gave that to me Friday night. Guess I forgot to throw it out."

"You think we need a marriage counselor?"

That got Paige's attention faster than the blender mixing a smoothie in the kitchen. "Did I ever say that?"

"No. I was just thinking..."

This whole time, Rhea was worried she might be the one coming off as defensive and hurt. Yet it was Paige who kicked one foot out of the pool water and accidentally splashed her wife's jeans. "Thinking what? That we need outside help for our marriage?"

“I wasn’t... I mean...”

Paige sighed, the fight out of her as quickly as it had flooded her veins. “Sorry. Guess I didn’t throw it out because I was thinking about it. Not *seriously*, but... I mean, we’ve been together a long time. Things aren’t how they used to be.”

“You’re right. We’re different people from when we were dating. Hell, we’re different from when we got married. Remember when we were poor?”

Paige’s laughter wasn’t as genuine as it used to be. “One wrong thing and we’re poor *again*, hon. It doesn’t take much these days, and it’s not like our parents are swimming in cash.”

“No...” They got by all right, had some investments, and Rhea’s books were successful enough that royalties would continue to trickle in for some years, but... well, she worried about “it” as well. *What if one of us gets sick and can’t work anymore? What if inflation gets so out of control that we can’t afford food? What if a giant earthquake flattens our house? What if, what if, what if?* Living in SoCal had been difficult enough when growing up in the poorer parts of town. Now it felt like *everything* was simultaneously gentrified and where the lower class lived. That was always true for Rhea when she walked around downtown Santa Monica.

Some of her friends, especially those from her short stint at Catholic school, came from wealth. Loren’s parents still had a house in Brentwood, for crying out loud. *Don’t get me started on Roxy*. Roxy’s father was a talent agent to some of the biggest up-and-comers of the 1980s, and her mother was an

Oscar-nominated costume designer. *Jeanette's mother was a supermodel.*

Meanwhile, Paige had grown up comfortably middle-class but hardly “thriving,” and Rhea’s parents... well, yeah.

*My father the tradesman and my mother the schoolteacher who died before I even went into high school.* The only reason Rhea didn’t worry about her and Danny losing the house was because it had already been paid off *and* Danny had done his best to hide the worst of his finances from his only child.

So Rhea and Paige were doing fine, by Rhea’s metrics. By Paige’s? Who knew?

Were they fine enough to afford a marriage counselor? Would they even survive each other’s critiques and airing out what bothered them in this marriage? *I thought we were fine. I thought we could weather anything.*

A few years ago, Rhea would have shut down any thought of counseling. They didn’t need it. Sometimes, life was tough, but they pulled through fine. Fine!

Now, though?

Paige was distant. Rhea’s father stressed her out. They were in completely different careers with totally different schedules. They hadn’t had sex in *months*. When was the last time they made out on the patio or skinny-dipped in their pool? When did they last travel somewhere and turn it into an adventure, not a cause of duress?

Maybe they *could* use a little outside help?



When she stepped out into the backyard that afternoon, Rhea had not counted on feeling on the verge of defeat. Yet when she looked her wife in the foggy eyes and realized that things had broken apart much quicker and much *harder* than she ever realized...

Didn't they once vow that all of this was worth fighting for?

"Should we call her?" Rhea asked her. "Maybe we should call her."

Paige was less committed than Rhea anticipated. "I dunno. Maybe."

"You want to think about it?"

"Guess it doesn't hurt to give it a think. Sorry, I'm really tired."

"Everything okay? Do you need to go to a doctor?" Rhea chuckled. "I mean like... a body doctor."

"I'm overworked right now. I promise I have some time off coming up."

"We should go somewhere. Get away from here for a while."

"Where would we go?"

"Depends on what you're in the mood for. Could go up the coast. Get a villa on the beach. Or we could dip down to Tijuana. Maybe Vegas? We haven't driven to Vegas in forever."

For the first time in a minute, Paige showed a glimmer of the silly girl still inside of her. "Vegas sounds like the exact

*opposite* of what I need right now.”

“Dunno. Could be fun. You could sit in my lap at the poker table and blow kisses in my ear while I blow my hand.”

“That would lose you money.”

“So? It’s about the fun.”

Rhea nudged her wife on the shoulder. Paige kicked some chlorinated water up into the air. The spray whipped against Rhea’s face, but the heavy, hot air meant it instantly dried.

“I love you,” Rhea said when the fervor died. “No matter what. I hope you know that.”

“I love you, too.” Paige leaned back, head tilted toward the sky. She shielded her eyes with her hand before pointing to a cloud. “Looks like a pair of lips.”

“Which kind?”

Paige scoffed. “The kissable kind.”

“Again, which kind?”

Paige flung herself back, both hands now on her face. “This is the real reason we might need therapy,” she muttered between her fingers. “You drive me a little nuts.”

“Only because I make you think about sex.”

“You’re sooo much hornier than me!”

*Is there a problem with that?* Rhea couldn’t help it. She saw women like her wife and was ready to go, no seduction required. Paige had always been a bit different. *She was the woman who taught me about courtship.* Before Paige, Rhea

had only known one-night stands and fly-by-night romances that lasted less than a month. Paige was the first woman Rhea had to work to get into bed, and that was the exact opposite of what she had heard about regarding one of the biggest queer heartbreakers on campus. *When we finally got into bed... sparks flew.* The kind that blossomed into colorful fireworks in the clear night sky – or spiraled out of control, burning half the state down.

Where were they now? Somewhere between Smoky the Bear and buried at sea.



Paige didn't have many personal clients that Monday when she was scheduled to oversee the weekly cleaning of the gym and help the manager go over the appointments. Sometimes, she met with talent agents who either wanted to bring their clients to train at this gym for a specific amount of time or project, and other times it was an agent trying to sign *her*. Luckily, Paige did not have to deal with such shenanigans that day – everyone was a known quantity, including her early afternoon appointment, a talented pro baseball player who had been introduced to Paige via his agent, Jocie.

“Give me *one* more.” Paige stood behind the bench press, a clicker in one hand and the other ready to assist with the weights at any moment. “You can do it!”

Pedro popped the bar up with one last mighty lift. With a whoop in his throat, he clapped over his achievement and gave

Paige two big thumbs up. “How’d I do, coach?” He sat up, sweat dripping down his face and arms. “Think I can be your clean-up hitter next week?”

His grin was as boyish as his charms. Luckily, they didn’t work on big, gay Paige. “Thirty reps are nothing to sneeze at.” She showed Pedro the number on the clicker. “Why do you think I pushed you? I knew you could do it.”

“My coach will be pleased.”

Before his workout ended, Paige brought him to the yoga mats for a proper stretch on the floor. “How do you feel about your performance so far?” she asked from a professional point of view. Never mind that her arm was arched over her head, fingers gripping the top of her shoe. “Are you living up to your standards out on the field?”

Pedro attempted to match her pose but had to settle with leaning over his leg while clasping his hands on either side of his calf. “I’ve done better. Done worse, too. Tomorrow’s game will be the cincher for the season, I think. Trying not to stress myself out.”

“If we can get your bench press up to where it needs to be, I think you’ll find a few more of those balls are hit out of the court.”

“You play a lot of baseball, coach?” Pedro always called her that, and she had stopped correcting him since meeting the man a year ago. “Or is it softball you girls play?”

“I played softball in high school, but I was always more into tennis.” Paige switched sides. “The idea isn’t that different when you’re trying to hit a ball to a certain spot. Raw power isn’t enough, but neither is a good eye or perfect timing. You need all three. So happens I can help you with that first one.” She pushed her arms out in front of her, back comfortably stretching. “The other two kinda follow after that.”

Once the stretching was complete, Paige walked Pedro to the entrance of the men’s locker room and bid him farewell. She half-heartedly promised to watch his game on TV the next day – he likewise made a false promise to do more yoga.

After that, Paige had a few minutes before her next client arrived. It was a Hollywood talent who had never been to the gym before, and Paige always looked forward to meeting clients new to town – even if they could sometimes be snotty and insufferable.

“Heeeey.” A man in basketball shorts and a simple tank top greeted Paige when she stepped behind the front desk and filled out her report on Pedro’s workout and progress. “How’s dancing with the stars?”

Paige offered a mild snort of amusement to Wesley, her youngest coworker who was technically her employee. *When you only own a share in the joint, is he really your employee?* This was a man who often cranked up the house music in the gym and went out drinking with some of his hockey-playing clients. *And hooks up with them. He likes to think I haven’t noticed, but I have.* Paige knew it might bite them all in the ass

one day, but Wesley was such a likable guy that no jilted B-list actor or closeted basketball star had yet to crash their Porsche into the front of the West Hollywood gym. *I keep waiting for it!* Paige hoped it happened while no one was there. Like at two in the morning.

“Pedro and the new girl are the only ones I’m seeing today.” Paige signed her name on the paper and put the clipboard away. Since most of their clients were high-profile, the gym preferred to keep such documentation a bit “old school,” in case someone tried to hack their system. The worst they’d find was how often hot shot action star Jason Jacobs hit the gym when he wasn’t on set. *Scandalous*. Then again, tabloids always found a way to spin the most innocuous or unsurprising of things. “Speaking of, have you seen my new client?” Paige stood in front of the terminal behind the desk. “Carmen. That’s her name.”

Westley said a chipper hello to the FedEx deliveryman dropping off a stack of boxes. *Looks like opening those is good busy work for you later, Wes*. It was either protein shakes or disinfectant wipes. Nothing in between.

“I’ve only been up here a few minutes, but you know the acting sect,” Wesley said with a shrug. “Fashionably late. Remember when Chantelle would always show up an hour late, like her concerts, I hear?”

Paige neither laughed nor frowned. “Let me know when she gets here. I’ll be in the women’s locker room for a few minutes.”

“Ooh-la-la.”

That got an eye roll out of Paige, but not until she turned around. Her face was buried in her phone as she took the familiar route to the women’s locker room on the other side of the gym. Her hair had come undone while working out with Pedro, and she preferred to fix it in front of the big mirror instead of fiddling with it in front of clients out in the middle of the gym.

Usually, she was one of the only people in the women’s locker room. Not that afternoon, when she stepped in on someone in a state of immediate undress.

“Sorry,” she apologized. Paige stood in front of the mirror, careful to keep the naked woman out of the reflection. Hair came out of Paige’s elastic band. “Pretend I’m not here.”

A silky voice spoke from behind a sports towel – one *not* attempting to cover up those surgically enhanced breasts or the waxy-smooth crevice between two perfectly curvaceous thighs. “No worries. A million people have seen me naked before.” The locker closed. When Paige braved glancing at the woman with supple skin, she saw an ass that knew what it was like to be on the other end of a proper squat. *That’s where I would start her out in a workout.* Paige chided herself for even thinking about it. There was something deliriously unprofessional about this exchange already.

The woman was still speaking.

“Are you Paige, by chance?”

Hair back in place, Paige turned around. She was a master of keeping her eyes on another woman's face when in a locker room situation. Something she had perfected in high school when she realized she *really* liked looking at her naked classmates... and not only for the scientific comparison of her own boobs to those of another eighteen-year-old.

“Yes. I'm Paige Powell.” Her hands were on her hips, biceps flexing in the muted light of the locker room. “I don't suppose you're my two o'clock.”

Delicate nails reached toward Paige. “I'm Carmen.” Eventually, both women's hands clasped together in a polite shake. “Carmen Dominguez, although you probably know me by my professional name.” Before their hands broke apart, Carmen's thin eyebrows wagged up and down her forehead. “Carmen Coyote.”

“It's vaguely familiar, but I'm afraid I don't know your work off-hand.”

“I bet some of your male coworkers do.” Carmen chuckled. “I won best actress back in 2019. For a little something called ‘Rearview Girls, 3.’”

Paige bit back her shock. *A porn star? That's new for us.* It certainly explained a *few* things, though. “I see. What brings you to our fine establishment? I'd think a woman of your caliber would already have a personal trainer lined up.”

“I've made those films, sure, but never had a *proper* trainer. My new agency is setting me up here, though. I'm getting out of the mainstream adult film business and focusing on some



more... relaxing ventures of a similar vein. So, I need to stay fit for the camera, but instead of being on a professional set in some New York hotel, it's my bedroom overlooking West Hollywood. Well, my audience thinks it's my bedroom, but it's my office. You get what I mean."

"Is that what retirement looks like these days?"

"Honey, even suburban housewives have a FansOnly now."

Paige nodded. "I think we start in five minutes. I'll meet you out on the mats then."

"Looking forward to it, Paige."

Something about the way Carmen said her name made Paige hesitate on her way out of the locker room. *I swear it's not her reflection.* Carmen was right in front of the big mirror, her towel draping between her two breasts and nothing else.

Even without ogling on purpose, Paige swore she felt her wife's jealous stare from halfway across Los Angeles County. *At least I know I'm not dead down there.* Paige was a professional, though, and that meant no thinking about her clients in *that* way.

Then again... it wasn't every day she got the exact kind of woman she used to go out with for a client.

## Chapter 5

Rhea didn't know what impressed her more – that Paige was on board with going to a counselor, or that they got in so quickly due to a last-minute cancelation.

Because it was the illustrious Dr. Seville's office they found themselves in on Wednesday morning when Rhea was usually still waking up and Paige didn't have as many clients. She was due back at the gym in the afternoon, but for now, she showed up in her yoga pants, sports bra, and a loose T-shirt that made her look more comfortable than Rhea in her jeans and linen shirt.

*I guess we're doing this.* Rhea thought that while waiting for the doctor to enter, Paige next to her, texting.

“Hello, ladies.” Dr. Seville said that before seeing Rhea, who hadn't had time to shave her upper lip that morning. Coupled with the flatter chest and short hair, most people looked twice after assuming her gender. Even if they were correct. *Yup. We're doing this.* Already making the therapist uncomfortable? Just like Rhea to simply exist on a couch. “So happy to have

you joining me today, and so last minute, too.” Her soft but enunciated voice was not lost on Rhea, who heard the same tone from the school counselor at St. Francesca’s. *Wasn’t enough to help me deal with the residual grief of my mom dying.* “Now, which one of you is Paige?”

Rhea’s wife looked up from her phone and was reminded to set it aside. “That’s me.” She crossed her legs, hands wrapping around knees covered in lavender leggings. “Hi.”

“That must mean you’re Rhea.”

“Yup.”

“Excellent. For the first session, I mostly want to get to know you la...” She stopped. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had a chance to thoroughly check your intake forms like I usually do. Such a last-minute appointment.”

“I’m she-her,” Rhea helpfully addressed.

“Ah, yes. Thank you.” Dr. Seville removed her eyeglasses and cleaned them with the corner of her burgundy sweater. When she put them back on her face, she said. “How long have you two been married?”

While she referred to the forms Rhea and Paige filled out online the night before, Rhea answered, “Thirteen years. We’ve been together for fourteen.”

“You met in college?”

“Yeah.”

A big grin that could have been as fake as half the faces in LA hit the married couple. “How exciting. I always love seeing couples who have been together for almost their whole adult lives.” She dove straight into the next topic. “Now, why don’t you both tell me some things about yourselves, starting with you, Rhea.”

She knew this would be the most painful part of the introductory session. *Talking about myself like it’s a corporate icebreaker is harder than it seems.* Rhea sometimes found it difficult to connect with new people. She vastly preferred simply being herself around those who already knew her. She basically implied as much when she talked about her ongoing writing career and how one of the best things about it was injecting her life story into the background of her novels and essays, an inconspicuous enough place for most readers to digest. *It’s like baring your soul without people thinking you are a raging narcissist.* Paige had once jokingly called it “socially acceptable trauma dumping.”

Paige was much curter when talking about herself. She mentioned growing up in Anaheim, working as a professional trainer, and how many NDAs she had to sign to get high-paying clients. Dr. Seville nodded during both spiels, occasionally asking a follow-up question and writing down her observations. In the end, she said, “I noticed that you two are very individualistic. You both have different jobs that appeal to your personality. I heard little about your home life or what you two might share besides a house and a marriage certificate.”

Rhea swallowed. Paige's visage remained unchanged.

"Do you two share any hobbies? What does date night look like for you?"

"Well..." Rhea waited for Paige to jump in and say something. When she didn't, it fell upon Rhea to concoct the effervescent image of "date night. "We both used to go hiking all the time. Oh, and fishing with my dad, both off the pier and in Kenneth Hahn..."

"We used to go to poetry readings at the feminist bookstore," Paige cut in. "Drag shows in West Hollywood. Clubbing in West Hollywood..."

Dr. Seville nodded. "That's a lot of 'used to.' When was your most recent romantic date? Describe it to me."

"We had a few friends over the other night for dinner."

That garnered Rhea a strange look from the therapist. "Was this a *romantic* dinner party?"

Rhea blushed. "No."

Paige jumped in again, this time saving her wife from more embarrassment. "Our last date was about a month ago. Remember?" she prompted Rhea. "We went to Tia Rosa's up by your dad's place. It's this fresh fish focused Mexican restaurant," she described to the therapist. "Right up on the beach. We got reservations for the patio, and it wasn't hotter than seventy degrees." She hid her small smile behind her hand as she moved her hair behind her ear. "So, I was freezing. Remember?"

“Of course. It was only a month ago.” Rhea matched her wife’s smile. “I had to loan her my jacket,” she said to the therapist. “*I was cold after that.*”

“We had *pescado zarendeado*,” Paige continued. “It was pretty good.”

“Excellent,” Dr. Seville said. “How often do you two go out on dates? Only the two of you, for the sake of it?”

Both women were quiet again. “It’s a bit erratic ever since the pandemic,” Rhea admitted.

Dr. Seville allowed a mild silence to overtake her office. A clock ticked on the wall behind her, but it was the unrelenting sunlight beaming through one of the vertical windows that annoyed Rhea the most. She had worn one of her linen shirts that day, but the black jeans were oppressive against her skin, and sweat gathered beneath her sports bra. She was suddenly self-conscious of her hair – including the fuzz on her upper lip. *No wonder she pointedly asked me my pronouns when we got here.* Rhea didn’t recall Paige being asked hers.

“Do you two feel that’s when you started to notice a shift in your relationship?” the therapist gently asked. “During the pandemic?”

“I guess...” Paige muttered.

“It was a strange time,” Rhea concurred.

“You would be far from the first to come into this office and mention it,” Dr. Seville continued. “Some couples found renewed fervor in their marriages when they suddenly had all

the time in the world to be together. Others had to face anxiety, strife, and stress in very close quarters with little room to breathe. And others found a new honeymoon period that quickly ended once things were back to ‘business as usual.’ Does any of this sound applicable to your marriage?”

The thing about Dr. Seville was that she said it so softly, so empathetically that Rhea couldn’t take offense. *Yes, all of that makes sense.* Couples faced things differently, let alone a global pandemic that completely upended their routines. Why shouldn’t she and Paige be the same way? *Besides, we’ve been together for so long. It was coming for us at some time, right?* The make-or-break point. *The do we stay together because of sunk cost fallacy, address all of our issues, or... break up?*

Rhea hated the thought. That’s why she was here – to tackle their challenges head-on.

“I was really anxious during lockdown,” Paige admitted. “I had to figure out my business, which is very ‘in-person’ because you have to be able to check someone’s form immediately. Despite being celebrities, a lot of my clients don’t have the kind of gym at home that I can provide at my business. When it wasn’t working, I pivoted to doing a YouTube channel to make money from ads and views.”

“Did pretty stellar,” Rhea said. “She was getting sponsorship offers before she went back to work in person.”

“How did you take the pandemic, Rhea?”

She wasn’t expecting to be put on the spot so soon again. “I was... well, I’m a writer. I have a home office. So I made

upgrades to my office with the stimulus check... I mean, most of my work could be done online. I was already conducting a lot of my work meetings over the phone or the internet.”

“Do you think it changed your marriage in any meaningful, long-term way? Such as in the responsibilities department? Or in the bedroom?”

Rhea blushed. Paige cleared her throat.

“We actually did it a lot those first few months,” Paige said. “It was like being on our honeymoon again. Although...”

“Yes, Paige?”

“I think for me it was the anxiety. I thought if I had more sex, it would distract me from feeling like everything I worked for in my career was crumbling.”

“Did it work the way you anticipated?”

“Yes.” Paige rethought that. “No. I don’t know.”

Dr. Seville pivoted the conversation again. “It sounds like things have chilled a bit since lockdown lifted. How often are you two intimate with each other?”

Rhea felt like a target was on her forehead, and Dr. Seville pulled a BB gun out of her belt. *I am the last person who openly talks about these things...* Her friends could talk about sex and their love lives for hours. Rhea, however, had grown up in a house where that simply wasn’t brought up. Her mother had lived long enough to give Rhea “the talk,” but it hadn’t amounted to more than how periods worked, how babies were formed, and “once you have a boy you’re dating,



we'll talk about it more." Except that day never came, because Rhea's mother died, and Danny's response to all sex talk was, "*You're supposed to learn that at school, right?*" Not that Rhea ever, *ever* wanted to hear her father say the word "sex."

Paige, however, did not have such inhibitions.

"What do you mean by intimacy? Is that a euphemism for sex?"

The doctor nodded. "If you'd like."

"Oh, we... ah..." Paige cleared her throat. "Maybe about once every..."

She left everyone hanging. Mostly Dr. Seville, because Rhea knew the answer.

"About once a month," Rhea said. "On average. So sometimes more, sometimes way less."

"I see." If Dr. Seville judged them at all for that, she did not let on. Rhea supposed that was a therapist's professionalism. "Are you two happy with that for now? Or would you like to see that frequency increase?"

"We're intimate in other ways," Rhea jumped in. "We cuddle on the couch a lot. We flirt. We kiss. We go on dates..."

Paige shook her head. "She's talking about the horizontal tango, Ray," she said. "Not the vertical tango in front of the TV when Carlos Gardel is on."

"Does this conversation make you uncomfortable, Rhea?" Dr. Seville asked.

“No. Just kinda coming in hot here.”

“It’s a sore spot with her,” Paige said. “She’s the horny one, you see. I’m the tepid water in a stagnant pool.”

Dr. Seville arched her brows. Rhea thought she might die of embarrassment.

“I think the main reason we’re here,” Paige continued, “is because I don’t put out.”

“Why do you think that is?” the therapist asked while Rhea shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Has Rhea said this to you?”

“Oh, no, not directly. You can simply tell. We’ve talked about it before. It comes down to me being stressed out and getting older, I guess. Sometimes I forget how long it’s been since we last made love. Then she tells me, and I’m shocked. I think we’re becoming more sexually incompatible.”

“That’s a very common reason for couples to struggle. Would you like to start there with your couple’s therapy? Rhea?” The doctor’s attention was fully on her. “Are you okay?”

No, she was not okay. Rhea’s biggest insecurity had been ripped open right in front of the therapist she had only met ten minutes ago. *That I ain’t good enough to have sex with anymore.*

She wanted to claw off her face and climb up the wall. Instead, Rhea Mendez-Kennewick had to sit in a chair, next to a wife who so nonchalantly implied, *“We’re growing apart because we don’t fuck enough.”*

Somewhere, Rhea's mother turned on the kitchen burner to help drown out the sounds of internal screaming.



While her wife took a bath, Paige looked over the paperwork the therapist had sent home with them at the end of their first consultation. Questionnaires that both women were expected to fill out in private would be gone over in two weeks. Until then, Paige flipped over a piece of paper that offered several tiers of “rekindling the spark” of a dead bedroom.

*Tier One – Injecting More Spontaneous Fun in Your Marriage*

Paige wasn't surprised by any of the suggestions. “*Go somewhere together you've never been before.*” That was obvious. “*Set aside one night a week where you are each other's sole focus of attention.*” Sure, Paige could do that. Didn't they do that already? “*Engage in kissing and foreplay, but do not take it all the way – make yourselves wait and build anticipation.*” That could be fun. “*Separate for a night and instead engage in online flirtations and foreplay – texting, pictures, video.*” That didn't sound like Paige's thing. She preferred the here and the tangible. Why else was she so insistent on being hands-on with her clients? The best bonds were made that way.

Dr. Seville had been adamant that they look at Tier One for now, but Paige was too curious to not peek at what Tiers Two and Three suggested. She balked at, “*Have a complete*

*physical assessment to address a sudden lack of sexual desires,*” in Tier Two, but it was Tier Three that made her choke on her water.

*“Engage in sexual roleplay.” “Attend an orgy.” “Consider kink and BDSM.”*

Paige disengaged from the list after that. Her mind was still reeling when she decided to talk about it with Rhea, who always left the bathroom unlocked.

“Have you read thi-*whoa*.” Paige had walked in on her wife in the bathtub, all right – and that was her hand between her legs. “I’m... I’m sorry.” Paige didn’t know why she was apologizing. Not even when Rhea brought her hand out of the water and clamped her thighs together. Wet hair became slicker beneath the water running down her fingers. The look on her face implied she wasn’t having much fun, anyway.

“Yeah?” Rhea asked with a clipped voice. “Don’t suppose you came in to help me?”

*Not with that attitude, I haven’t.* “I’ve got my clothes on. Besides...” Paige chuckled. “Put a sock on the door next time you want to be *alone*.”

“Never said I had to be alone.”

“Yeah, well...” Paige was not in a romantic mood a few minutes ago, and she definitely wasn’t now. “I came in here to talk to you about what our new therapist sent us home with.”

“Okay?”

Any other time, Paige was fine with sitting on the toilet when talking to her wife in the tub. Now? She'd uncomfortably lean against the sink, pretending that she wasn't too awkward of a height to accomplish anything more than a bruised tailbone by the time she went to bed. "Have you looked at this?" Paige kept talking, although her wife was on another planet while she rubbed her eyes with wet fingers. "If you go up to Tier Three, shit gets *wild*."

"You're not supposed to look at Tier Three yet."

"Why would she send us home with the other tiers if she didn't think we'd look?"

"All right." Sighing, Rhea's hand flopped back into the water with a pathetic splash. "What does Tier Three say?"

"That we should join an orgy," Paige attempted to flippantly say. "Or have a threesome with a rando. Get into the kink scene. Fuck each other with motorized dildos for all I know."

"Motorized *dildos*?"

"You never watched those videos they made on our campus back in the day, huh?"

"What are you on about?"

*Boy, she really doesn't know?* A popular porn site had come to their campus to "cast" unknown co-eds, and Paige had almost been roped into it before she figured out what was going on. *A lot of Sybians. So many Sybians in the warehouse across from the brand-new science building.* Paige had broken up with her girlfriend at the time because the "loose and

carefree” sophomore from a popular sorority insisted on “taking the opportunity” to have fun in a porn video, and for some reason, Paige wasn’t into it.

“The therapist is a quack,” Paige said. “She probably wants us making sex tapes, too.”

“You know... none of that is so strange. Our friends do shit like that all the time. They’re all members of that club downtown. The kinky one.”

“First of all, they’re *your* friends. My friends aren’t sexual deviants. Not that I have a problem with deviants.”

Rhea rolled her eyes. “What friends?”

Paige curtailed a gasp. “Ones from work!”

“You mean all the gay guys and straight girls? They’re hitting up Hellfire? Wait a minute, don’t tell me. I don’t wanna know.”

“You think we’re too good for that place, or something?”

“Or something! More like you’d die within five minutes there. You know, for being a big ol’ slut in college, you sure are a prude now?”

“I’m sorry, did you marry me hoping I’d stay a slut?”

Water splashed in the tub as Rhea held up her thumb and forefinger. “A little. You know I love sluts. Especially freaky sluts who can’t keep their boobs in their tops.”

This time, Paige couldn’t hold back her scandalized gasp. “That was *one time!*” Rhea must have meant the frat party

where Paige got so drunk she not only participated in a wet T-shirt contest but went completely topless after she won. It took the power of her two best gal pals to ensure her safety when surrounded by more twenty-something guys than Paige wanted to ever think about again. It wasn't until a few years into their relationship that Paige discovered her future wife had been at the party too. *Saw my breasts long before we started dating.* So much for that mystery. Or was that what made Rhea decide to start dating the big heartbreaker on campus? *I broke more than hearts...* Legend said that one of her girlfriends still didn't walk quite right.

“What are you thinking about?” Rhea leaned over the edge of the tub, arms crossed beneath her chin. “It's probably not me touching myself. I know that doesn't do it for you.”

Paige scoffed. “Don't self-deprecate yourself like that. You're hot.”

“Am I?” Rhea cocked her head. When the water flattened her short hair like that, she was so boyishly – yet *girlishly* – attractive that Paige remembered the first time they finally made love. *I put it off for so long because I didn't want another casual relationship. I wanted something real. Something that wasn't built on sex.* The wait had been worth it. From then on, that was Paige's consideration on the matter. If the sex was worth it? They could wait.

Perhaps she had been a bit too extreme with that...

“Yes. You're hot.” Paige's arms remained crossed as she stepped forward and bent her mouth toward her wife's. “I

always stare at you when you're naked, you know.”

Their lips gently touched. Rhea pulled away before Paige could go after more.

“I stared at you sooo much at that frat party.”

Paige stood up while her wife cracked herself up with such witty observations. “Perv.”

“My goal from that night on,” Rhea continued, while Paige tackled the toothbrush and paste on the bathroom counter, “was to find out what it was like to shove my face in your boobs while pounding you senseless between the legs.”

A slight tingle appeared in that spot right now, but it wasn't enough for Paige to run to bed with it. “That so?” she asked, bamboo toothbrush in her mouth.

“Yup. When we finally hit the sack after *weeks* of dating, I thought I was gonna die.”

Paige began brushing. “Did your dreams come true?”

“You really have no idea. I'm still riding that high after nearly fifteen years.”

Paige glanced over her shoulder. Rhea beamed back at her, arms slung over the back of the tub while her shit-eating grin lit up the whole bathroom.

It should have been a sweet moment that only reaffirmed their love for one another. After all, Paige loved the “little moments” that she sometimes lost living in a county like Los Angeles and having a career that catered to some of the most



superficial people around. As she spat out her toothpaste, though, she only felt one thing – and it wasn't relief. It was the gnawing sensation that constantly chipped away at her heart after years of kissing the same woman every day.

Guilt.

## Chapter 6

It wasn't that Paige had completely lost interest in sex or slightly less "involved" forms of intimacy. She simply set it aside more easily. There was always something more *interesting* to do. She got tired in ways the "slut" in college did not. When faced with the choice of sex with her wife or going to sleep early, she almost always picked sleep. It was arguably the most important function to her ability to live and make money, right after eating. So why wouldn't she make that choice every time it was in front of her?

*Because my wife is unhappy.*

Rhea was so good at hiding it. She always had a smile for Paige, who apparently took it for granted. The few times they raised their voices at one another? It ended with apologies and promises to do better. They were almost always on the same page about their dynamic. They had even both decided on the same house, thinking the other wanted something else. The only time they had *big* disagreements was when Rhea went on book tours and wanted Paige to come with her – it almost

always ended with Paige staying in LA because she had to work.

Rhea was Paige's wife, and Paige's wife was unhappy. She wanted more intimacy. More desire. If not carnal relations, then the knowledge that she was someone worthy of Paige's time and affection. This knowledge lurked in Paige's head the day after the appointment when she stood in the middle of the gym she helped build from the ground up.

She was surrounded by coworkers who openly talked about their romantic lives and what kind of debauchery they got up to on their weekends. She was amid B and C-list celebrities who called the paparazzi to tail them after a late-night bender. Many of them had memberships in clubs like Hellfire, where talent agents told their clients to be scarce for the sake of their image. Instead, careers were made there. "Girl next door" actresses blossomed into "erotic ingenues" and men who were written off as "mid" re-debuted with action star roles and a second shot at that summer's highest-grossing romantic comedy lead. All because they had packed on a few muscles at Paige's gym.

*Am I getting left behind?*

This was a city of superficial angels and trickster devils. Every relationship was quid-pro-quo until proven otherwise. It wasn't about how *many* people you knew, but *who specifically* you knew. Paige knew that from growing up in Anaheim, close enough to Disneyland to get a first-hand look at what child stars became when their youth began to fade. Since

moving closer to the city as an adult, she had swallowed every hard truth that passed before her. Some clients disappeared because Los Angeles had chewed them up and spat them out, after all. The same went for her coworkers, some of whom had tried their luck in Hollywood. Hell, one of Paige's co-owners still fancied himself a scriptwriter at night. He had never sold a script, but he was *so* close... or so he constantly claimed.

Had Paige become likewise disenchanted? Self-absorbed?

*I used to be the biggest gay slut on campus.* She kept a straight face while thinking that because one of the biggest stars on late-night TV had appeared for his one-on-one with the trainer who fancied himself a scriptwriter. Paige went over her paperwork at the front desk while she overheard what traffic was like from a man who made his living telling stand-up jokes at 11 p.m. The novelty of being around A-listers had worn off over the years, but Paige knew she had to keep her cool – even when she mentally went over every girlfriend she took to bed between her sophomore and senior years of college.

*It was seventeen, wasn't it?* Maybe that figure didn't compare to some of the bros who had a new girl every week, but Paige was gay. Her pool had been *so* much smaller. During the height of "The L Word," the president of the Gay-Straight Alliance joked that Paige wasn't only a Shane, but that she was the epicenter of every lesbian relationship chart in their *league*.

Which was a lie, of course. Paige kept most of her exploits to her campus, with the adage, “*Every new class coming in means more opportunities for me.*”

She cringed to think about it now, but she was almost forty, and forty-year-olds weren’t supposed to revel in their sorority conquests or romps with computer club nerds.

*Maybe Rhea wants to have more sex because I’m like a trophy to her and fucking me means she’s won.* Nah, that made no sense. Paige was simply good at coming up with reasons she should pack it in.

What did they even have in common anymore?

*We’re both hard workers...* That was evident in how much productivity they put out into the world, albeit in their own ways. Paige was a doer; Rhea was a creative. Paige might spend most of her time out of the house when global pandemics allowed, and Rhea might prefer to hole up in her office to get her work done, but they always made time for each other.

Right?

*I guess not.*

They had other things in common, though. They both liked the ocean. They both voted the same way without consulting one another. They both agreed that there was no such thing as “too much cheese” when calories were cut from the equation.

They were both only children. They both valued a good-night kiss. Neither of them had ever gone out with a guy, let

alone slept with one.

But they had differences, too. Once, Paige thought that the spice of life, but now...?

“Heeey.”

She looked up from her paperwork to see her next appointment. Carmen Coyote had arrived in a matching sports bra and leggings set, her freshly made-up face only more accentuated by her long hair pulled back into a ponytail. A light jacket shook against her fit and firm frame – something she was intent on maintaining more than refining. She had made it clear to her new trainer that, *“The way my body is now pays for my future. Let’s keep it hot, huh?”*

Paige was slightly distracted by Jocie Greer entering with one of her new clients. They vaguely nodded to one another before Jocie and a young basketball star were taken on a tour of the facilities. For Jocie, this was the hundredth time, but for the new NBA prodigy, it was his future. Paige almost forgot that an enviously beautiful woman stood right before her.

“Hi. Uh, I mean...” Paige refreshed her face with the practiced professionalism of a woman who ran her own business. “Good to see you again. Is it already almost two?”

“Sure is.” Carmen placed her keys and purse atop the counter, a glint of mischief in her amber eyes. “I’ve got a shoot tonight, so I have to make sure I don’t do anything too, uh, strenuous. I was thinking some good old-fashioned yoga if you guys do that here.”

“We can do some yoga and stretches, sure.” As soon as her coworker and the late-night star were gone, Paige moved over to the computer and checked Carmen in. “Any area you’d like to target?”

“Thighs and back, mostly. That’s what I use the most at work.”

Paige tried not to blush. It wasn’t that the frank talk of a famous porn star did her in, it was... well, that was part of it. The porn star part. Mostly because Carmen was ludicrously beautiful, and it showed that she had spent most of her adult life maintaining a certain figure within an inch of its existence. The fact she had chosen Paige’s gym for her West Hollywood training was an honor. Kinda.

All right. It *was*.

“Thighs and back it is.” Paige moved away from the computer. “Looks like you’re ready to go, too. Shall we meet on the mats? How about in room three?”

“I’m going to throw this stuff in a locker,” Carmen announced on her pivot toward the ladies’ locker room.

Paige had about two seconds to get her shit together before another figure appeared at the counter with scandal emblazoned on her ruby-red lips.

“Was that *Carmen Coyote*?” Jocie hissed across the counter. “The erotic film star?”

Paige played it cool as if she would not be acting the same way as Jocie upon such a humbling sight. “Says the woman

who brings in some of the biggest athletes in Los Angeles.”

“In another life, I am totally a smut peddler.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Jocie rapped her nails on the counter. “Rhea has no idea what she’s missing out on here, does she?”

“She’s far from the first adult film star we’ve had training in this gym.”

“Oh, I bet, but how often do you see the winner of last year’s Golden Scissors?”

“Golden... *Scissors?*”

“It’s the big adult film star award for best lesbian sex scene. Duh, Paige.”

“Forgive me. I had forgotten how important that is to queer kind.”

Jocie rolled her eyes as if she could *not* with her friend’s wife right now. “If you haven’t seen some of her work, you should. Top-tier shit. I feel like I’m sharing space with a goddess.”

“You watch a lot of porn, do you, Jocie?”

“Sometimes your girlfriends are in a *mood*.”

“I can’t say I think it a good idea to watch my *client’s* work.”

“You’re right. I’ll have to watch it for you.” With a flirtatious wink and a sweet swivel of her heel, Jocelyn Greer sashayed into the main room of the gym, where she was the only person to strut through in stilettos and a designer blazer.



*The last thing I should be watching is my client's adult film videos.* Even if Carmen had won the “Golden Scissors,” which was the most *awful* title Paige had ever heard in her life. *I'd rather not have my sexuality reduced to a stereotypical sex position few people actually engage in.* Said the woman who had foolishly attempted “scissoring” more than once during her college years. The sheer amount of core strength it required...

Honestly, she'd rather go in blazing with a strap-on. It was a more efficient workout, if that was what she cared about.

She hated what Jocie had done to her head, though. Paige was going to blame her. It must have been why she couldn't stop checking Carmen out while they did yoga together in a private room covered in nothing but mats and stretching aids. Carmen kept the conversation professional, but Pandora's box had been opened. Every time she stretched up, Paige saw the curvaceous line of a woman who used her body to get paid. And every time she stretched her legs across the mat?

Paige didn't want to admit what she thought. It wasn't good. Definitely not professional.

*I think I'm getting horny. God damnit.* Where was Rhea when she needed her wife? This was the perfect time for a mid-afternoon romp! It was even spontaneous!

Instead, Paige was stuck at work. She knew that as soon as she went home that evening, the moment would be gone, and she'd be stuck in her rut again.

*I can't believe I'm doing this, but...*

Once Carmen was gone, Paige tracked down Jocie, who was getting ready to leave too.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Paige asked with a lowered voice. “It’s personal.”

“Hm?” Jocie nodded to her client, who announced he’d wait for her by her car. “Sure. I can give you a minute of personal time. What is it?”

“Are you... planning on going to Hellfire anytime soon? Like with Loren?”

“Hellfire? With *Loren*?” Jocie shook her head. “We’ve banned her from going for a while. She always gets so sloshed that she starts making out with women who *aren’t* her girlfriends, and it’s a problem. A sexy problem, but still a *problem*.”

“Uh, all right...”

“Why?” Jocie leaned against the wall, blocking Paige from seeing her next appointment walking through the door. “That’s not what I expected you to ask me. Didn’t seem like your scene.”

*It’s not. I think.* “Rhea and I want to go somewhere different for date night soon,” she lied. “You know. Freshen things up.”

“Uh-huh...” Whatever Jocie calculated in her shrewd mind, she did not let on. “That’s not your normal nightclub, you know. People like... have kinky sex there.”

“It’s also a regular nightclub in other ways, right?”

“Yes. With themed nights. So if you were thinking this weekend... you’re probably expected to dress a certain sexy way.”

“You’re not helping.” And Paige wasn’t getting to her next client quickly enough, although he was thankfully caught up in conversation with someone else. “Look, it’s fine. She merely asked me to ask you if Loren... or whoever... might want to double date this weekend. Or sometime soon.”

Jocie thought about that while staring straight into Paige’s lying eyes. “I think Maya and I are due a night out on the town, only the two of us.” She referred to the third woman in her triad, the younger lady whom she and Loren had pursued individually before the three of them decided to *go for it* together. “She loves the club scene. All right. This Saturday. You two will have to get a trial membership, but since you’re a couple, and both women... eh, you can afford it.”

“Thank you for your belief in our finances.”

Jocie laughed. “I’ve gotta get going. I’ll text Rhea the details since I don’t think I have your number.”

“All right. Sure.” That put Paige on quite the spot, although she didn’t let it show as she waved Jocie out into the parking lot. *I’ve gotta get to Rhea before Jocie does.* This couldn’t sound like Paige’s spontaneous idea. Not because she couldn’t be *spontaneous*, but because Rhea would never believe that the kinky nightclub was anyone’s idea but her own.

So... it had to sound like her idea. That’s all there was to it.

## Chapter 7

“Jesus, Joce.” Rhea emerged from her house staring at the convertible in her driveway. “When did you get *this?*”

Her friend, dressed in linen pants that flared around her clear stilettos and a lacy bralette that left *nothing* to the imagination, gestured to the voluptuous woman in a brown tube dress in the passenger seat of her car. “What my baby wants, she gets.”

“You’re saying this is your car?” Rhea asked Maya, Jocie’s younger girlfriend.

“No way!” The woman unbuckled her seatbelt and leaped up, her barely contained breasts threatening to flop right onto the windshield. “Jocie messes with people. You know that.”

*Sure do.* Like how Rhea knew that Jocie was messing with her when she and Paige brought forward the idea of a double date... to Hellfire, no less. *That’s the last place I expect my wife to want to go, but I won’t say no.* It must have been the influence of Dr. Seville and her pleas of “spontaneity” to keep

the love alive. Yet when Rhea heard how *soon* they were going there, she immediately booked an appointment at the laser clinic and pushed back a meeting with her editor so she could search the local high-end thrift store for something “new and exciting.”

Because how often did this chance present itself?

“Where’s Paige?” Jocie asked, completely overlooking Rhea’s suit pants and pinstripe vest ensemble. “Is she still getting ready?”

“Unfortunately.”

Jocie raised two immaculate eyebrows. What she didn’t want to admit was that she and her old schoolmate Rhea both went to the same laser hair clinic in Santa Monica. “What does that mean? Has she been up there getting ready for the past five hours?”

“Paige’s process may have started right after lunch, yes. She came down for the takeout I ordered for dinner and then went right back up to our room.”

“How thick was the mud mask on her face?”

Rhea demonstrated with her hands on either side of her hips. “Could drive a truck over it.”

When Paige finally emerged from the house ten minutes later, all eyes were on her. Especially Rhea, who hadn’t seen that dress in a long time.

“Holy moly,” she muttered.

“Someone’s excited for the new *Barbie* movie,” Jocie said, louder, her girlfriend putting both pinkies in her mouth and giving Paige an enthusiastic whistle.

Paige brushed some of her curls out of her face and waved to Maya, who returned it with the kind of energy that screamed she had pre-gamed before hitting the club with her girlfriend.

“Thanks, guys.” Paige locked the front door behind her and shuffled toward the convertible in a pair of white stiletto heels. Her hot pink wrap dress with a sprinkling of rhinestones glittered in the setting Santa Monica sun, but once she caught the look on her wife’s face, she said, “I’ve got ballet flats in my bag.”

“You’ll need ‘em.” Rhea couldn’t take her eyes off her wife as Paige tackled the slight incline in the driveway with trepidation. Jocie opened the door while Maya pulled up the seat so Paige could get in. “You look *great*, Paige!”

Blond curls settled in the backseat. Paige pulled a black handkerchief out of her bag and gently tied it around her head, containing the hair she had spent most of the afternoon preparing. While she and Maya engaged in conversation, Jocie approached Rhea and slammed a hand on her shoulder.

“Your wife is a fox, Mendez.”

Rhea blinked away the image of her athletic, tomboyish wife done up in the kind of outfit that turned heads wherever she went. When was the last time Paige wore such a fine dress, let alone with hair like *that*? To a friend’s wedding before the pandemic? That was all Rhea could think as she realized it was

time to leave if they wanted to get to the club before it became so busy on a Saturday night that they turned around and left. *Because we're old.*

Never mind that Hellfire catered to an older, more exclusive clientele. Rhea was convinced she was getting old.

But not Paige. Paige may have been technically a few months older than her wife, but she never got *old*. Only finer. Wilder. More exotic.

Untouchable.

“You had no idea what I was going to wear,” Rhea said as she buckled up in the backseat and Jocie started the car. “Yet we look like we *match*.”

Paige leaned in toward her wife, the motor revving up around them and the car slowly backing out onto their residential street. “It’s a hot date night, right? We should look the part.”

Rhea had no idea what the theme was at the club that night, but she already knew that she and Paige had won the contest.



Nothing appealed to Rhea’s pride more than the number of looks her wife received once they were in the club. Rhea may have slicked back her hair and accented her vest with a luxurious broach, Jocie may have been showing off half her torso, and Maya sporting curves to die for in her tight dress, but... it was Paige who sashayed from one room in the club to

the other, stiletto's clicking to the beat of a Dua Lipa song and fresh curls enticing every eye in the room. She boldly stepped past leering men and curious women as if she had somewhere important to go – somewhere that may or may not include her wife, who was always a couple of steps behind.

Rhea didn't mind. She enjoyed the looks her wife got, because why shouldn't Paige be the center of attention? She was always the center of Rhea's when they were out together. *My wife is amazing, you know.* Hard-working. Kind and sweet. Hot. Not always in that order.

Even when she caught Jocie staring shortly after they were seated on a couch in the main lounge, Rhea didn't care as much as she also wanted to watch Paige's ass shake back and forth on her way to the restroom.

"I get to sleep with that every night, you know," Rhea said to her friends.

Maya grabbed her girlfriend's credit card out of her wallet and went to get them drinks from the bar. Jocie nonchalantly watched her before addressing her friend's comment. "Yes, you lucky bitch. Did you ever think you'd score such a hottie when you were a baby lesbian coming out of her cracking cocoon?"

Rhea laughed. "No! Not in a million years. Dating wasn't easy for me, you know. I often think that if, God forbid, I didn't have Paige anymore, I'd be *fucked*. I can't do apps, dating sites, or joining meetup groups for the sole purpose of finding women to date. I take the win whenever I can." She



didn't mention the tensions underlying her marriage: the dying bedroom, the long hours spent apart, the wildly different careers and family dramas that kept them on phones when the other was actually around... what was the point? Right now, Rhea was content. She was on a different kind of date with her wife, the woman she loved more than any other. And Paige was a *smoke show* in a dress that Rhea was pretty sure covered nothing more than a matching pair of underwear. Because Paige would flirt like that in a sex-pulsing nightclub.

Sure enough, Paige returned from the restroom with a wide roll of her eyes.

"It's barely eight and people are already going at it in the women's room," she said with a dramatic sigh. "All I wanted to do was wash my hands, but the stall next to the sink had someone in it who would *not* stop moaning."

"I know which bathroom I'm using in a few minutes," Jocie quipped. "By the way, where did you get that dress? I know a few female athletes who would die to have it for their next *Look at me, I am feminine* party."

Paige chuckled. "This old thing? I dug it out of my closet. I think I got it right after college." She looked to Rhea. "Do you remember? I've hung onto it for so long that I've forgotten where it came from."

"I have no clue," Rhea said with a grin.

Maya came back with drinks for herself and Jocie. They informed the married couple that a tab was now open, and they should get whatever they wanted while the line was short.

“Allow me.” Rhea’s hand glided against Paige’s thigh as she stood up. “Don’t want to let such good grace go unwelcomed. Do you want a margarita?”

“Rum and Coke with Bacardi.”

Rhea almost tripped over her own feet when turning around to catch that. “A Cuba Libre? Since when do you drink those?”

“For a few years now. Where’ve you been? I’m not really into vodka anymore. Reminds me of college.”

“All right.” The only reason that perturbed Rhea so much was because she *swore* she never saw her wife drink rum. *I’m the one who likes rum.* For years, Rhea tried to get her wife to try different drinks she made and ordered, but Paige always turned up her nose. Their liquor cabinet was half rum, half vodka, but now that Rhea thought about it... they restocked the rum much more often than the vodka. *Here I thought I was drinking way more than I ever did before.* A feat, since Rhea only had about one drink a week.

Only one person was sitting at the bar in the main lounge: a dominatrix clad in her fetish gear, complete with knee-high boots, leather corset, and a Venetian mask that flirted with Rhea as she approached in her laughably vanilla half-suit. The two exchanged polite looks as the bartender took Rhea’s order.

“I can’t tell if you look like a baby around these parts or not,” the woman with a deep voice said. “Also, you kinda look like the woman who is supposed to meet me here for our ‘impromptu’ performance. I don’t suppose you’re Lily?”

Rhea shook her head. “Sorry. I’m here with my wife and some friends.”

The dominatrix brushed her hands over a napkin with a shrug. “It was worth a shot. Fun thing about this gig is half the time I have no idea who the club is setting me up with. I miss the days of having a regular partner.”

Paige’s drink came out first. Rhea wrapped her hand around it, sheltering the glass from whatever might be in the air. “Are you employed by the club?”

“No, honey, I’m a free agent. Pay my taxes myself and everything.” A wink flew in Rhea’s direction while the bartender made her drink. “The club hires me to put on shows once in a while. Sometimes I have someone I can bring, other times I rely on them to set me up with a submissive partner.”

“Doesn’t that take the romance out of it?”

“Sweetheart!” The dominatrix clasped her hands together as if Rhea had said the most precious thing. “It’s not always about *romance*. It’s a show! We’re here to have a good time, but part of my job as a professional performer is to, ah... inspire people. As long as I have decent chemistry with a person, I don’t need to know their real name or what they want to achieve by the time they die. I just need to know their safe word.”

Rhea laughed, another glass appearing before her. “Maybe we’ll catch your show. My wife is expecting me.”

“Is she the one in the pink dress?”

Rhea shot another look in the dominatrix's direction. "She is. Have you seen her?"

The woman jerked her thumb toward the other side of the lounge. "Looks like you're married to a wild one."

Sure enough, Paige had left the couch and was already engaged in a conversation with a couple, the man barely able to take his eyes off Paige's cleavage and the woman stealing touches to the pink fabric and the rhinestones adorning it. "She hasn't even had a drink yet," Rhea said.

That garnered a chuckle. "I'd ask if she's available for a show tonight, but I have a feeling you've got your stamp on that one."

Rhea almost couldn't fathom it. *Paige? In a BDSM show?* She would have laughed if the image didn't titillate her so quickly. *God, I wish.* Rhea didn't particularly share in the fetish, but she loved the idea of Paige participating in anything raunchy or sexually scandalous. Things that she had eschewed since graduating college and claiming Rhea as her one and only. Things that Rhea would love to see again.

*I still can't believe we're here.*

Rhea left the bar behind and approached Paige, who caught her gaze shortly before her wife arrived. The woman in the couple acknowledged Rhea with a slight nod. The man, presumably her husband based on the wedding rings, was still staring at Paige.

"Made new friends already, honey?"

Paige accepted her Bacardi and Coke with a twist of her hand. “This is Irene and her husband Josh. Irene and I had the misfortune of bumping into each other when both of our high heels started giving out on us.” She sipped her drink. “Luckily, Josh was here to save us before we went down in a blaze of embarrassing glory.” She took another sip. “I’ve only been here for ten minutes – I can’t kill all the fun *yet*.”

“You must be Paige’s wife.” Irene extended a hand bedecked in two colorful rings. “We’ve already heard so much about you. I believe my husband has a vest like that.”

Even after so many years on that earth, Rhea still wasn’t sure when someone was offering a backhanded compliment. It didn’t help that she could be self-conscious about her masculine style when out for a nice night on the town. *Or wearing baggy clothes at a concert. Or wearing gym shorts to the pool. Or...* Rhea always liked her style until she was out in public, surrounded by hyper-feminine women and their male counterparts. *Don’t ask me where the no-fucks twenty-something went.* Rhea was convinced she woke up at thirty-two hating everything about herself... no wonder her writing career took off around that time!

“Pleasure.” Josh shook Rhea’s hand next. “Do you two come here often? It’s our first time.”

Rhea was too shocked to answer that question. She knew men would be at the club that night but didn’t think for two seconds she’d have a conversation with one. “Uh...”

Paige coolly answered in her wife's stead. "It's not our first time, but it's been a long while. We're not usually into the scene. Where are you from? Or did you recently move to LA?"

"We're originally from the east coast. New England, thereabouts," Josh continued. "We were in town for a wedding and decided to do a little something for ourselves. Are you locals?"

"Our whole lives," Paige said. "I grew up in Anaheim, she grew up in Malibu... we live in Santa Monica now. I have a place in West Hollywood. We get around."

*Why are you telling them all the details?* Rhea didn't know these people, and neither did Paige, who was already more communicable than she usually was at these parties. *Did someone slip her something before we left home?*

"We'd invite you to join us over in our corner," Rhea curtly said, "but it's sort of a girl's night."

Josh nudged his wife. Irene giggled. "Oh, we understand. Don't worry about us. We've got plans of our own tonight. Have a lovely evening."

Rhea took her wife by the arm and escorted her back to where Jocie and Maya waited. "New friends of yours already?"

Paige clutched her hand to her chest. "Hardly. I just don't want to be a bitch when I'm wearing something that catches attention."

“You *do* look phenomenal. Have I told you that already?”

A slight, smug smile teased Paige’s face. “Maybe. You could always tell me again.”

Rhea squeezed her wife by the waist before they sat back down. “You look as good as you did on our first date.”

That caught Paige by surprise. “I wore shorts and a T-shirt on our first date.”

“You looked fabulous, like now.”

Paige didn’t have a moment to respond before Maya was grilling her about how she did her hair. For Jocie, that was the perfect opportunity to slide over toward her old friend and say, “I thought you two were going to get sucked into that vortex over there. I was gonna have to come over and extract you before you found yourselves swinging with some East Coast couple.”

Rhea’s throat immediately closed up. “Huh?”

“For the Lord’s sake, you didn’t notice that the guy was *thirsting* after Paige? To be fair, the wife was gunning for you. Guess you could’ve gotten it if you and Paige were into that.”

“I don’t... no, I did not pick up on that.”

Jocie rolled her eyes as if Rhea were fresh out of high school and naïve to the adult world. “I’d say *that’s hilarious*, but I guess you don’t spend half your nights out with one of your girlfriends with random dudes hitting on you.”

“It’s been a long time since that’s happened. Anyway, Paige would never go for a guy like that. She’s never even been with a guy.”

“Really? I knew you hadn’t been, but not her.”

“Believe it or not, it’s one of the things we still have in common. A complete and utter lack of interest in men.”

Paige slammed back into Jocie when she attempted to stand up. “I think I might need my flats,” she announced when Jocie steadied her by the arm and grinned. “It’s been a devilishly long time since I last wore shoes like these. Can you guys tell?”

All Jocie – and Rhea – could tell went way beyond the shoes on Paige’s feet. As Jocie politely looked away, Paige’s wife experienced a torrential storm of lust and jealousy as she realized that the woman in the pink dress was not only lacking a bra beneath her dress... but that one of her breasts had fallen out when she took a dive.

She leaned in front of Paige while her wife fixed the wardrobe malfunction. Rhea didn’t care about her friends seeing it as much as she was wary of the strangers in the room – including men, and certain dominatrixes.

At least the night had not been *boring* so far.



## Chapter 8

**O**f all the things Paige expected from her night out on the town, accidentally flashing the club and having another woman's husband hit on her were nowhere near the top of the list. At least not in the first twenty minutes of being in Hellfire.

Yet she took both in stride, even when Josh had leaned in and whispered something quite lewd right in front of his wife, who looked on with great interest until Rhea headed in their direction. Paige was not about to walk off with anyone, let alone someone who used flowery, almost literary language to describe what he would like to do to her with his genitals. Gym Paige would have clocked him right between the legs with her knee, but this was Hellfire, and she had no interest in causing drama over what people usually got up to there.

She didn't tell Rhea. Nor did she share that tidbit with Jocie and Maya, both of whom quickly got tipsy and took to the large dancefloor to show each other what moves they had learned that month. Paige kept to one drink while Rhea braved

a second for the first time in at least a year. *Hope you can still hold your liquor because these are not watered down.* Left to her own devices, Paige perused the main lounge and counted how many lower-level celebrities and corporate board members she recognized. After all, many of them were clients at her West Hollywood gym.

She may not be a regular at Hellfire, but she knew a thing or two about how it worked. For one thing, the *big* names would not be there. Not anywhere within sight, anyway. The VIP area on the second level was where the big-wigs who wanted to be alone got their jollies while the middle class – which may or may not include vetted sex workers – partied in the main lounge or took their rendezvous to the back rooms. Jocie had suggested she could get them a semi-VIP table in the back if they wanted some quiet place to chat, but it came with the caveat that as the night went on... well, shenanigans might happen around them.

*You're talking to someone who turned in her prude card years ago.* As soon as Paige realized she didn't have to engage in sex with men, everything changed. Some of it for the better!

Yet she hoped to get interested in sex with someone else. Specifically, her wife.

*She looks great tonight, doesn't she?* Rhea may not have been as fit as Paige, but she still cut that vest and those pants like she had something to prove. Paige caught more than one person checking out her wife, too, and there was something to the pride that gave a woman in a bright pink dress.

Paige had to be careful, though. She knew it wasn't a good idea to put so much pressure on the night that she got too nervous to perform later that evening. She was her own worst enemy, sometimes. How often did the urge to have sex strike her, and she bungled it by the time she got home or ate the wrong thing for dinner? Used to be she could get in the mood in five minutes and go all night from the spark of inspiration. Now? *Takes three days to get revved up, and it can be ruined in five seconds.*

That was why she wanted to come to a sexually charged space. That was why Paige spent several hours getting ready, including paying such careful attention to her hair. That was why she purposely didn't wear a bra, hoping the dress was tight enough to offer support and simply accepting the fact that people would see her nipples beneath the semi-sheer fabric. Honestly, she didn't mind the stares or the surreptitious compliments filtering her way. She *liked* the attention. At some point, she would have enough, but for now...

She hoped her wife appreciated it as well.

"How much product is in your hair?" she asked her wife, who returned with her second drink.

"How much product is in *your* hair?"

Paige laughed. "You don't want to know."

"Right back at you."

With their friends not likely to return from the dance floor anytime soon, Rhea and Paige walked hand-in-hand around

the club, their interest piqued by the hidden corners, illuminated alcoves, and open stages sporting stripper poles and the kind of straps that made Rhea blush when she realized what they were for. Paige was less scandalized about it, but she realized that her wife had a much less exciting college life than what Paige regularly saw at frat and sorority parties. *Except the people doing that here are probably waaaay safer than a couple of twenty-year-olds drinking from red Solo cups.*

“You know,” Rhea said as they bypassed a couple going at it in one of those illuminated alcoves, “I met someone interesting when I was getting our drinks earlier. A dominatrix was sitting right there waiting for her assigned partner of the night. I guess they’re supposed to do a show later.”

That only slightly surprised Paige. “She didn’t bring one with her? I thought that whole thing was about trust and love or whatever.”

“Apparently, if you’re a pro, you can start spanking and gagging anyone if you know their safe word.”

“I’m assuming it’s a bit more complicated than *that*.” Paige got an eyeful of a confident woman’s naked ass when they turned a corner. “At least I hope so. I can’t imagine doing something like that with a total *stranger*.”

“It’s not your kink, though. So I guess that makes sense.”

“What are my kinks, huh?”

They stopped by a wall, where there was plenty of room for Rhea to lean and for Paige to check on her stilettos hanging by

a strap from her bag. “That’s a great question,” Rhea said. “What gets Paige Powell’s motor running these days?”

“Shouldn’t you know?”

“Guess I don’t.”

Her bluntness took Paige aback. “I... don’t know. I haven’t thought about it in a while.”

She almost expected her wife to be crestfallen by that admittance. *I’m sorry I don’t contemplate these things anymore.* To be fair to Paige, she had no reason to think about her sexual urges or what piqued her arousal in the current decade. She simply... existed. Sometimes she had sex with her wife. Sometimes she took care of her own needs when Rhea wasn’t around, or she didn’t want to deal with the expectations of another person. Gone were the days when Paige hunted Rhea down when the call of the lust claimed her – and gone were the times when she couldn’t stop thinking about one basic bodily function. Namely, sex.

Wasn’t it usual for interest to wane as a woman grew older? *Maybe there is something wrong with me.* That’s how Paige felt when Rhea, the woman she had given her heart to nearly fifteen years ago, looked at her like that. *She still wants me. Nothing’s slowed down for her. It’s me. It’s all me.*

She didn’t want to give into the guilt that clutched her heart when she saw that desperate plea reverberating beneath her wife’s skin. Guilt implied that Paige should actively change something about herself. *I can’t help what’s happened.* Whatever that was.

Aging. Undiagnosed issues. Disinterest in the same person she had been with for nearly half her life.

“I’m sorry.” Paige couldn’t look her wife in the eye when she said that.

“Why in the world are you apologizing for something?”

“I don’t know.”

Rhea stiffened long before a half-naked submissive man and his loud, overbearing mistress brushed up against her on their way to a VIP room. Yet she only had a passing interest in the spectacle. Rhea’s whole attention was centered on Paige, who had shown up braless at a kinky nightclub.

“I didn’t mean to ruin the mood,” Rhea said with that affable demeanor that Paige knew was a front for how she felt. “Do you want to watch the show?”

“You mean the...?”

Rhea shrugged. “It’s something different. Can’t say we’ve ever watched a couple of women spank each other before.”

*Maybe you haven’t.* Now wasn’t the time, though. The last thing Paige wanted to keep thinking about was her college days when she desired to be in the present. *With her. With my wife.* So she took Rhea’s hand, drew her closer before someone else snuck by them, and asked, “How long until it starts?”

Rhea glanced at her watch but blushed hard enough for Paige to know her wife wasn’t checking the time. “A bit.”

Paige squeezed Rhea's hand. "Want to walk around some more? I think Jocie and Maya are preoccupied with sweating up the dance floor. Now I know how she keeps fit." She referred to Jocie, who eschewed all of Paige's offers for a membership discount at her gym. *Yet she's leaner than some of the actresses who walk through my doors.* "Besides, it's been years since we were last here. Maybe they got rid of that tacky leopard print sofa."

"I'll take that bet. That thing probably draws people from around the world."

Paige laughed as they walked away from the VIP entrance. "How much are we betting? Five bucks? A drink?"

Their arms slightly swung with every step. "Who has to do the laundry next?"

They quickly forgot about the tacky couch as they perused the open areas of the club, from the large front room full of stripper poles and the dance floor to the darkened rooms full of tables, loveseats, and sex swings. *Good Lord, I haven't seen one of those in person before.* Paige could barely take her eyes off it as Rhea urged her in the direction of a giant cross occupied by a curvy woman who was already bound and gagged for the public's voyeuristic consumption.

"Is something going to happen?" Paige whispered into her wife's ear. "She's been hanging there for who knows how long."

"I dunno. Do you see anyone else around?"

Paige had half a mind to ask an employee about it, but two servers with empty trays walked by the naked woman on the cross and said nothing. *I guess it's fine?* Paige wasn't turned on by the sight, but she *was* bothered in some other capacity. *Does it bother me that someone would do this to themselves? For some sexual pleasure, I guess?* She didn't get it. Nothing about hanging naked from a BDSM cross, for everyone walking by to see and touch, did a damn thing for Paige. The freakiest she ever got were handcuffs and strap-ons. She thought that was *freaky!*

"Uh..." Rhea bumped into her wife, who was already on her way toward one of the room entrances. "I think we better get outta here. Because her party is about to start."

Sure enough, several people entered the room, some of them openly gawking at the woman on the cross. They all had red bracelets on their wrists, regardless of their suits, dresses, or fetish wear that marked them as disparate parties here for a singular event. *I guess we should have checked the schedule.* Or maybe there was a sign outside that said this was the designated gangbang room of the night.

"We should get out if only to avoid the smell," Paige quipped when they were far away from the crowd. "Can you imagine doing something like that?"

"What? Volunteering to be strung up for total strangers to have their way with you?" Rhea apparently had to think about it. "I mean, maybe?"

"Rhea!"



They stopped in front of an empty loveseat along a hallway wall. When Rhea grabbed her wife by the waist, she miscalculated the force in her arms and sent both her and Paige down to the cushions. One of Paige's breasts almost popped out of her dress as one leg draped over her wife's lap. Rhea leaned in closer, a giggle on her hairless lip. *Did she go to the clinic? For tonight's date?* This must have been important to Rhea, who hated the laser hair removal clinic because of her self-image issues.

"I never did wild stuff like that when I was young," Rhea said as one naked woman chased another down the hall, shrieks of laughter prompting a hostess to politely ask them to please calm down for everyone's safety. "Before you, the most action I ever got was making out with a psych classmate when we were supposed to be studying."

"You were not a virgin when we started dating," Paige bluntly said.

Rhea played with the fringe of her wife's collar, daring her breast to pop out. "No, but I was painfully awkward and... vanilla? Should I say that?"

"Are you saying that you're into some of this stuff?"

Rhea blushed again. "I never really thought about it. Have you?"

Paige was prepared to answer but realized she didn't know what to say. "No. After we met, we fell into our..."

As her words petered off, Rhea filled in the rest. “Our routine.”

“I don’t mean it like that.”

Paige slumped farther into the sofa, one foot sticking out into the hallway. It was enough for a young woman in a sleek black sheath dress to almost fall over Paige’s ankle in what would have surely been the most embarrassing thing to happen in Hellfire all night.

Luckily, the young woman delicately stepped around the foot the moment Paige and Rhea realized what happened. “Sorry!” Paige said. “I lost my balance.”

A slightly sour look shot in their direction. It took Paige a moment to realize that was the woman’s default demeanor and not personal. She saw it all the time in LA.

“No worries,” came a slightly gravelly voice. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

Paige attempted to stand up and get out of the way, but Rhea was sitting on her wife’s skirt, and the best Paige could do was have the front of her bodice ripped open in front of this young stranger.

“Oh, my God.” Paige closed her dress before anyone else had a chance to see what she kept. Rhea slapped a hand over her mouth but said nothing. “What a night.”

The stranger in a black dress must have liked what she saw, for she made no qualms of jutting her hip out in one direction

and gazing down at the couple as if she found her new targets.  
“Are you guys together?”

Paige was too honest for her own good. “Y – yes.”

Rhea slapped her hand upon her wife’s thigh. “Married for over ten years, kid.”

*Who are you calling “kid?” Since when are you a fogey?* Paige shook her head. The young woman didn’t seem to mind, though. “Married? So happens I’m looking for a couple to play with tonight.”

The words smacked Paige so hard that she almost forgot where she was. *From a naked woman on a cross to someone straight out of college asking to “play” with us.* Maybe this was too much upfront. At least for Paige, who had already pushed her party meter for the night.

“You mean like...” Rhea wagged her finger between herself and Paige. “Like... together? At the same time?”

“It *was* on Tier Two of the therapist’s list...” Paige muttered.

“Not sure we’re ready for that yet, sorry.” Rhea cleared her throat. “Don’t get me wrong. You’re cute. We’re very flattered.”

The young woman was so nonchalant about the rejection that Paige now saw her more as a dejected teenager than someone old enough to be in a 21-and-over club. “Whatever. You guys have a nice night.”

Paige waited for the girl in the black dress to be gone before saying anything. “You sure shut that down fast.” A part of her

was surprised. Wasn't Rhea the one wanting to push the boundaries?

"There's no way she was twenty-one," Rhea said. "I'll eat my hat. I don't have a hat."

"You sure? Kids are looking younger than ever."

"Says the woman who had a fake ID in college."

"Yeah, to get beer, not to infiltrate sex clubs. Wouldn't they know if it was fake?"

Rhea shook her head, an admission of confused defeat. "I think that show is about to start. Are you still interested?"

Paige was, but if only to get out of this awkward conversation. *A lot is happening quickly*. Including the feelings overtaking Paige, who was no longer used to processing so many so quickly.

Even in her flats, Paige was shaky on her feet as they walked to the main performance area, which was already filling up with excited attendees. Paige didn't see their friends, but she saw Irene and Josh from across the room. *Don't make eye contact...* Instead, Paige accidentally locked eyes with the young woman in the black dress. It forced Paige to confront whether she thought this girl was as old as she purported to be.

Yet there were so many people in the room with them that Paige lost contact. Her seat was slightly elevated, though, and it allowed her to see the stage as clearly as Rhea, who wrapped her arm around her wife as if Paige were in danger of being carted off over someone else's shoulder.

*I shouldn't think of it like that. It's the woman I love spending affectionate time with me.* Even if they were about to watch two people who had never met each other before engaging in something as heated as BDSM...

Paige wasn't bothered by the prospect until both women took the stage, already dressed down to their underwear and assuming positions that implied they had done this before.

It really should have been the strangest, most uncomfortable thing Paige Powell had ever witnessed. Hell, the whole environment was a trip and a half for a woman who had never before played the voyeur with her wife. *I'm old and worldly enough to know that people consent to this stuff every day.* Didn't Paige and Rhea have friends who were into the "underground" lifestyle? Rhea had even written it into one of her stories, although she didn't go as far as to visit Hellfire for "research." Yet here they were, braless Paige garnering attention for her look as she sat with her wife in the back of the room while one woman bent over a pommel horse and another flogged her ass for the whole club to watch.

*Doesn't that hurt?* Paige winced every time the submissive woman shot forward on the pommel horse, her widened legs wobbling from impact while her mouth courted a wordless scream of acquiescence. *Do people really like this?*

What a rhetorical question.

Paige should have known better than to question that. Because the show had barely run ten minutes before couples broke away from the audience with knowing smiles on their

lips. A pair next to Paige and Rhea continued to whisper in each other's ears, one woman slowly losing more of her clothing as the show continued. Paige took her wife's hand in her lap and didn't notice when Rhea's fingertips brushed against the flirtatious hem of a pink skirt.

Because there was a reason Paige's breath was locked in her chest and she couldn't stop touching her chest every time the flogger cracked against her skin. At first, she assumed it was the shock of the situation. After all, what was she *doing* here? Trying to prove to herself – and the world – that she was still cool, hip, and ready to party with whatever? *I wasn't into drugs as a youth. Instead, I was addicted to girls.* There were two on the stage right now. There was another making eyes with Irene and Josh as if they deserved someone in a black sheath dress. And there was probably the whole contingent from the gangbang quarter who had to drop a woman from a BDSM cross to see *this* for themselves.

The whole club was charged in a way that was both foreign and electrifying to Paige, a woman who plied her trade with some of the most self-absorbed people in LA. For all she knew, one of them was here now, but they would never notice her. Their eyes were locked on the stage, where the submissive with a red ass was brought to the chains hanging from the ceiling and brought the bountiful pleasure of a pair of nipple clamps. The dominatrix engaged the crowd by asking if her “dirty, slutty sub” deserved the overwhelming vibrations of a sex toy while tiny weights were added to the chain hanging from the nipple clamps. The answer was, of course, a

resounding applause in support of truly fucking up the woman on stage.

“If you had to choose between a spanking or having your nipples tortured...” Rhea whispered in her wife’s ear. “Which would you choose?”

Paige immediately slammed her hand over one of her breasts. “Definitely the spanking,” she hissed. “My nipples are only for *tenderly teasing*.”

Yet the submissive on stage loudly moaned every time another tiny weight was added to her chain. When the intensity of the vibrator strapped to her mound was turned up, her legs buckled, feet lifted off the ground as she remained completely suspended from the air. An employee dressed in all black stayed at the back of the stage to ensure the chains from the ceiling remained taut, but all eyes were on the orgasmic bliss shuddering through a total stranger.

“I didn’t say you could come yet, slut,” the dominatrix said. “I swear, they don’t listen these days!”

What was supposed to be a moment of levity was chaos for Paige, who had to face something that never once crossed her mind or struck her heart in her nearly twenty years of having sex – some years more often than others.

This was *actually* hot. Not only because an attractive naked woman was having her sexual shit kicked on stage, or that fifty people were watching, but because *something* in the woman’s heady complexion triggered an inspired thought in Paige’s mind.

It was bliss, wasn't it? A transcended physical pleasure that highlighted everything missing in Paige's sex life... with or without Rhea.

"You all right?" her wife asked.

Paige had not realized that her whole body was stiff against Rhea's body. "Here," she whispered back, bringing her wife's hand to the crevice between her thighs. "All the cool kids are doing it."

"You're kidding..."

Paige was dead serious. Something tingled inside of her, and it wasn't the simple arousal that chased her throughout her adult life. It was the unknown. It was *adventure*. Something as sweet as the way two kinky strangers shared a kiss on stage before the spanking recommenced made Paige yearn for some simple pleasures of her own. Where else could she go with her wife where getting felt up in front of everyone else was completely allowed? Or even encouraged?

One thing Paige could say on her deathbed was that she was not an exhibitionist. Nor was she particularly a voyeur who wanted to spend every weekend watching shows like these. She didn't need to chase the "next hot thing" or go to therapy for how sexually desensitized she had become over the years. Yet she did enjoy the look on Rhea's face when she realized that her hand was on her wife's underwear. Paige encouraged her to keep going, yet Rhea was hesitant. At the end of the day, she had less experience with these things.



No, not sex. *I made sure of that early on in our relationship.* No wonder Rhea felt so put out now. She had come to see Paige as a source of sexual revelry and carnal bonding. What had Paige done? Focused on work. The home. Finances. Everything but what made them spark for the very first time, all the way back on the Santa Monica Pier.

The submissive cried for mercy when the vibrator was taken to its maximum level. The chains jangled from the ceiling. A weight fell off the chains hanging from the nipple clamps. Every eye in the audience was on her, but it was the dominatrix who had the pleasure of wrapping her arm around the shaking submissive and whispering some sweet nothing into her ear.

Whatever it was took the stranger to a higher plane of her mortal existence. Paige looked on, desperate to understand this new-found feeling inside of her.

But first, she wanted her wife's finger underneath her underwear.

## Chapter 9

Rhea didn't question what about the show had completely riled up her wife, who was one of the first out of her seat when the show was over. Hell, Rhea could barely catch up with her as they raced out of the showroom and Paige caught the attention of an employee. All Rhea heard by the time she made it to them was that all the private rooms were currently taken, and it was a half hour on the waitlist before anything might open.

Although, there were plenty of *open* rooms in the back where they could take their marital lust.

*Is this seriously happening?* Paige grabbed her wife by the edge of her vest and marched her into those backrooms, where Rhea immediately averted her eyes from the other couples going at it like rabbits, let alone the single voyeurs taking it all in. *You've gotta be kidding!* They had never even made out in public before, let alone *had sex*. Wasn't this going from zero to sixty in renewing some of the spark in their marriage?

Then again... did Rhea give a fuck about that? Her wife was here. She was needy. She was throwing caution to the wind and kissing Rhea like they hadn't kissed in five years.

They found the coziest corner in an alcove by the busy room. The green walls were dark enough to hide Rhea, but Paige's pink dress stuck out so much that her wife slammed her into the farthest corner and shielded her from every curious eye. *This is mine, everyone.* The dark blond curls, the slender legs, and the braless breasts were marked the property of Rhea Mendez-Kennewick, the biggest butch in the club.

Or so she psyched herself up to be when she realized a man could walk into the room at any moment. *I'm fine with that. Totally cool.* Especially if it meant they realized that they didn't stand a chance against a woman who knew how to fuck her wife.

Even so, Rhea had to overcome the performance anxiety currently crushing her. At most, she thought they might fool around before packing it in and going home. If Paige was horny enough to have sex in the privacy of their bedroom? *Sweet!* Rhea was game!

This, though? Rhea had to live in the moment. She sucked in her courage – and she sucked the tender throat in front of her, determined to give her wife everything she wanted.

And it was what Rhea wanted as well. Because as soon as she unwrapped the pink dress and flung herself at her wife's naked breasts, it was like being a teenager all over again.

Paige was beautiful. She had been lovely when Rhea first saw her on their undergrad campus, and she was gorgeous on their first date at the Santa Monica Pier. She had been a goddess sent to Earth on their wedding day, and an unfathomably stunning woman at home, whether in her work leggings or a pink dress that caught the attention of everyone around her. Her femininity was never questioned, unlike Rhea, who never knew how she truly felt about it. People gazed upon Paige Powell and saw a divine woman with a body straight from mythos and business acumen from legend. She could have easily made a living as a model or, Rhea forbid, a social media influencer who did her makeup perfectly while shilling diet pills and earbuds. But she didn't. Paige was her own woman. She built her business from the ground up and knew how to pivot when the whole world shut down. Things may have stagnated in the bedroom, but only because Paige was so busy being a badass.

She was definitely a badass *now* as she pulled Rhea forward and unzipped her pants.

There were times when a woman did not question her wife's lustful inhibitions. Never mind how critically out of character it seemed after fifteen years together – or how there had been a particular inciting incident right before this moment in the corner of a sex club. *We'll come here every week if that's what it takes!* Rhea quickly forgot that anyone could stumble upon them and watch at any moment. Hell, she forgot that a song played on the speaker above her head. All Rhea knew was that

her wife's body was open and bare, and she started to touch Rhea where she was most likely to completely disintegrate.

*Implode.* That's what happened to Rhea the moment Paige pushed her hand into her wife's pants. After that, the only things Rhea acknowledged besides her sudden burst of pleasure were the breasts in her face and the whimsical cry of a woman who hadn't been so sexual in *years*.

"Destroy me," Paige growled into Rhea's ear only a moment later. "Fuck me like you've been aching to all year."

Certain words held the keys to Rhea's carefully kept hysteria. The locks came undone with that voice – after that, Rhea was an animal.

She knew she was starved for carnal harmony in her marriage, but what made Rhea even wilder was knowing that her wife *wanted* this. Paige wasn't a mere pillow princess going through the motions to keep the spouse happy: she *needed* Rhea's fingers inside of her, daring to dive as deep as they could go while meeting the heady downward thrusts of a woman pushed up against the wall. Rhea had been inside her wife that year, but the experience was far from *this*. *It feels like I'm fucking the crazy chick at the party.* Until that moment, Rhea hadn't realized how badly she wanted that experience.

Because Rhea was happy to go either way. She loved getting on top of her wife, and she liked it when Paige took control, too.

Paige had never been such a perfect power bottom.

Rhea understood her assignment. *Destroy her.* Tear apart the remnants of Paige Powell that refused to wake up and rejoin a sexual society. Rebuild what was left behind. Create the crazed, feminine being vainly attempting to finger Rhea while receiving the best sex of her decade right here in public against a darkened club wall. When Rhea thought about it for too long, she almost snapped out of her haze. Why would she want that? Why would she want anything but Paige's pleasure?

“Oh, God!” Neck arched and scalp pressing against the wall, Paige completely collapsed around Rhea's hand, her breasts sweaty and her nipples precariously peaked as she offered herself up to whatever divine oversaw women's sexual pleasure. Rhea drank it in. It was a sight she so rarely saw, and she never wanted to forget it.

Like she never wanted to forget the kiss that slammed into her only a moment later, Paige offering to reciprocate with a hand down Rhea's pants.

Never before had Rhea given in so quickly. Because it only took about a minute before her face sank into Paige's shoulder, the fabric of the pink dress cradling her moan.

Paige had nothing to hide now. Even when Rhea fell to the side, leaning against the dark green wall with her zipper still down, her wife remained completely on display as if she wore a robe at home instead of a dress to the club. More than one surreptitious glance made it her way, and she brushed them off like gnats on her meal. *How did I get so lucky with a piece of*

*ass like this?* Maybe that was crass, but Rhea *felt* crass. She was ready to destroy Paige all over again.

Then one person openly stared at Paige, meeting a guarded gaze that only a woman as self-assured and beautiful as Rhea's wife could formulate on the spot.

Paige said nothing as the girl in the black sheath dress approached. Although Paige was the naked one, Rhea received equal attention from the young lady with curls as dark as her dress.

“Can I help you?” Paige curtly asked, still disinterested in covering up.

The young woman put her hands on her hips. “It's your last chance to take me home,” she said to both Paige and Rhea, one of them more surprised than the other. “Or take me here. It's couple's choice.”

Paige laughed, her heated cheeks perfectly matching her own dress. The two couldn't have been more unlike – for while this girl boldly approached the married couple after they were finished fooling around, something about her screamed that she lacked the proper confidence to handle this situation. Rhea had seen it before, after all. *There's no way she's older than twenty.* She wouldn't ask to see the fake ID, though. Nor would she report the young woman to the club. Technically, the age restriction was for the easy access to alcohol, not the sex. Yet one thing was true for both Paige and Rhea, two women *way* old enough to be here.

“You’re a bit young for us.” Paige finally closed her wrap dress and loosely tied it on her hip. “Don’t worry. It’s not because you’re not cute.”

Rhea was still in shock. *Who is this woman?* Definitely not her wife. Paige? Not only performing like this in public but talking so directly to a young woman who was interested in them *like that?*

“Sorry.” That was all Rhea thought to say. “What’s your name?” Great. Because *that* wasn’t awkward. If Paige divorced her for this moment, Rhea wouldn’t blame her.

The woman backed away, her disinterested smile not fooling anyone. “Helena,” she said. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Paige waited until she was gone before speaking to her wife. “How about that? She’s a kid in a candy store here.”

“Does she have the nickels to make a purchase?”

“Write that into one of your stories.”

“You know I don’t write stories like...” Rhea stifled an unsexy guffaw. “This.”

“Maybe you should. Start up an erotica name, like R. Mendez or, you know...”

Rhea arched her eyebrow, waiting.

“*Rhiannon Powell.*”

Although Rhea brushed her off for that, the thought didn’t leave her mind for the rest of the night. In between making out with her wife for a few more minutes and heading home to bed



– where Paige continued to be flirty, seductive, and cheerful until the drinks caught up to her and she fell asleep – Rhea toyed with the idea of taking her hobby writing in a new direction.

*Rhiannon Powell, Erotica Author.* Maybe there was something to that.

## Chapter 10

**D**r. Seville almost choked to hear that Paige and Rhea had peeked ahead on the homework. But, she admitted, it was on her for sending them home with the whole packet.

“You did it on purpose,” Paige accused the couple’s therapist, albeit not with an aggressive tone. “You were testing us. That’s what I figured.”

A sly smile may have given away Dr. Seville’s true motives, but she still said, “To be fair, very few couples look that far ahead, let alone jump right to trying one of those things.”

Rhea held up a finger to speak. “I don’t think ‘sex club’ was on Tier Three. That sounds like a Tier Two thing.”

Ultimately, it didn’t matter what tier it was on. The conversation was centered on the recent breakthrough in the relationship, particularly where they were more concerned – the bedroom. In the days since going to Hellfire, things remained tepid on the romantic front, but Rhea was patient. She had seen a side of her wife she never knew existed. It had

come so hot and fast that Rhea was grateful for some downtime with no sexual expectations afterward. *I'm still trying to process the woman I witnessed.* Let alone the woman she fucked...

Because, the more she thought about it, that had not been classic *lovemaking*. Nor did the word “sex” aptly fit what they had done in front of a tiny audience without a care in the world. *That was stone-cold fucking.* Rhea always blushed to think of it. So rarely had she experienced something like that in her life. Her experiences in love before Paige were not as exciting as her wife’s. *I'm not really like that. I think?* Paige hadn’t brought it up since that night, but Rhea was observant – weren’t all writers supposed to be? Paige had openly browsed a website about BDSM right in front of her wife. She was caught rooting through the sex toy drawer under the guise of, *“We should get rid of some of this stuff we’re never using again,”* yet not with the brutal indication that they weren’t having *any* sex again. *She’s up to something. I don’t know what, but...*

Rhea would find out in due time, she supposed.

“How are you feeling after your big night out last week?”

It took Rhea a moment to realize that Dr. Seville was asking *her*, specifically. Rhea was forced to look up from her plain nails and pretend to think about the event academically: an impossible feat, when her wife was right there. *Back in a T-shirt and yoga pants.* Paige looked great in anything, but it was no braless wrap dress. Because, no, Rhea couldn’t get that

image out of her head. When she wasn't lovingly reliving every second, she was analyzing what had changed in her wife – and why Paige was so thirsty to ride that night to completion. *The woman I married would not stand there naked and have a conversation with someone young enough to be her daughter... let alone right after I... you know...* Perhaps not, but the Paige from college? The one who existed and matured before going out with Rhea?

Was this the resurgence of the biggest slut on campus?

“It took me a bit by surprise,” she answered truthfully. “I wasn't expecting it.”

“Are you surprised as well, Paige?”

Rhea's wife fussed with her watch before answering. “I went along with the flow. If there's anything I've learned about myself, it's that if I'm suddenly in the mood, I should try to embrace it.”

“You mean in the mood for sex?”

Rhea still wasn't used to how bluntly the therapist spoke, but Paige was unfazed. “Yes.”

A sudden emergency call took Dr. Seville away from the session for a minute. As soon as she stepped out of the room, phone to her head, Rhea leaned in toward Paige and said, “Do we have to tell her all the details? We barely know her.”

“We're paying good money to help her address what's on our minds, right? She has to know what's going on.”

“Okay, but like, you didn’t have to detail that we watched that show first.”

“Why not?”

Rhea was so caught off guard that she shrugged in indifference.

“Are you embarrassed by it?”

“By what?”

“The very kinky show we watched and got turned on by.”

*It was mostly you who got turned on by it...* The only saving grace was that their friends had no idea what had happened in the back rooms. Well, maybe they knew since Jocie was *perceptive*, but they never said a thing on the way home. *I love my wife, but hot damn.* The more Rhea thought about it, the more she wondered if she could hit up the club even once a month to get some with her wife. It sounded exhausting.

When Dr. Seville returned, she was keen on talking about Tier One of her chart. The rest of the session was spent talking about what was most feasible for the busy couple attempting to seduce one another all over again.

Paige’s nose was buried in Dr. Seville’s literature on the ride home. Rhea simply stared ahead at the road, hoping a clear mind would later open it to new possibilities.

She *hoped*.

# Part 2

## **Rekindling the Flame**







## Chapter 11

Paige wasn't used to making it all the way out to Hollywood. When a woman worked in WeHo, she didn't *need* to go to Hollywood.

Unless it was for Pride. Something she still associated with *West* Hollywood – but if there was one thing she was used to now with her age, it was that things changed. Constantly.

Hilariously enough, Rhea complained about it more than anyone else.

“This crowd is unmanageable.” They stood near the entrance of the festival, Rhea's hand clasped on Paige's as they faced down the rainbow-clad surge of people making their way into the festival. “Your phone is charged, right?”

Paige sighed. “Yes.”

“Good. Because I might die in here, and I need you to know that if I don't respond to your text, it's because I'm dead.”

“Good Lord. Since when are you a baby about crowds?”

“*Baby?*” A large man in bondage-wear bumped into Rhea, but she was so transfixed on Paige that she said nothing about it. “More like I already feel my soul sucked out of my body because...” She did a double take on the pair of women coming up to them. “Oh, hey guys.”

Paige had never been so happy to see Roxy and Jeanette, the friends they had agreed to tackle Pride together with. After everyone made the expected comments about the weather and the crowd, they proceeded to the entrance, where Paige was grateful to have procured tickets in advance. Because the people continued to push against them until they were well into the festival grounds, surrounded by entertainment, food, and vendors who hocked their wares until their throats were sore.

*We weren't even going to come this year.* They hadn't been to any kind of Pride festival since 2017. Even if the pandemic hadn't happened, they would still have skipped those years out of... what was it? Could Paige even say? *Disenchantment. Isn't that what it is?* Between the corporatization of something that had once been dear to Paige and simply feeling too old for what she often saw, Pride had lost all appeal.

But Rhea and Paige had agreed – along with their therapist – to get out as a couple more. That included events that celebrated their shared sexuality. With Pride right around the corner from that decision, the rest was obvious.

*I guess it's not so bad.* Paige would have rather done something else, but nothing on her list of short-term ideas had

anything to do with her specific *sexuality*. Oh, WeHo and the surrounding area was a haven for “they gays,” but Pride was a different beast. It wasn’t simply being around people like her. It was shoving it in other people’s faces.

That appealed to her right now. Maybe not so much for Rhea, who kept close to Roxy when Paige inevitably pulled away to investigate the marketing materials of a “queer-owned gym” in West Hollywood. *I’ve gotta know if they’re competition, okay?* Luckily for Paige, the gym was for locals more than “Hollywood.” Her clientele was secured... for now.

She wasn’t surprised when she lost the others. With her phone fully charged, Paige wasn’t worried about being left behind. Besides, it was *her* car in the parking garage. Rhea didn’t have a key, so she wasn’t going anywhere without Paige. *Oh, who am I kidding? I’ll have to hunt her down later.* When Rhea got like this, she was liable to hunker down somewhere and wait for the tide to turn. She wasn’t necessarily afraid of large crowds, but she could get overwhelmed when a hundred people seemingly spoke to her at once. This was a woman who told her literary agent, *“I’ll do the signing, but I want an orderly line of people. Not some big group coming at me like a horde of famished zombies.”*

Not that Paige minded. There was something to navigating a crowd of happy people on one’s own. She might not be able to take her time picking out which booths she wanted to peruse, but once she was there, nobody urged her to leave because they were *bored*. Then again, Paige was surprised she didn’t catch up to her wife at a bookshop occupying a corner booth.

The sellers were distracted by a group of people at the other table, giving Paige ample opportunity to spin the racks and dig through the magazines, both vintage and new. She found a copy of *TransAmerica* magazine signed by Laverne Cox that was enticing but was quickly distracted by other books arranged neatly on a shelf.

There were some of the usual suspects about exploring one's sexuality, from baby's-first-gay-kiss to dating in an app-infused world full of people who don't respect boundaries. But that wasn't what Paige cared about – she was old hat at all of that. Instead, she pulled out a photobook titled, "*Sapphic Submission.*"

She brazenly opened that in public, where anyone could see her. Yet after a few weeks ago? *I'm not as reserved as I thought I was now.* She thought nothing of opening right to a spread of highly erotic art depicting two women in a very kinky pose, complete with the same kind of nipple clamps Paige had seen in Hellfire. For all she knew, it was the same professional.

She then turned to the front, which was more written editorial than photographic.

*"I never truly embraced the queer girl within me,"* wrote one of the book's models, *"until I gave myself over to a woman. A femme. I never realized such a thing existed."*

She went on to say that engaging in BDSM and kinky play rejuvenated her love for herself, for it allowed her to feel pleasure while getting to know the "real girl" within her – one

unbridled by societal expectations, both as a woman and as a lesbian.

*“We’re taught from a young age that men are in charge. If you realize you’re gay, that creates a conundrum for everyone, even the most well-meaning people. ‘Who is the man?’ I’ve been asked by both friends and family as if either of us wants to be. When I’m with women like my Mistress, I’m whisked away to a world where none of the gender bullshit exists. It’s me and her. I can completely give myself over, hungry body and tattered soul, to her. We do not doubt each other’s womanhood while respecting the sweet roles we play in the bedroom. It’s the most freeing thing I’ve ever experienced. I wish more women like me could feel this like I do.”*

The column referenced a specific photograph on the next page. When Paige turned to it, she was greeted by a silhouette of the writer succumbing to the embrace of a woman who was smaller and more delicate than her. The writer, with her large, athletic frame, was no doubt a womanly idealization of herself as she submitted to the hyper-feminine shadow wielding a paddle. The caption read, *“Lady A Shares a Sweet Moment with Her Submissive Partner, Dolly.”*

Paige’s imagination ran with the possibilities.

She did not shy away from her recent thoughts. They teased her every time she had a moment to herself, and why wouldn’t they? Paige’s mind had been opened to the endless possibilities of fetish and kink. She didn’t know how deeply

she wanted to take it, let alone with Rhea, but she knew her interest was more than piqued – it yearned to know more.

BDSM was not a new concept to her. She lived in LA, after all. What beguiled Paige, however, was the realization that it could apply to *her*. She could be like those professionals on the stage in Hellfire. She could be like this woman in this photoshoot, celebrating her womanhood with someone who understood her on such a deep, personal level. Someone who didn't see her for the possible gender role she inhabited.

“Find anything interesting?”

Paige had seen Jeanette come up in the corner of her eye but was so engrossed in the book that she did not yet wish to pry her attention away. Now? She had no choice.

“You might know something about this,” she said.

Jeanette chuckled upon seeing the title. “There's one I haven't heard of before. You know, I heard that you two went to Hellfire a few weeks ago. With Jocie. I was kinda surprised. You guys don't usually go for that.”

“Go for what?”

Jeanette picked up the same issue of *TransAmerica* before putting it down again. “The super spicy stuff.”

“You mean public sex and kink. Fetish stuff.”

“Ha! Sure. Hellfire isn't like some other clubs in the area where you have to go looking for the really fun stuff. It's right in your face as soon as you leave the main lounge. Ask me

how many times Roxy and I have stumbled on the *wrong* kind of party when looking to chill.”

Paige couldn't help it: she imagined Jeanette and her wife stumbling upon a scene of another couple's own making. *Mine and Rhea's*. Right now, though, it was a clever secret the pair kept to themselves.

“You guys do this stuff, right?”

This time, Jeanette was not surprised when Paige brought it up. “You know we do. It's not a secret if you know us long enough. Why? Aw, you and Rhea are dabbling, aren't you? Wait. Have you guys been freaks like us this whole time?”

She asked it so genuinely that Paige couldn't help but laugh. She closed the book and shelved it before anyone else chanced upon her reading it. “You might say I'm interested in dabbling. You know, we've been seeing that therapist you recommended. Quite the interesting lady, with uh... interesting methods.”

“Did Dr. Seville suggest you guys do kinky stuff? She usually saves that for later. It's why we were upfront about it with her. Wanted her to know what she was in for with *us*.”

“As I said, I want to dabble.”

“Does Rhea?”

Paige was temporarily distracted by a coordinator with a megaphone who reminded everyone to grab their last-minute tickets to see Meghan Thee Stallion later that evening. Paige knew that Jeanette and Roxy had tickets, but Rhea knew she'd

rather have dinner somewhere quiet than face a concert on top of this crowd.

“I think she’s into it. I mean, she’s seen what it’s done to me. Rhea is into pretty much anything I am.”

“Ah, gotta be careful with that,” Jeanette sagely said. “I’ve met women like Rhea in the kink scene. Introverted, curious but confused, and prone to getting in *way* over their heads while their partner runs ahead of them. Make sure it’s something you both want to do before diving in. Also... do you know which role appeals to you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Paige almost said with a scoff. “I’m a total bottom in my marriage. Not many people guess this about Rhea, but she’s like a shark in the sack. Once she smells blood in the water...” Paige made herself laugh. “I could make a period joke with that.”

Instead, Jeanette was the one laughing loudly enough to get strangers’ attention. She and Paige moved out into the main walkway so other browsers could peruse the shelves.

“I’m sure lots of people *assume* that about Rhea because she’s so androgynous, genderqueer, whatever...” Jeanette shrugged, the body glitter on her bare shoulders shimmering in the sunlight. “But I’m kinda surprised. She’s the one who comes off as the bottom to me.”

Paige had not expected that. “Really? Interesting. I’ll be sure to pass that along to her.”



“You will *not*. Because then she’ll say something to Roxy, who will say something to me, and then I’ll have to come tell you because *reasons*. That’s how this works. Everything’s a circle of self-perpetuating gossip. Now, where are our wives?”

It was almost embarrassing how long it took Paige and Jeanette to find their other halves. Both Rhea and Roxy - also known as Rhiannon and Roxanne to those who wanted to piss them off – were at a booth spinning prize wheels and signing up for the mailing list of a local West Hollywood synagogue. *Today is the day I find out that Roxy is Jewish*. It was also the day she discovered Rhea couldn’t spin the wheel without getting the tooth stuck with every flick of her wrist. The woman behind the booth was so patient with Paige’s wife that it was a miracle anyone else got a turn that afternoon.

“You know what I want?” Paige asked when she looped her arm around her wife’s and they continued down the walkway. “Temporary tattoos. Maybe some fairy hair. You game?”

All four of them were down. Paige already had the perfect rainbow in mind.



Rhea and Paige sorted through their finds at their neighborhood taqueria later that evening, where margaritas enjoyed happy hour status and they didn’t have to pay for parking. Not if they were *locals*, anyway.

“Where did you get this?” Paige popped a pineapple lollipop out of her mouth when she unearthed a string of rainbow beads

from the reusable shopping bag they took with them to Pride. “I didn’t know you were going to Gay Mardi Gras after this.”

“Some kid at a booth gave that to me,” Rhea said over her margarita. “I don’t remember where. After seeing you get that rainbow tramp stamp, I’ve forgotten everything but your ass crack.”

Paige shoved the sucker back into her mouth and pretended to make a sour face. “You love my tramp stamp. It shows you what’s at the end of my rainbow.”

“Yeah. Your butthole.”

That was the wrong moment for someone to arrive with their order.

Paige soon forgot it, though, as she rummaged for more snacks in the bag and flipped through fliers, postcards, and business cards from half of LA’s queer-owned businesses. For the second time that day, she asked her wife why her publisher didn’t have the local gay writers sitting at a booth signing autographs and passing out books. For the second time that day, Rhea looked like she wanted to die on the spot.

“I already hate doing bookstore and coffee shop signing. My God, could you imagine me at *Pride*? All those people bothering me... no way.”

Paige dunked her fish taco into salsa, much to her wife’s chagrin. *I’ll do it twice for you, honey.* Paige didn’t care how other people ate their meals. When she had tacos of any kind? They went into whatever salsa she could get her hands on. *No,*

*we do not lovingly spread the salsa inside the contents and fold up the taco.* She wanted it messy. That was half the fun of eating tacos.

*Heh. There's another joke there.*

They had most of the taqueria to themselves that evening, the place cool and inviting while classic Mariachi songs played over the speakers. Rhea checked her phone while Paige continued to pull out more fliers from the bag, including from the local queer clubs and groups she would have never thought of joining before.

“I can’t believe how much of that stuff you grabbed,” Rhea said without looking up from her screen. “Sociopath behavior, honestly.”

Paige ignored the jab at her expense. “I want to see what’s out there. Guess I’m feeling adventurous this summer.”

“Kinda like you felt adventurous in that club?”

A pamphlet from the local poly group went back into the bag while Paige read through *Heart Disease and You*. “Guess so. You know...” She remembered seeing something relevant in the bag and searched for it now. “I found this while we were separated because you had to pee.”

“Have I told you yet how fucking awful it is to piss in a Honey Bucket in LA? In *June*?”

Another thing for Paige to ignore. “What do you think?” She slid a flier across the table.

Rhea leveled her gaze on her wife while snatching the flier into her hand. “What now?” she muttered, before nearly exclaiming, “*What?*”

“Go on. Read it over. I had a great conversation with a furry in a whole-ass fursuit. He knew a lot about this stuff.”

She half-expected Rhea to make a quip about fursuits in the summer sun, but Rhea kept that to herself as she read the flier with widened eyes. “You’re serious about this stuff, huh?”

“I think we might be on to something. I can’t stop thinking about that night. Can you?”

Rhea turned the flier over, even though there was no one around to accidentally see it. Certainly nobody hovering over their table now that they were done with their dinner. “We’ve talked about this already. I’m not sure the whole shebang is right for us.”

Indeed, they had addressed continuing to explore kinky situations, but not enough to sate Paige’s thirst for knowledge. Rhea was cagey – she liked talking about their night at the club, but only as much as it turned Paige on enough to make out or get frisky beneath the sheets. *Not that much of that has been going on.* Much to Rhea’s dismay, Paige was sure. *Did she think the horny switch had been flipped like that?* Probably. Rhea was capable of deep and complex thoughts about other people, but when it came to her wife, the blinders came out.

So, when Paige found a booth advertising “First Time Kink Kits, 50% Off With Voucher,” she was inclined to go for it.

What was the worst that could happen? *We find out that it's not for us? Please.* It had to be better than being interested in anything else *but* sex.

Because Paige had been reminded of the carnal delights that could lead her to a place far away from her real life. She was interested... but this only worked if her wife was on board.

“I think you’d make a great Domme,” she whispered across the table. “You’re already a hot top, hon.”

Rhea wasn’t scandalized, but the fierce fire behind her eyes told Paige to cool it. “I don’t want to...” she looked around. “Make it a lifestyle. I know that’s not me. Maybe we could do some restraints and spanking and stuff in *private*, but I’m not into putting it all on display in the club like that. Not if it’s planned. Exhibitionism is not for me.”

“Sure. I can roll with that.”

Rhea shook her head. “Are you really the woman I married? I’ve never seen this side of you before.”

Paige couldn’t help but grin. “You shoulda seen me when I was an undergrad in college.”

Because that bitch? She was back.

## Chapter 12

The Malibu surf was as picturesque as ever. Rhea rarely wished she had a convertible, but whenever she drove north on the Pacific Coast Highway, she imagined taking the top of her car down and letting the fresh sea air blow through her hair.

*I never realized how much I needed things like this until I moved to Santa Monica.* The two cities were neighbors first, different worlds second. But Rhea always counted the differences when she traveled from one to the other. For as much as Santa Monica was home now, she was always struck by the childhood nostalgia that hit when she drove to her dad's.

People were more relaxed in Malibu. Surf culture had a grip on her time in public school like it did on the world when she was growing up in the '90s. *Never forget Malibu Barbie.* Or TV shows like *Hannah Montana* and *Private Practice*, both of which Rhea hated to admit she had watched while they were on the air. *In my defense, Hannah Montana was a good kid's*

*show*. She didn't only like it because one of her writing buddies had gone on to be a scriptwriter for it.

Even rock bands like Hole had a song about Malibu. Books were set there. Plays, movies, video games... everyone loved Malibu, and Rhea had no idea how good she had it growing up.

The waves looked warm and inviting. Surfers lined up on the beach to take another plunge. Open Jeeps and top-down convertibles sped by Rhea as she contemplated grabbing ice cream from the same drive-thru she used to work at in the summers. It was still there, after all. Last time she drove through, it was another teenager making a few bucks in the window.

Everything was so simple, sometimes. Like the Californian beaches sometimes faced south, not west.

Which was a detail her dad always made fun of her for when she mentioned how weird it was to see the sunset over the ocean in Santa Monica.

“That’s what you get for leaving home,” he said with a chortle the moment Rhea put down the prescription medication she picked up for him at the pharmacy down the street. “I’ve got a window that faces south right here. Don’t gotta worry about it destroying my retinas.”

“What makes you think about that?”

Danny was inclined to wave away his heart medicine, but when his daughter gave him another look, he reluctantly

grabbed the cup of water. “I’ve been to that fancy house of yours. Your main window faces west. Feels like a furnace in there even with the AC on.”

Rhea also drank some water as she tidied up the kitchen. In the two days since the cleaner had last been there, Danny had already made a mess on the dining table and spilled what looked like orange juice on the kitchen linoleum. Rhea said nothing as she grabbed some paper towels and unearthed the antibacterial cleaner from beneath the sink. Her father watched her, silent.

It wasn’t that Danny thought cleaning was “women’s work” or that he was too lazy to do it for himself. What must have killed him watching his only child get on her knees and scrub old orange juice off the floor was the thought that he *couldn’t* do it. Not when he was still stuck in a wheelchair, only getting up long enough to use the bathroom or move himself to the couch or his bed. Even in the shower, Rhea had installed a bench so Danny didn’t have to exert himself using the detachable showerhead. All of this painted a picture of a very sick man recovering from a pivotal moment in his medical history – something he was too proud to say messed with him.

Even before his wife’s death, Danny had been an independent man. He approached being a widower with a child as a challenge, taking on most of the household responsibilities until Rhea became more adept at helping him when asked. *He always worried about me thinking I had to do things because I was a girl, or because he was the one who paid for everything.* Even so, when the opportunity to go to



boarding school on a scholarship came, she worried about her father being left alone for the first time since meeting his wife.

Now it felt so... normal. To leave him alone. It seemed like that was what he wanted.

“You don’t have to do that,” he muttered when Rhea was done. “I can get it.”

Rhea didn’t argue with him. There was no point. Besides, she and Paige did what they could when the nurse wasn’t around. Which was a more frequent occurrence since the insurance was running out.

“I read that book you sent me.” Danny tilted his wheelchair toward his daughter when she sat on the couch.

“You mean the one *I* wrote?”

“Yeah, you sent it to me. ‘Member?”

Rhea nodded. “That was a few months ago.”

“Yeah, well, didn’t have much time for reading when I was working. Now I’ve... don’t got much to do besides watch TV. Did you know they changed the host of *Jeopardy*?”

“Well, yeah. Alex Trebek died.”

“He did? Damn. I’m so out of the loop. Did I ever tell you your mom and I went to a taping of the show for our anniversary? We thought that was a hot date night.” He snorted. “Culver City! Imagine taking your wife there. Though, you ask me, she had a crush on that host.”

“Yeah, I know, Dad. That was right before Mom got sick. I was already in middle school.” Her mother had talked up going to the game show taping for *weeks* to anyone who would listen. Even though she was an LA native, Rhea’s mother had rarely done anything celebrity adjacent. She had only been to Disneyland once when Rhea was a kid, and the only celebrity sighting she had out in the wild was when she stood in line behind Ricardo Montalban at Ralphps. *She never stopped talking about that, either.*

That was one thing Rhea missed about her mother. In a sea of self-absorbed wannabes and social climbers, she lived in a home full of no-nonsense working-class finesse.

*Now my dad is sick.* The man had never looked as old as he did now, with lines on his face and freshly minted jowls Rhea had sworn she’d never seen before. *When did he get those? Between the heart attack and now?*

“So?” she asked her father a moment later. “What did you think of the book?”

Danny looked at her as if he had no idea what she was talking about. “It was fine.”

“Just fine, huh?”

He tossed a hand up to his head. “What do you want from me? I can’t say I didn’t like it, because you wrote it. Can’t say I loved it, because you know I don’t really read things that aren’t Tom Clancy or James Patterson. I don’t go for the sappy stuff. That was your mom’s thing.”

“I’d hardly call that book *sappy*, Dad.” If it was the most recently published one, it was about a family of washed-up child stars who had to attend their stage mother’s funeral. The inspiration was one part Rhea’s experience growing up in Malibu, and another part from the stories Paige told about her clients from work.

“It’s about a funeral, ain’t it?”

“It’s about the relationships between siblings and the traumas they all faced growing up with an abusive mom and being kids in Hollywood.”

“Like I *said*. Sappy.”

“All right.” Rhea dropped it.

Or at least, she tried. Because Danny had something else he wanted to say. “That ain’t about your mom, right?”

“What? Of course not. Mom was great.”

“So why did you make that mom in the funeral sound like a bitch and a half?”

“Dad, I also don’t have three siblings, and I’ve never been in show business. I don’t write stories about my life, or about you, or Mom... most of us writers are making stuff up about other people. Fake people who live in our heads.”

“So why was that one girl working at the Cream Queen? You used to work there.”

Rhea pursed her lips. “To make it more authentic.”

“Is that character supposed to be you? The baby of the family who became a celebrity at five before burning out at twelve and working at the Cream Queen?”

“Dad, it’s a metaphor for what she later did when she was addicted to drugs.”

“You mean the porn stuff? What’s that got to do with Cream Queen?”

“I am *not* explaining that to you.”

“Just sayin’. You could stand to write more about your life.”

“Even if I did, I wouldn’t let *you* read it.” Rhea eased down on the couch, elbow resting on a factory-manufactured pillow that said *King of the Roost* with a rooster stitched in the center. “Besides, what are you talking about? Why are you bringing this up now?”

Danny scoffed.

“I’m serious. This isn’t the first time you’ve mentioned what it is I write about and gotten it confused with real life. I’m starting to think you’re telling me something, not *asking*.”

“You know me. I’m not a real academic type. That’s always been you.” He scoffed again. “Where you get it from, I haven’t the foggiest. I loved your mother more than anything, but a Stanford type she was not.”

“I didn’t go to Stanford either.”

“You still went to college, which is more than she and I ever did.”

*You could have gone.* Except Danny went straight into the trades out of high school, where learning disabilities had held him back from great grades. *Mom could have gone.* Except she came from a low-income family where she was one of the only ones who spoke English, and nobody at her school thought to tell her how to apply for grants and scholarships. Sure, Rhea had leveraged these aspects of her parents' backgrounds when applying to boarding school and later college, but she often wished she hadn't had to.

"Guess what I'm saying is that some of your stuff lacks a personal touch," Danny said.

Rhea's head perked up. "That's the most academic thing I've ever heard you say about literature, Dad."

"Ah, don't get me started. I'd love to see you put out a book about what it was like when you were young. Hardworking parents in a city full of rich celebrities and stuffy types. You know, when going to the beach was free, but it didn't feel like it."

"I like to think I put those things in my characters and their situations."

"Yeah, but they don't feel real. That's my criticism."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Look, I'm no writer, but I know they ain't only the stories or the settings. They're how the characters feel, right? Do more of that. You gotta tell men like me how they actually

feel. Don't give this flowery show of 'aw, my mom was mean and had me making lots of money, and now I do drugs.'"

"So you're saying you're an advocate for *telling over showing*? I'll pass that along to my editor. She'll love it."

"You've gotta have balance, kid." Danny wheeled himself closer to the remote on the coffee table. "Now, what's your poison? I finally figured out how to get Netflix to work on this damn thing. It kept telling me something about my damn password."

Rhea didn't have the heart to tell him about recent policy changes. Namely, that he wasn't supposed to share her and Paige's password anymore. Danny barely understood how the TV worked outside of the satellite stuck to his roof.

*Balance, huh?* While her father rambled about the shows he had been watching, Rhea lay across his couch and studied the slightly stained curtains fluttering before the opened window. *I'm always looking for a better balance. I don't need more.* It was a word that was bandied about in therapy. Paige had started saying "balance" more often, and it was always phrased as if it was supposed to be helpful or good for Rhea. Because everyone knew what was good for her better than the woman herself.

The sad thing? She didn't know how to argue against that. She was a woman who went with the flow so much that sometimes the currents carried her to an unfamiliar place.

Like the present state of her marriage. Rhea had been excited that Paige wanted to try new things and commit to livening

things up in the bedroom so she was more inclined to have sex with the woman she loved. Yet Rhea hadn't been quite prepared for the quick, *hard* turn toward kink. Was that really living in Paige's head this whole time? Had it been lurking beneath her subconscious for the past ten years? Had she dabbled before with other girlfriends, and simply wanted to forget it with someone so "vanilla" like Rhea?

*Am I that vanilla, though?*

These were things she couldn't discuss with her father, and she already felt uncomfortable thinking about them in front of him. Yet Danny was none the wiser as he rolled into the kitchen and unearthed Chex Mix to snack on while watching *Lethal Weapon 4* on TV. Danny Kennewick was one of the last big Mel Gibson fans left in Rhea's life, and she hated to admit that this movie was a particular nostalgia bomb from her childhood.

It was right at the part where Murtaugh cried "*Riiiiigggs!*" into the rain as if such a trope had yet to be run into the ground. Danny munched on his snack while Rhea continued to contemplate the state of her life up until that point. *What if everything is for naught?* That was the fear playing in the back of her mind, even while Danny Glover's panic was abated on the screen. *What if this is it? What if we're hurting each other so we have an excuse to move on?*

That frightened Rhea more than anything. Paige wasn't merely her wife... she was her *life*. Their marriage wasn't one of convenience and shared responsibilities, including the

house neither of them could afford on their own. It was love. History. Memories.

It was everything keeping Rhea together. So often, she had told herself she could deal with anything in her marriage as long as Paige wasn't actively hurting herself or others. So what if they had less sex? So what if Paige spent long hours at work to procure her future and their retirement? And so damn what if some people looked at them and wondered how *they* were a couple? Didn't Paige know she could do so much better?

*Maybe my dad is right.* Maybe Rhea should write more about her own lived experiences instead of following the stories of others who may or may not exist. Already, she had been toying with the idea of a new pen name that explored the dirtiest thoughts inhabiting her head. Not all of them included Paige, although Rhea liked to think her wife was often center stage. Too bad she couldn't stick with a name like Rhiannon Powell, which was too similar to another author on her publisher's roster. But she liked the idea of using Powell. Even when they got married, Paige and Rhea never discussed changing their names to match. Rhea was still Mendez-Kennewick, after her parents. And Paige was still the lovely and alliterative Powell, which was like the feminized version of the word "power."

*I always kinda liked the name Rhea Powell.* The only reason Rhea hadn't changed her name after getting married – besides being lazy – was because she didn't want to completely lose her connection to her mother. The Mendezes had never been a



big constant in her life, but sometimes it was the only way Rhea remembered that there was another part of her that her father couldn't teach her about.

She already knew so little about her mother, the woman who distanced herself from her family after marrying a *gringo* who worked hard labor. All Lucinda ever really talked about was her parents coming from Mexico and struggling to have children in a world where that was all Rhea's grandmother wanted.

There were a couple of aunts and uncles out there. Some cousins. Yet Rhea never really knew them, and they didn't know her. Outside of Danny and his likewise disparate family members, Paige was all Rhea had.

“You okay over there, kid?”

Rhea looked up from the couch. “Yeah?”

Danny turned his chair back toward the TV. It was the end of the movie, when everyone was back to being a sergeant and the LAPD was once again insured against the sheer destructive power of Murtaugh and Riggs, two Vietnam War vets who were too old for this shit.

While Danny laughed and commented that “they don't make movies like these anymore,” Rhea went into her father's room where she hoped to find one of the only photos of him and Lucinda, taken a few years before she died.

She was happy. *He* was happy. If there was one thing Rhea took away from her parents' marriage, it was that a couple

who truly wanted to be together found a way to make it work. Even through financial hardship, a daughter, and a petty thing like lymphoma.

Danny refused to become a statistic when his wife was diagnosed. He stood by her through the surgeries, chemo, and radiation that hadn't been enough in the end. He cursed the healthcare system that kept his wife from going to the doctor when she first showed signs of being sick a whole year before she was forced into the ER. He blamed himself for Lucinda's death so Rhea wouldn't have to.

For all his faults, he stepped up when necessary. Rhea wanted to be that kind of spouse, too.

*I've got faults. Lots of them.* She put the framed photo back down on her father's thrift store dresser and wondered how long it would be before she had true regrets about her marriage – and kicked herself for doing nothing about them.

## Chapter 13

One of the many tips in Dr. Seville's "Tier One" was setting aside a consistent night for romance. This, she stressed, did not have to ultimately lead to sex – it was more about making time for one another and being in the moment. No work. No friends. No TV – and for the love of God, no cell phones.

That night became Wednesday. They were less likely to have other plans that night, and Paige mentioned that it would be nice to have something to look forward to on "hump" day. *Says the woman who sometimes works weekends, too.* Rhea couldn't complain too much. Paige always made a good chunk of extra money whenever a client was desperate enough to get one-on-one training on the weekends.

Except that made Rhea more aware of how tired her wife must be at the end of the day. Even on a "normal" Wednesday, when Paige did more paperwork than physical fitness. So, instead of ordering takeout like she might usually do when Paige phoned ahead at four and announced, "*I'm beat,*" Rhea

zoomed down to the corner market to pick up ingredients for her wife's favorite healthy homemade meal.

*Grilled salmon, fresh greens, and seasoned couscous it is.* Rhea knew how to make it well enough, but it had been a while. And she wanted it done before Paige entered the house around six. *Not the easiest thing I've done, but for Paige? Anything.*

She had finished plating dinner when a sweaty woman in a track jacket and yoga pants shuffled through the door. The moment Paige smelled salmon in the kitchen, she dropped her bag and picked up the pace. Her smile was worth all of Rhea's effort.

"I feel so schlubby." Paige awkwardly sat at the dining table while her wife brought over a plate of food and white wine. "Here I am, too gross to be considered human, and you've made one of my favorite romantic meals."

She wiped something from her eye. Rhea figured it was sweat. "I thought you didn't have many clients today?" she asked when sitting down.

"I finished my paperwork early and decided to do an intense workout of my own. Didn't have time to shower before coming home. To be fair, I thought I'd hit the shower as soon as I walked through the door. But..." Paige shyly smiled at her wife. "You went all out, I see."

"Did I? I only wanted tonight to be special."

Paige remained collapsed in her seat while Rhea cut into her salmon. *Could have grilled it longer.* She was already picking bones out of her teeth. “Yeah,” Paige said with her exhausted smile. “Thanks. This looks great.”

“You haven’t eaten any yet.”

“Can’t. Too tired.”

Using her own fork, Rhea reached over and slipped her utensil under the couscous. “Should I feed you, Ms. Powell?”

Something about that made Paige laugh even harder. “That’s not necessary but thank you.” Nevertheless, someone had to eat the couscous on Rhea’s fork, and Paige didn’t see why it shouldn’t be her. Once some sustenance was in her mouth, she sat up, grabbed her fork, and began eating dinner.

Neither of them forgot that it was “intimacy” night, not even when Paige went up to take a shower by herself and Rhea popped some popcorn in the microwave to eat while they watched one of their favorite shows in the living room. She had everything ready, including the show queued up on the TV when Paige came back down in her pajamas.

“What?” Paige asked as she took a small towel to her still damp hair. “I didn’t leave a glob of shampoo in my hair again, did I?”

Rhea made space next to her on the couch. “Admiring your top without a bra.”

Paige glanced down. “They’re excited to see you.”

“I’m excited to see *them.*”

When Paige sat down, it was with a sigh announcing that she was ready to finally relax. So was Rhea, who had tossed one of her wife's favorite flavored waters into the fridge so it would be chilled for this moment.

"I feel like I'm getting such special treatment." Paige snuggled into her wife's embrace as the opening credits began to play. "What have I done to deserve such doting attention?"

Rhea was only slightly caught off guard by that question. "I just wanted to go out of my way to do nice things for you. Maybe make it more of an instinctual habit."

"I've never thought you didn't do enough."

*That's not the point...* Rhea dropped it, though. Her wife was relaxed and happy on a night dedicated to marital intimacy, and that was all Rhea had wanted.

It was an hour-long show, even when not accounting for the commercials they paid to not have to see. Yet Rhea struggled to pay too much attention to the machinations of the characters out to destroy one another or the familiar sights of Los Angeles where the show was primarily filmed. While Paige was not deterred from occasionally bursting with, "*That's where I buy my quinoa bowls!*" Rhea was too focused on how nicely her wife fit into her arms and how they had gradually sunk into the couch together, like two perfectly fitting puzzle pieces.

She smelled nice. *No, great.* She was warm. *No, hot.* She laughed easily. *No, often.* Rhea couldn't take her eyes off the part in Paige's hair or how one nipple had stayed hard beneath

her thin shirt while the other all but disappeared. Naked toes curled over the arm of the couch while a muscular arm stretched above Rhea's head. Soon, Paige was completely on top of her wife, the two of them sharing one softened heartbeat.

They were kissing long before the credits rolled and the preview for next week played.

"We can watch it again later," Paige said through a playful nip, her leg swinging over Rhea's waist as making out became easier. "Unless you don't want to."

She must have meant *this*, although Rhea's brain didn't know what to register. All she knew was that there were lips on her mouth and a hand on her thigh.

It never took Rhea long to get in the mood when Paige showed this side of her. Besides, Paige Powell was the best kisser in the world. *That* was the real reason her wife wanted to write under that name.

*Best kisser. Best lover. Best friend.*

Rhea distracted herself long enough to fumble for the remote and turn off the TV. As silence filled the living room, the married couple renewed the noise with tiny squeaks of excitement and the couch leather straining beneath their mutual weight.



Paige was tentatively excited to get upstairs and take this night to the next stage. The allure of pure *making love* had eluded her for a long while, but that also wasn't what she anticipated when she got off Rhea and motioned for her to follow the night into the bedroom.

Hell, Paige didn't usually get this turned on while cuddling on the couch. Hadn't that been one of the issues over the years? *I need something new. Something that speaks to a part of me I didn't know existed until now, when I'm staring down the barrel of forty.* For the first time in years, Paige felt like there was *potential* in her life. Not only her romantic life, either. *Everything.*

And she wanted to share it all with Rhea, the woman who always looked at her like she was a decadent dessert to savor for the rest of the night.

Paige had been thinking about it all day, honestly. She knew that tonight was their assigned time for each other, nothing else, and her imagination had been in overdrive ever since. It got so bad at work that she had to set aside some of her administrative tasks for the next day and instead focus on a hardcore workout that would help ease the feelings reverberating through her body. *Then I come home and find all of these sweet things my wife has done for me...* Her favorite meal. Her favorite show. Commenting on her body, kissing her like that... Paige had missed this. She missed *herself*, the horny temptress who could go all night long.



For a while, she assumed it was simply her getting older. Her body changed, after all. But that past month had shown her that the old Paige Powell may have been lurking within her all this time, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

Rhea knew all this, too. Since that night at Hellfire, they had made more efforts to openly communicate what was going on in their minds and lives. One thing Paige had brought up – and Rhea hesitantly agreed to try – was introducing more kinky adventures into their love life. Particularly at home, where Rhea was more comfortable leaving her comfort zone.

So she probably wasn't surprised when they got to their bedroom and Paige showed off what had come in the mail earlier that week.

“You went ahead and got it, huh?” Rhea attempted to hide the twitching in her face, but Paige noticed. *I shall now ignore it unless it becomes a bigger issue.* “Have you opened it yet?”

Paige flipped open the top of the box to show off that she had, indeed, opened it. “I haven't gone through it yet, though.” She did that now, starting with a small glossy booklet that came complete with graphic depictions of how one might use the beginner implements within.

Rhea pulled out a pair of black fuzzy handcuffs. “Wild,” she muttered.

“Isn't this fun?”

Across from her on the other side of the bed, Paige's wife opened the handcuffs and already wondered how they were

supposed to lock without a key. Little did she know that this style of handcuff was manufactured *specifically* to avoid someone getting stuck without a key.

“Do I need a safe word yet?”

Paige pulled out some starter nipple clamps and shuddered. *Maybe not tonight.* She shoved them deep into the bottom of her nightstand drawer. *Baby steps.* Instead, she’d fantasize about the velvet eye mask that looked comfortable enough to sleep with. *Maybe I will!*

She already imagined herself naked on this bed, handcuffed and blindfolded while her wife did *God knew what* to her. A tingle of excitement zipped from her head to her toes, and it took all of Paige’s restraint to not throw herself onto the bed right now.

“Hot damn.” Rhea pulled out a pair of barely-there underwear with an attachment that was meant for only one thing. “I thought this was a strap-on at first. What do you do with this?”

Paige pointed to one of the smaller toys in her nightstand. “You put a bullet in it.”

Rhea stared at her, incredulous. “It took me way too long to figure out what kind of bullet you’re talking about.”

“The kind that shoots you to the moon.”

“Is that what we’re calling it?”

“Hey, if this is too much for you right now, we can save it for later. I mean, we don’t have to do it *all* at once.”

“No, no...” Rhea delicately placed the strappy underwear with a bullet harness on the bed. “I want to try. I just didn’t know we were doing it *tonight*.”

“Neither did I, until I started feeling... you know.”

Rhea blushed. She was always her most adorable when Paige flirted with her.

“We *could* get out the strap-on...” she mused.

Paige fell forward, hands bracing against their bed. “We sure could.”

“You know it doesn’t take much to keep me going.” Rhea was still blushing, as if they didn’t candidly talk about their sexual physiology all the time. “But you? Think you could keep it up the whole time? *So to speak?*”

“Actually...” Paige stood back up, hands on her hips. “You’re the one who has to keep it up, *so to speak*.”

Rhea slowly nodded. “I figured as much.”

*What’s that mean?* Paige almost asked but didn’t want to ruin the mood – not if Rhea was on board to have some fun tonight. *Who am I kidding? She’s always in the mood!* That was one thing Paige loved about her wife. But, if she thought too deeply about it, she soon realized that was probably a source of their fizzling sex life. *If I know I can have it whenever I want, it doesn’t put a lot of fire under my ass to go get it.* It wasn’t like when she was in college, having to seduce a new girlfriend every few months to keep the weekly sexcapades going. Because if anyone thought Paige Powell

was getting it *every night of the week* in between finals and extracurriculars... well, people were kidding themselves. It never shook out that way, not even for the biggest “slut” on campus.

*I'm feeling that energy again.* As Paige crawled onto the bed, feet kicking up behind her while she overturned the box and sorted through the last of the papers and brochures, she grinned to imagine what she and her wife might get up to before the night was over.

Assuming Rhea remained game, of course.

## Chapter 14

Paige didn't know what to expect, and that was what made this so *hot*.

"I'm ready whenever you are," she purred to no one since she had no idea if Rhea was even in the bedroom with her. "You there?"

Something thumped on the side of the room. "One moment. This needs untangling."

Paige shifted her whole body where she lay on their bed, the blindfold on her face and her wrists handcuffed above her head. Their solid headboard didn't allow Rhea to clasp the handcuffs to it, but Paige promised to be a good girl and keep her hands over her head. *Or you could cuff them behind my back.* Whatever Rhea wanted!

"At this rate, I might need that bullet after all." Paige still anticipated whatever her wife had in store for her, but it was taking a while to get to the main event. *Can I get a kiss, at least?* Paige imagined Rhea straddling her, lowering her lips

for an enchanting kiss that was sure to keep them both buzzed. Or maybe that was Paige's body telling her stories again. "Do you wanna hook a girl up?"

"Oh... sure." Another thump. Paige sensed her wife's presence nearby, long before the bottom nightstand drawer opened. "Does this thing need new batteries? When was the last time it was used? I hope the batteries haven't corroded ..."

*Give me a break.* If Paige wasn't handcuffed and blindfolded already, she would be doing most of this herself. At least she'd have Rhea on top of her, maybe giving it to her good...

The bullet buzzed to life. Paige bit her bottom lip in anticipation.

"Where you gonna put that thing, Ms. Mendez?"

Did Paige feel silly asking that with such a faux-husky voice? *Yes.* Like right out of a cheap porno, not that Paige had anything against those... but it wasn't usually *her*. Not until she tried some roleplay on for size.

"I do believe I'm about to put it in your underwear, Ms. Powell."

Rhea could have said that with more *oomph*, but Paige wasn't any less turned on. She loved that her wife's hand was soon between her legs, pressing against her underwear and "threatening" to pull them off if she so much as squirmed too hard. *Do it. I dare you.* Arousal had never come so easily to Paige, a woman who had been sexually dormant for far too long.

While Rhea may have been new to some of the kinkier forms of sex, she was a seasoned pro at stimulating her wife. Which sent Paige straight to pleasantly chuffed, a state she so rarely inhabited these days. “Touch me like that,” she whispered, back arching and hands slowly drifting down toward her face. The fuzzy black material encasing the plastic cuffs tickled her nose, but she didn’t sneeze. Not when there was so much on the line already.

“You like that, huh?”

“Yes,” Paige squeaked, thighs jerking open as soon as her wife’s finger delicately touched the sweet spot that sent her straight to the stars. “Damn, you find my clit fast.”

“I know where it is. It’s also not very well hidden.”

*You might be surprised.* One of the reasons Paige had always been so “top” in her college relationships was because it was the only way to secure her pleasure. Try as some of her girlfriends might, many were either too shy or too *lazy* to make her die in the best ways.

“I want more of *that*,” Paige said as soon as Rhea teased her wife’s opening. “Get on top of me and fuck me good, baby.”

Rhea pulled her hand away. “The power bottom strikes again,” she mused. “You know I’m not ready yet. Guess I’ll have to preoccupy you with something else.”

“Whatever you give me, I’ll love.”

Paige knew exactly what she was getting, and she wasn’t disappointed when the bullet buzzed to life again – this time

directly on her underwear. Paige jolted upward, hands crashing into the headboard as she responded to the overwhelming sensations with full force.

“That should do it.” Rhea pushed the bullet beneath Paige’s underwear and left it nestled between nub and entrance, neither striking Paige where her iron was hottest nor where she would be driven craziest. She attempted to withstand the onslaught of vibrations as she waited for Rhea to “get ready,” but it wasn’t working – before her wife climbed onto the bed, Paige cried out in delight as one set of vibrations went straight to her clit and the other dove deep into her core. Every part of her was alight with the furious fires of *get inside of me and love me*.

Instead, she was already coming by the time Rhea sat next to her and watched.

*I hope you’re enjoying this, hon... because I sure am.* Paige would love it more if a naked woman was on top of her, preferably going to town between two hungry thighs, but Paige would take what she could get right now. What she *got* was Rhea grabbing her by one leg before bending down to flick her tongue against Paige’s nipple.

“Jesus!” Paige cried out. “You trying to kill me?”

“Yes,” was all Rhea said while the bullet continued to buzz. By now, it had slipped down Paige’s slit and lodged itself inside of her. Paige gave up keeping her hands above her head. The fuzzy handcuffs clanked as she absentmindedly pushed Rhea’s hands away and buried her face in the pillow, blindfold



pushing up her forehead. “Maybe I enjoy watching you go crazy.”

Paige was saved from the bullet, but only because Rhea showed her a hint of mercy. When it shut off, the bedroom was eerily quiet. All Paige heard was the beating of her heart.

“You know, it’s been a while.” Rhea didn’t give her wife time to rest. *To be fair, I didn’t ask for any.* Paige was *d t f*, and if she didn’t do more of the “f” soon, she might completely lose the moment as it turned to dust between her fingers. *I don’t want it slipping away.* She wanted her wife. She wanted Rhea. “Since I last completely buried my face in you.”

Like Rhea didn’t give Paige time to rest, she likewise refused to let her wife respond to that assertion. *Yeah, it’s been a while.* That was all Paige had the mental fortitude to think before she felt her wife’s face right on her pussy.

“*Uhn!*” Paige had never sounded so inhuman as her body went from technological stimulation to human. She usually didn’t like oral sex so *directly* on her clit, but when she was already loosened up and made to feel like the used towel tossed into the hamper after a long night in bed? *It doesn’t matter anymore, does it?* There was a tongue inside of her, and the best Paige could do was slam both hands on top of Rhea’s head and feel her short hair tangle.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Rhea grabbed Paige’s hips before they traveled any farther up the bed. “I’m not done with my dessert yet.” The words were barely out of her mouth

before her tongue darted back into Paige, who completely gave herself over to the woman who now owned her soul.

The crazy thing wasn't that Paige was still going – it was that *Rhea* was still going, playing along with the moment, never letting another breath or kiss go to waste. It reminded Paige, when she had the wherewithal to remember, of the earliest days of their relationship, when there were never enough moments to steal between the two of them. Domestication had sobered up their sex life, but it hadn't dulled the memories.

Paige was still too fresh from her battery-induced orgasm to go again so quickly, yet there was Rhea, gasping for breath as she dragged her tongue up the length of her wife's sensitive slit and made her spiral toward insanity.

And she still wasn't done with her. Paige was left to crumple on the bed, her body screaming at her to take a break, to calm down *a bit*, but she still yearned to learn what else Rhea had in mind for them that night. She needed it *now*.

“I like your hands cuffed in front of your chest,” Rhea mused as she got her hips into position. Yes, that was the strap-on Paige had teased about earlier, and *no* she was not ready, not that it would stop them from giving it their all. “Makes it look like you're praying for me to keep going.” As the strap-on thumped against Paige's mound, she uncurled her fingers, refusing to give in to the image Rhea painted. “Is that right?” A kiss imbrued with Paige's scent hit her cheek as Rhea soon

spoke right into her wife's ear. "You want me to keep going? You want me to fuck you like you're tonight's prize?"

"Oh, my God," Paige squeaked in disbelief. "You're unbelievable right now."

"Am I?" Rhea urged the tip of the strap-on toward Paige's opening, still ready, still willing to go. "Because I think you're the unbelievable one. You take it pretty damn good, *baby*."

She threw that word right back in Paige's face. *She's right...* Paige whimpered as the strap-on slid so easily into her. There was a moment when nothing was inside of her. Now? She didn't know how else to live. *I never call her "baby" unless I'm putting on a show.* Like tonight.

Except this wasn't a show. This was Paige Powell getting exactly what she asked for when she reembraced the heathen within her.

When was the last time she threw herself so readily into a moment like this? When was the last time Rhea fucked her with such crazy vigor?

When was the last time Paige felt this *alive* with the woman with whom she pledged her love?

"Oh...!" Paige didn't need the blindfold. Her eyes naturally slammed shut as Rhea drove into her, testing the very limits of a woman she should have known so naturally. "Fuck, *yes!* Don't stop!"

She heard the heavy breaths in her wife's chest. She felt the sweat accumulating against their skin. And she witnessed the

harrried way Rhea thrust forward, her body nowhere near as physically fit as her wife's, regardless of how much Paige tried to change that over the years.

It didn't matter now. Rhea was giving it her all. She was going to make them both happy tonight, regardless of how it made her body feel in the morning.

Paige was incapable of climaxing again. She was merely a plaything, a conduit for her wife's pleasure.

It was *amazing*.

She impatiently waited for the moment when she heard – and felt – her wife climax. It was in the way her thrusts became more arrhythmic, her voice coarser, and her body still as it collapsed on top of the woman who was more than happy to welcome her into waiting arms.

Paige didn't know about Rhea, but that was some of the best sex they had in *years*. It had only taken, at most, fifteen minutes.

Maybe they were really on to something here.

## Chapter 15

*“**H**er body was like a flower on the verge of blooming: too delicate to touch, but with so much potential about to burst forth and conquer the garden. If only people knew that...”*

Rhea sat back in her office chair, fingers steepled before her face as she contemplated the words she had written. Something was off about them. They didn't quite catch what she had seen the other night on her wife's face.

“Crap.” She backspaced over the last sentence. “More crap.” She turned it into a tiny song, a new beat every time she tapped the certain key beneath her pinky. “Crap. Crap. *Craaap.*”

Rhea was already critical of her writing, as evident every time she profusely apologized to her critique partner for what she imparted upon them that month. A part of her figured that saying sorry up front would make up for any shortcomings in her work because there were *plenty*. She used too many adverbs. She failed to capture the emotional bond between

people, only the aftermath of what they had done to each other. Even her editor, who was usually her biggest cheerleader, gently chastised Rhea for never fleshing out the heart of the character or properly setting up the coming scenes. She liked to get straight to the action, and that included this spicy piece of erotica she attempted to write for her own amusement. Or to publish online under an anonymous pen name if she could get away with it. She'd have to check her publisher's rights of first refusals again. It might not cover something as scandalous as this.

*Skanky. It's fuckin' skanky.* Could Rhea write that in a book? Or would it kill the mood?

It was nearly noon, anyway, and she had agreed to meet up with Roxy at the corner coffee shop for lunch. Normally, Roxy wasn't anywhere near this part of Santa Monica during the week but a doctor's appointment had brought her into Rhea's sphere that day. Why would she say no to lunch with a friend? Especially with writer's block kicking her ass?

So she logged out of her computer and turned off the monitor before grabbing her phone and wallet. It was another hot summer day in Southern California, but the Pacific breeze was cool enough to send Rhea out in both a pair of denim shorts and a long-sleeved shirt that kept her warm in the air-conditioned chill of her house. She donned a baseball cap to protect her scalp before heading out in a pair of brand-new Adidas she picked up at an estate sale the weekend before. *The things people throw away without ever using them.*

She had gone to that estate sale with Roxy, who lived for those things. Hell, Roxy was wearing the Vivienne Westwood blouse she had scored at the same sale when she walked through the coffee shop door and waved to her friend in the corner.

Their lattes matched perfectly with their paninis and the giant piece of coffee cake they decided to split so they wouldn't "spoil their dinners." Something said with laughter on their lips as if that was the most stereotypically feminine thing about them. *We love our sweets. We don't wanna get fat.* Between the two of them, Rhea was the most masculine-looking one that day. Already, the barista had noted her outfit, her flat chest, and the unwaxed hair on her upper lip and referred to her as "sir." Never mind Paige always said that her wife stood "like such a woman," whatever that meant. *Apparently, nothing much.* At least Roxy had a fresh and girlish pixie cut to go with her flamboyant blouse and nails painted a deep, bold red. When Roxy embraced her more feminine side, it was no contest: she was one of the most gorgeous women to stroll through Santa Monica in wide-legged pants and a purse strap on her arm.

When she went masculine, though... even Paige had commented she might want to wife swap with Jeanette. One day. It was just a joke. *Sure, Paige.* Maybe a few months ago Rhea would have believed that, but now?

Ha! If only Roxy knew.

“Does your publisher know about this book you’re writing?” Roxy asked between bites of her spinach and mushroom panini. “The one that’s going to light whole shelves on fire when some unsuspecting bookstore employee places it there?”

“It’s not coming along that great. And no. They have no idea. I haven’t brought it up.”

“I don’t suppose this is one of Dr. Seville’s exercises?”

“What? Writing erotica? Maybe. I haven’t looked at it lately. Paige is *all* over that instead.”

“Jeanette had mentioned something about that.”

Rhea leaned back in her booth, eyebrow arched. “Do I want to know what’s gotten back to you via a game of telephone?”

Roxy grinned through her napkin. She wasn’t wearing lipstick, but even if she was? It would have been impeccable after eating a panini and drinking a latte. Roxy always sprung for the best quality of everything. *It’s what you can do when you grow up in a rich family.* Rhea had always gotten along well with Roxy, but it was no secret at their school who were the “legacy” girls and who were there on a scholarship. Some girls, like Jocie, made such a scene with their “low class” mannerisms they were eventually expelled. Others, like Rhea, kept their heads down and quietly made friends with other low-key girls like Roxy. *Possibly slept with some of them.* Roxy hadn’t been her first, but she was the one that made Rhea realize she really, *really* liked girls. Like, a lot.



*Best thing about Catholic boarding school. All the girls. All the horny girls!* Rhea still felt like she never took full advantage of anything. Not like Paige, who would have dominated the heat levels at school.

That was something Roxy and Rhea liked to reminisce about when they met up, just the two of them. Their romantic history was so far behind them that either one was likely to forget when it was inevitably brought up again. Jeanette loved teasing them about it. Paige wasn't interested in the details. Which worked for Rhea, because Roxy wasn't the only friend she had slept with back in school. *Don't get me started on what Loren did to my very gender identity.* Loren was as straight-laced as Roxy on the surface, but once the nuns weren't looking, Little Miss Valedictorian went through more girls than her current girlfriend Jocie.

*I wonder what that's like... to get with someone you went to school with all those years ago.* Rhea only knew what it was like to stay with your college sweetheart.

"I've heard some things..." Roxy's voice brought Rhea back to the present, where indie pop played on the radio and a healthy mix of LA professionals and studying students populated the noisy booths around them. "Namely that Paige has gone straight to Tier Three and wants to tie you up and spank you all night. Girl, get out of my bedroom on a normal Saturday night. You're giving *my* wife more ideas."

Rhea was blushing long before her friend stopped talking. "It's not like that," she hissed. "I mean, she's the one wanting

to get tied up.”

“Oh?”

“What?”

Roxy shook her head. “Never mind.”

“No, *what?*”

“I said never mind.”

Rhea let the silence simmer while hoping her friend would say what was on her mind. When Roxy refused to answer, Rhea had no choice but to continue the conversation where they last left off. “Guess it’s no secret that we landed in the therapist’s office because things have been...” Rhea shook her hand before her face. “Not so exciting in that department. Not for a lack of trying on my part. You know me. You look at me long enough and my nipples are as hard as rocks and my crotch is screaming, *Come and get me!*”

Roxy laughed hard enough that Rhea had to stew in her own words. *I can’t believe I said that.* No wonder she was writing a treatise to her sexual fantasies. “Guess you do have one of the higher sex drives among the people I know. Man, I used to be that way. Somewhere between getting married and feeling my estrogen levels plummet, I have to get myself in the mood now. Luckily, Jeanette knows all the right ways to push my buttons, and we keep it interesting. We never do the same scenario twice in a row.”

“I don’t even know what you mean by ‘scenario.’ See, that’s the thing about me. I’m a horny bitch for vanilla ice cream.

Sometimes I'm in the mood for some sprinkles or chocolate chips on top, but I'm totally happy going to town on a soft serve from Cream Queen."

Roxy shuddered at the mention. "What an *awful* name for a fast food place."

"Yeah, well, when you're ripping off Dairy Queen..."

"Good to know you guys had a good time at Hellfire, though. That's one of our fave places for a reason. Though I've never thought of you two being a couple who goes there."

"That's where Paige got turned on by the kinky stuff. She's going in deep pretty quickly."

"Oh? Keep that in check. Nothing worse than a newbie who sub-drops so hard she's in a permanent coma."

"Sub drop?"

Roxy snatched her hand around Rhea's wrist from across their table. "Oh, dear. *You're* the real newbie here."

Bristling, Rhea shook her friend off her and pretended she wanted to find the last few drops of her latte. "It's a lot of effort putting my head in that kind of space. It felt like looking in a mirror when we were fooling around the other night." Rhea lowered her voice. The odds of anyone hearing her were nearly nil, but why jinx it? "Here was this woman going from zero to sixty like it was *nothing*. And there I was, psyching myself for something I had never done."

"What? Be a top? I thought that was your usual dynamic."

“It wasn’t the same ol’, you know? Like I did some of the same things, right?” Rhea shrugged. “But it was with this exhausting twist. I had to act like I was putting her in her place or something. Keep the party going until we can’t take it anymore. I dunno. Didn’t feel quite natural. Now I know she wants to keep doing that. You’re saying we should be careful about getting bored with the same scenarios? I don’t know *any other* scenarios! I don’t think I’m as inspired by this stuff as she is.”

“Yet you’re inspired by making her happy, right?”

“Of course I am. I’d do anything for Paige. She’s more than my wife.” Rhea folded her arms on the table. “She’s the love of my life. I can’t imagine a world without her. Why wouldn’t I want to make her happy in the bedroom? She already has so little interest in sex these days. I thought that maybe... that would be the new normal. Like once a year, you know?”

Roxy’s eyes widened. “Once a *year*?”

Rhea was still blushing, this time for a very different reason. “I’m being hyperbolic, but to illustrate how it *feels* for me. Since the beginning of our relationship, I’ve always been the one with the highest drive. Yet while mine’s stayed about the same, hers has... depleted? I don’t know. I wasn’t too mad about it until we started seeing the counselor. Suddenly she’s got all this interest? Does this mean I was doing something wrong all this time? That I’m not...” Rhea was going to stop there once she realized where her train of thought was going, but Roxy was watching her, waiting for the inevitable. *She*

*must know what I'm about to say anyway.* “I’m not interesting anymore. Maybe I never was.”

Roxy could have immediately claimed that wasn’t the truth, but to her credit, she didn’t blow any unnecessary smoke up Rhea’s ass. Instead, she looked away, hand perched beneath her chin as she contemplated what she had heard.

“That’s probably not what Paige is thinking at all,” Roxy eventually said. “If what you tell me about your days in college is right, she probably burned herself out on chasing tail and feeling like nothing came out of it. Then she met you, decided to take things slower for once, and it worked – you guys fell in love and got married. You know, even though Jeannie and I can be too hot for TV, there are times when we don’t make love for *months*. I didn’t even realize it was that long once. Life had gone by so quickly, you know? Then she looks at me at the dinner table and suddenly says, ‘*You still want to fuck me, right?*’”

Rhea guffawed to imagine someone as composed as Jeanette blurting that out over dinner. But she also got it. There were times when she wanted to ask Paige that same question.

“My point is that it happens to lots of couples. Even those of us who have a whole *thing* about our sex lives. It’s good that you’re addressing this, right? Before the resentment settles.”

“I can’t imagine a world where I feel resentful toward my wife. Not even about that. I know it’s not on purpose. It’s life, right?”

Roxy sighed. “That’s why you’re figuring it out. I’m sure you’ll figure this out too. It’s not like you’re not on board with exploring this stuff with her?”

“Guess I’m worried it’ll be too much, too fast for someone like me.”

“Someone like you?”

“You know...” Rhea couldn’t look her worldly friend in the eye. “Boring. Vanilla.”

“You’re the one putting those words in your mouth. I don’t know anyone, least of all Paige, who has ever said that about you.”

“Maybe that’s how I feel about myself. It happens.”

“So you *want* to explore that stuff with your wife?” Roxy grinned.

“I think my problem is that I don’t want to go too fast too quickly. I’m like a horse right now, Rox. Easily spooked. Might kick you in the face if you startle me.”

Roxy laughed hard enough to make her straw clatter in her glass. “You’ve got too many expectations set up for you at home. You’ve gotta move ground zero away from the house.”

“How so?”

“Whenever ‘domestic’ things are pushing us over the edge,” Roxy said, “we leave town. Rent a cabin out by the lake or something. Get a beach house farther up the coast. Or spend a weekend in Napa. When’s the last time you two went away for

the weekend? You know, disconnect from the world for a bit and focus on each other?”

“I dunno. We went away for the weekend a few times during the pandemic, but it’s been a while since things opened again. When we *did* travel... huh, that was when we went to Cabo. Pretty hectic week. We did a *lot* of stuff together, but it was mostly touristy stuff. I don’t even remember what we did for downtime. Did we even have downtime?”

“Sounds like you guys are due a weekend away from home. There’s your next scenario.”

Rhea rolled her eyes. “I’m gonna hate that word by the end of the month. Luckily, I’ve got a thesaurus that lives on my desk.”

“I’ll be the first to admit that I haven’t read any of your books since the first one, but you’re not one of those authors that uses the thesaurus all willy-nilly, are you?”

“Absolutely. Definitely. Without a doubt.”

“I knew it. That’s why you’re up for all of those awards. You’ve won the Pulitzer, right?”

Rhea never knew whether to laugh or scoff when her friends teased her about being a writer. “I’ve never won awards outside of local and niche stuff. I don’t really count it. I mean, my publisher doesn’t. If it didn’t come from New York or London? Didn’t happen.”

“You’ve got to milk more of your personal life.”

“Funny. My dad said the same thing.”

“The man who named you *Rhiannon*?”

“A very respectable goddess in Celtic culture, I’ll have you know, *Roxanne*.”

“Please, we were both named after Boomer songs, and my dad doesn’t even like Sting.”

“Careful. We’re almost old enough for teenagers to call us Boomers.”

“What teenagers? I avoid them. Stay off my lawn.”

“Me too.”

Roxy offered her friend a fist bump over the table. It was the perfect moment for the exact demographic of people they tried to avoid walking by and making fun of them for pressing fists together like it was 2007 or something.

“That kid wasn’t even a glint in his father’s eye in 2007.”

Rhea pretended to check her phone so she didn’t have to face the embarrassment of a kid twenty years younger than her *judging* anything she did. “You know what I was doing in 2007?”

“Partying during spring break?”

“Not quite. I would have been in college, so I was checking out some cute blond and wishing she’d try to date me instead of all the lame girls always on her arm.”

“That’s how it’s always been between you two. You pining, her playing.”

“You say that with a smile, like it’s a good thing.”



“I mean...” Roxy offered a self-satisfied smile that already made Rhea regret saying anything. “You can work with that. Show your wife why *she* should be the one pining after *you* for a change. It’s been fifteen years.”

“Not quite fifteen years.”

“So you see my point. Rock her world, deny her, drive her crazy, and then go in for the kill on the trip you’re totally going to plan when you get home later.”

“You think I’m going to spring that on her?”

“I *know* you are.”

Rhea hated to admit it, but her brain was already computing the best path between getting in Paige’s pants and giving her a taste of her own sweet medicine.

*Maybe we’re on to something here, after all.* When she returned to her office that afternoon, she didn’t immediately take her friend’s advice and start searching for rentals up in the mountains. Instead, she reopened her document from that morning and wrote for three hours. She was glued to her chair until her legs became too numb to remember how to walk when she inevitably got up to use the bathroom.

She was sucked into the fantasy. The one where her cunning yet hapless heroine was lured into an unassuming cabin in the Californian woods, where a total stranger had their way with her – restraints, riding crops, and all.

She had no idea what she was going to do with this story when it was done. Knowing Rhea, she would never let anyone

see it. Sometimes, her favorite tales were better off that way.

## Chapter 16

It was the week before Independence Day, and Paige faced two pressing dilemmas: her clients wanted her to work over the holiday weekend, and her wife had momentarily lost interest in anything beyond kisses to the cheek and the occasional smack on the ass.

“Not me,” Carmen said at the beginning of their workout session on Wednesday. “I already have to work this weekend. Why would I ask my *trainer* to work too? Gross.”

She and Paige hit the weight station, where the trainer had already set up the exact weights she had assigned her client that week. Since beginning with Carmen, Paige had assessed the woman needed more than ten-pound weights, but less than twenty. They had to be careful, in Carmen’s words, to not make her “too buff.” She wanted to be toned but not muscular. Paige was so used to that request from female clients that she almost forgot that *she* was allowed to do whatever she wanted with her own body.

“It’s the long holiday weekends when we get the busiest with one-on-one clients,” Paige explained while waiting for Carmen to finish stretching. “Actors.”

“Don’t *I* know some actors.” Carmen adjusted her yoga pants and sports bra before sitting on the bench. “Of course, not the kind you usually see on TV.” She leaned back, assuming the position for skull crushers. “Unless you’re watching something besides Netflix, I guess.”

Paige ignored that. If there was one thing Carmen liked to do, it was *almost* talk too much about her job before realizing this wasn’t the appropriate venue. To her credit, she had also mentioned that she was so used to being around people in her industry that she sometimes forgot how to act in “proper” public.

*I can relate to that.* Ever since Paige went down a specific rabbit hole, she had to refrain from talking about it with everyone she knew. Not that she had issues with avoiding sex talk with her coworkers. *Yeah, let’s not.* Yet when someone asked her, “*What did you do this weekend?*” Paige had to refrain from talking about the videos she watched “for research” because she was left on her own when Rhea turned in early or suggested she wasn’t “in the mood.”

*Not in the mood? Since when?* They’d spend the whole evening flirting only for Paige to be on her own in the shower if she got herself worked up enough. In all their years together, Rhea had only rejected Paige’s advances a handful of times. Usually, because she was too tired or not feeling well. *Isn’t she*

*the one who wants to have more sex? I don't get it.* Paige almost brought it up with Dr. Seville but didn't feel comfortable hashing it out with her wife. Rhea had become more open about speaking in therapy, and Paige didn't want to get in the way of any breakthroughs they had. *Considering how much we're spending on couples' therapy...*

Carmen sensed her trainer's mind was elsewhere. "Am I supposed to do another set?"

Paige snapped herself out of her thoughts. "Sorry. No. We're moving on to dumbbell raises. Hop up. One knee on the bench, the other on the floor while I check your form."

"Yes *ma'am*."

Paige did a doubletake but decided to not say anything. It was all in her head. Carmen was naturally flirty but had never gone too far in this professional setting. Yet Paige was always *very* aware of what her client did for a living. How could she not think about it when Carmen always showed up looking picture-perfect, even for an hour at the gym? Everything about her, from the decent plastic surgery jobs to the workouts she requested to keep her figure, only served to remind Paige that her client made her living off her body. *Not the way a bricklayer does.*

It didn't help that Carmen was open about who she was and why she requested what she did. She only wanted a female trainer but was friendly to all of the men working at the gym – and some of the other clients as well. It wasn't until shortly after Carmen arrived with the money to afford Paige's services

that she discovered how many of her coworkers' clients were also in the sex work industry. That included one of the guys working out with another trainer. Carmen mentioned she recognized him from a shoot she did a few months ago.

*The things you learn about people's sex lives doing this gig...*

Paige didn't know if it was knowing as much as she did about Carmen that made her more inclined to check out in the most *unprofessional* way possible. *Or maybe it's because she's kind of my type.* Yet Paige's surreptitious glances at Carmen's cleavage or her ass when she bent over would have normally been brushed off as accidents... not so much glimpses of opportunity. *What makes her different from the others?* Carmen was not the most attractive client who came to the gym. Hell, Paige could list at least three women who were more arguably the kind of person to get her going. Except here she was – with Carmen, a woman who occasionally winked at her. Was that on purpose? Or was that one of Carmen's tics at this point in her life?

When Paige first realized she was attracted to Carmen, she felt guilty. So much so that she confessed to her wife that there was a client who kept catching her eye. Paige was not a cheater – even if Carmen offered, Paige would *never* follow through. Unless Rhea was on board. And Rhea was probably not on board.

So it was foolish to think about. Besides, Carmen was a client, and professionalism was paramount. The honor and

image of the gym were at stake. The first trainer to start sleeping with a client? Out on their ass. It was in their contracts.

Rhea had not cared. At least, not visibly. *Does she care about anything right now?* Paige seriously wondered if her wife was suffering from a funk. It wasn't like her to not be turned on so easily... or to have no comment about her wife thinking about someone else. At the very least, shouldn't it have been fodder for discussion? A chance for them to think about what they found attractive and wanted in their marriage as they approach their fifteenth year together?

One would have thought!

“Your mind seems elsewhere today, Coach.” Carmen had taken to calling Paige that after overhearing Pedro. “Like, no offense, but there was a time when I had done my seventieth crunch and you were staring at the lights like you were determined to make yourself go blind. We have a joke about blinding yourself in my industry... ah, never mind.”

Carmen closed the locker door as Paige sat on the bench nearby. She hated to admit it, but her mind *had* been elsewhere. *Thinking about my marriage. Thinking about my wife.* Thinking a bit about Carmen, but that was hardly a threat to everything else.

“You're right. I apologize.”

“Everything good?”

Now that she was brought back to the living moment, Paige hunched over, touching her fingertips to her toes. “Personal things that I should not be letting get in the way of my job.”

“Oh? You’re married, right?”

That wasn’t hard to guess since Paige often wore her wedding band to work. It was a simple gold ring on her left hand, but that spoke volumes in a town where everyone was either married or pretending to be married for show. Especially women. Especially conventionally attractive and physically fit women like Paige. Telling some of the especially dense men of Hollywood that she was a lesbian meant nothing. Athletes? *If I have to hear “you miss every shot you don’t take” again, it will be too soon.*

“Yes. It’s nothing serious. Just a lot going on right now.”

Paige wanted to drop it there, but Carmen was too discerning. Maybe that was why she had made it far in her industry: Paige supposed there was something to being able to easily read people, be they head of companies or customers handing out tips on a livestream. *Gotta have a thick skin, too.* That was true for everyone in LA who put themselves “out there” for public consumption. Wasn’t that part of Paige’s job? To make everyone perfectly presentable for all the hate they received?

“Relationships are a lot of work. How long have you been together?”

Paige noted that she didn’t say *how long have you been married?* She must have known that relationships were longer



than a piece of paper.

“Almost fifteen years. We met at the tail-end of college.” Technically, they had met before that, but Rhea had not been on Paige’s radar until her mood changed and she decided to take things like romance more seriously. *Rhea was right there.*

They often quipped that things happened when it was best. If they had dated earlier, then Paige might have messed up a good thing, or Rhea might have been woefully unprepared for falling in love. They weren’t destined to navigate finals, spring breaks, and club activities together; instead, their relationship blossomed because of the post-college world they entered while having each other’s backs. The romanticized past of a crappy studio apartment in Echo Park was lovely to look back on, but only because they had made it through the terrible minimum wage jobs, losing friends to the other side of the world, and family upheavals like the death of Paige’s grandmother and, subsequently, her aunt. *We were glue.* They were engaged after living a full year together and married not that long after. Paige’s family had called her crazy for getting married so young, but she had been ready to settle down after graduating.

She was the type of person who needed someone steady in her corner. Rhea was more than that: she was a rock.

*And hot.*

Paige had never pretended otherwise. There was something about Rhiannon Mendez-Kennewick that spoke to her on that primal, fundamental level from their first date, when Paige

witnessed the overwhelming kindness of one woman who wasn't afraid to be herself. For years, Paige's superficial approach to life – mostly as a way to self-medicate how hard she was on herself in the academic sphere – had led her to overly femme women who spent a lot of money on their appearance, usually to the detriment of their bank accounts and mental health. Others she tried to stick with because she liked the aesthetic they projected to the rest of campus.

With Rhea, though? Everything was different. *She* was different.

Tomboyish. Gentle. Ready for anything. The most time Rhea spent on her appearance was in the shower or when she thought she was hiding shaving her upper lip. *She thought I'd be disgusted with her...* As if Paige hadn't noticed long before she accidentally walked in on her future wife shaving in front of the bathroom mirror.

What intrigued Paige the most about her wife, though, was how different she was from those other girls... in bed. She could be as gentle during sex as she was in everyday life, or she could be a rough and rowdy lover who wasn't willing to take Paige prisoner. As someone who was used to being the dominant one in her first few relationships, she loved finally living the “power bottom” fantasy, as Rhea jokingly called it.

*I wonder what kind of lover I'd be with other women now.* It was merely an academic question. Because Paige was too busy exploring this new phase in her marriage. *Rhea... has so much potential if she opens herself more to it.*

“I’m gonna use the shower here, all right?” Carmen announced that right in the middle of removing her sports bra. It was only her and Paige in the women’s locker room, but for some reason, Paige was the slightest bit annoyed that her client had no inhibitions about getting naked in front of her. *What a body. Damn.* Paige couldn’t have sculpted this for any client, not even if paid a million dollars. It was a body granted by God... and a decent enough income to pay for high-quality food *and* a trainer like Paige Powell. And surgeons. More than one was involved here because Paige would eat her sneakers before admitting those breasts might be real. *Still... a fine job, Doctor Whoever.*

“Of course it’s fine,” Paige said long after Carmen scuttled toward one of the two showers in the corner of the locker room. She took a complimentary towel with her, whistling a tune that Paige did not recognize as the hot water fired up and steam crept toward the ceiling.

She was on autopilot until she returned home three hours later. Paige forewent her usual podcast while in the car and instead listened to the local Top 40 station as if she recognized anything from the years after Lady Gaga’s height. Names like Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo were mere concepts in the corner of her mind. Ironically, Rhea knew more about them because she had time to kill during the day to look up whatever she wanted, including new music.

“*This Olivia Rodrigo kid is something else,*” she had said while listening to something Paige barely heard in the car. “*If I*

*had been in high school when this came out, I would have been obsessed.”*

Paige didn't get it. Did that mean she was old?

*I'm not old.* She was still under forty! She didn't have a gray hair on her head! So what if she worked a lot and didn't have time to follow what was hip and trendy? She didn't have to still be in college to be considered *young!*

Besides, her parents still called her a “baby” whenever she griped about something. She might as well own it.

*When I get home...* Paige turned on her blinker to make the corner to her street. *I'm having a serious talk with Rhea.* What about? Their mutual needs, for one thing. It didn't have to be Wednesday for them to take time out for each other. It could happen on a Tuesday, too! Because Paige didn't think she could wait another day to remember what it was like to have her wife on top of her.

As soon as she put her car in park in the driveway, she grabbed her water bottle and tucked her keys into her yoga pant pocket. The summer heat beat down on her as she made her way to the front door, noting that the front curtains were closed – probably because of the higher heat that day. Rhea was a stickler for keeping the AC at a decent level without exerting more energy because they let in too much afternoon sunlight.

So Paige wasn't expecting to see her wife regally sitting at the dining table, back straight and black-rimmed reading

glasses making her look like the stern professor about to verbally spank a student caught cheating.

*I wish.* “What’s up?” Paige asked, tossing her wallet and keys onto the dining table like she did every evening. “If we had a landline phone, I’d think somebody had racked up a serious bill from the way you’re sitting.”

Without missing a beat, Rhea turned over the piece of paper before her and slid it toward her wife. “This is me informing you that we’re going somewhere this weekend. For the holiday.”

Paige’s heart mildly skipped as she picked up the paper and immediately recognized the logo for a popular rental agency at the top of the invoice. “Did we win something?” Rhea wouldn’t simply book a trip without consulting her wife first, right?

“*We* didn’t, but you have.”

Paige’s eyes darted between the paper, which she barely read, and her wife’s fiercely placid countenance. “What are you talking about? I don’t remember entering any kind of contest.” She now read the text more closely. It was a three-day getaway to a lakeside cabin in the wilderness, right between LA and San Francisco. The drive alone would take half a day considering the holiday traffic. Paige couldn’t help but wonder *what* her wife was thinking... especially when she saw the total printed at the bottom of the sheet. Rhea had attempted to mark it out with a Sharpie, but when held up to

the light, Paige saw the amount. It was *not* cheap. “Who’s paying for this.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Rhea!”

Both of Rhea’s palms pressed against the dining table. “I said don’t worry about it. My last royalty check more than covers it, and weren’t you saying I should spend it on myself?”

“This isn’t spending something on *yourself*.”

“I want to take my wife on a well-deserved trip out of the city. Where she can be...” Rhea folded those hands before her face. “Spoiled.”

The way she said that struck a chord with Paige’s simmering libido. “Is that so? Do you have big plans? Like what’s for dinner tonight?”

“I ordered us takeout. Should be here any minute.”

“I see you have everything figured out, don’t you?”

“How about we eat dinner, take care of our chores, and go upstairs for a short preview of what you can expect this weekend?”

Paige’s brows wandered away from her eyes. “It’s not even Wednesday,” she purred.

“Let’s say I can sense some pent-up energy coming from your direction. I’d hate to think you were boiling over in the car on the way to the lake. I have to stay focused on the road.”

“So you’re doing all the driving, are you?”

“You’re the one who could use the trip the most. I’m just spoiling you.”

Someone knocked on the door. Most likely, it was the deliveryman with their takeout. Paige turned around to get it, but one eye remained locked on her wife’s unwavering visage. “Aren’t you full of surprises right now?”

“Wait ‘til you see what I ordered.”

Everything Rhea said and did was a setup to prepare Paige for what came next. Because when she said that, it meant Paige was pleasantly surprised to find food delivered from a taco stand near the pier, a place they ate at on their very first date.

Rhea played a game Paige didn’t quite understand, but she was willing to grasp the rules as soon as they appeared. Because Paige wanted to play.

## Chapter 17

The traffic was as chaotic as Paige predicted that Fourth of July weekend. Although they weren't due to check into the rental until three, they left early, overnight bags in the trunk and snacks in the backseat as they pulled out of their Santa Monica driveway and headed toward the Californian wilderness.

*Us and everyone else.*

Rhea remained completely cool as she navigated traffic jams, aggressive drivers, and people who refused to let her over into their exit lanes. Paige? She would have lost it by now. *So, better her than me today.* Paige either stared out the window or looked at her phone when she had decent reception. Since Rhea was driving, that meant they listened to whatever she desired, and today? It was classic rock.

“Nope.” That was the most Rhea said for a whole hour when she skipped past a Fleetwood Mac song. “Cursed.”

“You were named after that song. How is it cursed?”



“I’ve always assumed I was conceived to this album. Forgive me if I could live without the images in my head.”

She said that smoothly, one hand looped over the wheel while the sunglasses on her face masked what she felt inside. *Who is this woman?* Paige didn’t mind, but she had been slightly suspicious of this trip ever since she found out about it. Rhea had distracted her more than once with favors and slightly dirty talk, but Paige was well aware of the truth... that whenever she looked away for more than a few minutes, Rhea blasted her façade and revealed the same slightly agitated woman beneath the cool demeanor.

*What is her game? What was she up to?*

Paige decided to go with the flow. Once the shock of her wife booking them a trip without notice faded, Paige looked forward to it. Wasn’t it also a convenient way to tell her clients and coworkers she couldn’t work that weekend? She had *plans*.

*I have a feeling I’m getting laid.* Should Paige start fanning herself now?

They were caught in traffic at their very last exit. While cars gradually weaved in and out of each other’s way, Paige braved the question, “What are you thinking about right now?”

Rhea slightly turned her head. Her faded green California Surf T-shirt she picked up at a thrift store fit her frame the same way all men’s shirts did: perfectly. *So jealous.* Paige’s chest was too awkwardly shaped for anything but tank tops, crop tops, or women’s V-necks.

“Thinking about everything I want to do this weekend.”

“Oh?” Paige coyly asked. “Like what? Fishing? Kayaking?”

“Everything I want to do to you.”

Shivering, Paige looked out the passenger side window. “Is this a sex trip? Because I might not be in the *mood*. I might need something else to do but be at your beck and call.”

“Uh-huh.”

*Still don't get the game.* But Paige wanted to play.



Rhea heaved a sigh of relief when they reached the cabin. After four hours of driving, she was ready to be done with it for a couple more days. Particularly if her reward was the dazzling view of one of California's most secluded lakes.

And the woman standing in front of it.

“Do you smell that fresh air?” Paige held her hair out of her face as a breeze kicked up. “It's so unlike the sea breeze back home.”

*Doesn't smell like wildfire, either.* Rhea didn't say that out loud. She didn't want to put that thought in her wife's head. Not if she was enjoying herself. “I figured some fresh air would do us some good. You're not the only one running herself a bit ragged back home.”

Paige's curious gaze lingered on her wife. “Have another deadline for your publisher?”

“Not quite. Taking time off to figure out what project I want to tackle next.” Rhea hadn’t told Paige about her erotic endeavors. It wasn’t that she was embarrassed by them. If anything, she looked forward to putting them out there for the world to enjoy. *Maybe I’ll self-publish it.* As long as she was writing something completely different under a pen name, she could do whatever she wanted. Secretly? The world would be her oyster.

Except she kinda liked having this all to herself. Her editor didn’t know. Her readers didn’t know. Paige definitely didn’t know. It was the sweetest secret Rhea ever had.

Paige gazed back out over the water. “It’s so peaceful here. I thought it would be way busier this weekend.”

“I picked this one on purpose. I wanted us to have some decent privacy.”

“Remember our honeymoon on Tahoe?” Paige turned her whole body toward her wife, a smile on her lips. “We barely left our hotel room, but when we did, we had a pretty good time.”

“Anytime we weren’t eating or in bed, we were on the Nevada side playing the slots.”

“Well, yeah. We wanted money.”

“A dollar went a lot farther back then. Imagine us being like that now.”

“Listen to you, sounding like a grandma.”

“I feel like one sometimes.”

Paige nudged her. “You definitely do not look like one. We’re plenty young still.”

Rhea took that to heart as they brought the rest of their belongings into the two-bedroom cabin overlooking the water. The kitchen was stocked with basics like cooking oil, butter, and seasonings, but it was up to them to bring their food for the weekend. The nearest town, let alone the grocery store, was five miles away. Undoubtedly they would eat out at least once, but Rhea had planned on them cooking much of their food out here in the middle of nowhere, far away from their computers and with only mild reception for their phones. Already, Rhea eyed some of the board games and puzzles on the cabin’s shelves.

They played one of those games while eating a dinner of spaghetti and steamed vegetables.

“Careful not to get any sauce on the cards,” Paige gently chided her wife while they ate with one hand and played with the other. “I can imagine whoever owns this place finding out and charging you for the privilege.”

Rhea drew a card and moved her piece accordingly. “I don’t think anyone will notice for a few months. This box hadn’t been opened in a while.” Based on the number of dead flies they found in it, anyway. Still didn’t stop them from having a rousing game night at a lakeside cabin. “Which is weird. This place was billed as a big family spot.”

Shrugging, Paige took her turn in between bites of food. “Maybe the families that come here are all about the boating

and fishing. You know, things we couldn't care less about." She made her move. "If you're not outdoorsy, you read and play board games. Or talk to people."

"Let's not get too crazy," Rhea said.

Paige peered at her wife from over her cards. "I've always been fond of talking to you."

"Is that why you married me?" Rhea moved her piece closer to the finish line. "Because you like talking to me?"

"And other things."

Rhea knew exactly what her wife was getting at but pretended she was ignorant. "What other things?"

Paige put her hands in her lap, forgoing eating and playing games to formulate her next thought. "I like your cooking."

"Mmhmm."

"Also, your ability to cut a nice figure in a man's T-shirt."

"Is that so?"

"Can't forget that you have impeccable hygiene. I like that in a woman." "Painting a lovely picture of me, Paige."

"Now, hold on." Paige accidentally knocked her fork into her plate, clattering the two together in the kind of cacophony that rang between Rhea's teeth. "I don't think you understand what I put up with before I found you."

"Found me? Where was I before we met? Lost?"

"You know how nothing existed before you were born? That's how it often feels when I think about my life before we

went on our first date.”

Rhea tilted her head, already forgetting her dinner. “Is that so? You flatter me.”

“Do you think I lie?”

“I think you overinflate my importance in your youth.”

Although Paige gasped, it was with a girlish grin on her face. “No way.”

“It’s true. I remember life before you pretty well. Things only start getting fuzzy when I try to conceptualize... well, life before my mom died.”

Paige was so far away in her own head now that she completely forgot both the food and the game. The only thing before her was Rhea, a woman who could be as mysterious now as she was fifteen years ago. *You wouldn’t guess that by talking to her for a few minutes. She can be such an open book.* It was one of the many things Paige loved about her future wife back then. There was no acting coy. No pretending to be someone she wasn’t. On their first date, Paige learned about Rhea’s childhood growing up in Malibu, her mother’s death, and the path she took to a Catholic boarding school that admitted her right before her junior year of high school. Paige’s childhood was so boring in comparison. *No wonder I looked for ways to spice up my college years.* She had searched for drama like a troubled kid searched for peace and sobriety.

“I don’t want to talk about the past, though.” Rhea was still focused on their evening activities in the lakeside house. “I was hoping this weekend could be more about our present. You know, where we are in our marriage right now. Maybe focusing on what we could be doing more or less. Like simply being... present.”

She *almost* ended that sentiment with a question. Paige heard it as easily as she heard the rehearsed nature of her wife’s statement. “How much of this have you planned, exactly?” Paige went through the motions of taking her turn at the game, but she was more focused on the twitch of Rhea’s ear as if her wife had been waiting for something like that.

“I didn’t plan on anything.”

“That must be why everything feels faintly choreographed, all the way down to playing this game with this takeout in front of me.”

“If you think I knew what kind of board games they’d have in here, you’re crazy. I’m not *that* perceptive.”

“Except you are planning something, right? Neither of us is super outdoorsy, nor did we bring the canoe holed up in our garage. This is a good canoeing lake. So...” Paige didn’t care if her food went cold while she grilled for the truth beneath her wife’s crumbling veneer. “What are you planning, Rhea? No sense in being dishonest with me. I can see *right* through you whenever you start falling apart.”

“I’m not falling apart,” she said with a squeak.

Paige snorted. “All right...” Rhea tossed her hands into her lap as she sat back in her creaky wooden chair. “I was telling the truth when I said we could use a weekend away from home. Not to mention, neither of us cares for all the firework sounds, whether they’re legal or not.”

“Right.”

“But I also thought that this weekend was a great opportunity to reconnect. We’ve been doing well with the homework the therapist sends us home with... even if one of us likes to look ahead when she’s not supposed to.”

Paige wasn’t taking that bait. “So, this is about intimacy.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Rhea’s sigh shook the table. However she was planning on segueing to the next topic... it wasn’t like this. *She said it herself. I’m always sprinting ahead where I shouldn’t be.*

“It’s been a while since we last had a blunt talk about what’s going on in our heads.” Rhea was dangerously close to winning the game, but Paige wasn’t inspired to become more ruthless. If anything, she was willing to let Rhea win if it meant keeping her placated. “When’s the last time we talked about our fantasies? When we first moved into our house?”

All right, so Paige wasn’t expecting *that* segue – and she was even more impressed that Rhea had gone there without blushing. *I love her blushing, but she’s trying to be so put together right now.* Paige was committed to being mature about this as well... no matter how easy it would be to poke at



her wife's penchant for turning pink whenever they addressed their real feeling about... anything.

“You mean sexual fantasies?”

“Are there any other kinds?”

Paige grinned. “I'd rather not talk about *those* kinds.”

“Cool.” Which is exactly how Rhea tried to play it when she said, “What thought has been turning you on lately?”

This was how Paige knew she had been married for so long. Only in a relationship like theirs could they bluntly ask each other such personal questions and *not* have it be weird.

“Are you saying you don't want to start with your fantasies?”

“I insist that you go first.”

Paige conveniently picked that moment to eat more of her dinner. Didn't a woman need time to think and formulate thoughts? Rhea couldn't simply put her on the spot like that and expect an answer as if Paige had one loaded in the chamber all day. Besides, this wouldn't be the first time they talked about their fantasies over the dinner table.

Yet, as Rhea had implied, it had been a *while*. Perhaps they were due an update. Things had changed a bit, hadn't they?

“I told you about one of my newer clients, right?” Paige cut through her noodles to minimize the mess she made when she stuffed spaghetti into her mouth. “The FansOnly star who

recently moved to West Hollywood because it's where her agent wants her?"

"I didn't know FansOnly people had agents."

"They do if they got their start in regular old porn."

"I see..." Rhea tapped her lips with her finger as she surveyed the board game before her. Did she realize how close she was to winning? "I think you've mentioned her before. Her name was like... Denise Dingo or something."

Paige couldn't help but laugh. "Carmen Coyote."

"I was close."

"Not *even* close."

"It's the same general association. Anyway, is she hot?"

"Of course she's hot. The woman is a full-time sex worker. She's got almost every *objectively* hot factor down. The only reason she comes to my gym is because she wants to maintain what she already has going on. I think her agency pays for it."

"Damn. That must be nice. I wish my publisher paid for me to maintain *my* looks."

"You're an author! You're not out there selling your face and body on the internet."

"I mean, I *could* be..."

Paige almost choked on a piece of vegetable. "I'd love to see something like that."

"Would you?"

That was the last thing Paige expected to hear from her wife.  
“Rhetorically speaking, of course. Unless...?”

“You did not just pull an *unless*?”

“I mean, is that the fantasy you were going to talk about?”

“Certainly not. Besides, you haven’t gotten to *yours*.” Rhea crossed her arms. “I’m starting to think you’re shy about sharing.”

“Not at all. I was just caught off guard.”

“By what?”

Paige pulled her hair out of the way when she leaned forward. The last thing she wanted was for her recently trimmed ends to end up in her pasta. “By the thought of you strutting your stuff like *you’re* a professional at it.”

“I may be no Carmen Cheetah...”

“Coyote.”

“...But I *did* fuck you in front of a small audience a couple of months ago. Have you already forgotten?”

“Not at all.” Paige’s elbow almost slipped off the table. “Actually, I was going to bring that up as part of my fantasy, but you keep making me get ahead of myself.”

“Fine.” Rhea mimicked zipping her lips shut. “The floor is yours, Ms. Powell.”

“I’m actually not sure you could handle it.”

Rhea remained silent, her eyes trained on her wife’s visage in the darkening cabin.

“I imagine us going back to the club.” Paige dropped her voice to a husky whisper as she toyed with the image in her head. Such a romantic night required careful consideration of her own fantasies – especially with an audience right in front of her. *The best audience I could ever ask for.* Rhea was so attentive, even in her silence. It almost made Paige go mad with desire she didn’t know she courted right now. “It’s just you and me,” she continued, setting the scene of two married women out on date night in the kind of place where anything could happen. “We don’t have any expectations of what might happen or what we’ll see, you know? So when this beautiful woman approaches us, we go with the flow.”

Rhea spoke for the first time since Paige felt comfortable enough to share what was on her mind. “I don’t suppose this mysterious woman looks like someone who comes into your gym a couple of times a week.”

“If she does, it’s only because she’s someone who has caught my attention lately. I have no interest in actually doing anything with her outside of a professional setting.”

Rhea chuckled. “Having not seen this woman for myself... I’ll take your word on it.”

“Do you think me the type of woman who strays? Let alone with a client?”

“No. I think you’re someone who bottles up your fantasies and quietly places them in the back of the pantry in the hopes you’ll never have to face them. Life is simpler that way, right?”

“Sometimes I think you don’t know me at all.”

“Let’s say I’ve had the opportunity to get to know you over the past fifteen years, and I’ve noticed a few things. But, please...” Rhea gestured toward her wife. “Continue.”

“Do you want to hear what goes through my mind next?”

Rhea was noncommittal again.

“Because there’s a lot more of you and her going on than her and me.”

If Rhea was surprised by that, she didn’t say.

“Do you ever imagine having sex with a woman who isn’t me?” When Rhea still did not immediately respond, Paige continued, “Because I think it would be pretty hot.”

“Can’t say it’s ever crossed my mind. I’m obnoxiously monogamous.”

“I thought I was too. Now I’ve got all sorts of weird thoughts in my head.”

“Is this when you elevate to Tier Three of the therapist’s suggestions and go straight to us being polyamorous now?”

“Hell, no. I still want you to myself.”

“Sometimes with a third woman who doesn’t know what she’s getting herself into?”

“It doesn’t have to be something that ever actually happens. Maybe I’m thinking about that one girl at the club. You know, the one perving on us?”

“You mean the one who was young enough to be our daughter?”

Paige shook her head. “You keep focusing on the wrong things. Fine. What are you fantasizing about lately?”

Rhea took a methodical bite of her food, her gaze expertly leveraged on the woman sitting across from her at the table. “Suppose you’ll find out soon enough.”

“What’s that mean? Come on, you’re not going to play along?”

“I’ve been playing along this whole time.”

It took Paige a moment to realize that this had all been a game, from the moment her wife sat at the dining room table and announced they were going somewhere this weekend.

*One game, two players.* Every time Paige thought she had Rhea figured out, something new and exciting came along to upend everything she assumed about herself – and her marriage.

If only she knew where all of this fun was heading. She might be even more excited.

## Chapter 18

**D**espite the sun's best efforts, Paige did not immediately awaken as soon as it was high enough to shine past the nearby mountains, through the opened window, and right into her face. It wasn't until her skin heated up so hot that she was forced to turn over and acknowledge that her wife was no longer right next to her.

They had gone to bed after spending the rest of the evening on the front porch overlooking the lake. Herbal tea that had been graciously left by the cabin owner was the perfect “drag me down” after an intense dinner and board game that had amounted to nothing. *I don't even remember who won. Must have been Rhea.* Paige assumed her wife was now either in the kitchen or in the shower. Or maybe she was taking a late morning walk around the property without Paige, who had mentioned going for a light hike if Rhea was up for it. *She didn't go without me, did she?*

Paige rubbed the back of her neck as she sat up and stretched. The humble cabin bedroom was heating up enough

that she was driven out of the bed and into the attached bathroom, where she faced the uncomfortable truth that she might be alone in the house.

“Rhea?” Paige crept through the silent house out in the middle of nowhere. If she were the type with an overactive true crime imagination, she might automatically assume that her wife had been kidnapped by a crazy neighbor or had abandoned her here in a cruel jest. Yet the car was still in the front driveway, and there were no signs of a struggle anywhere in the cabin. Including the kitchen and dining area, where Paige finally found a note.

*I stepped out for a short while. Breakfast is on the table.*

Sure enough, Rhea had set out a bowl of cereal and a cut grapefruit, both protected by saran wrap in case Paige slept in later than anyone anticipated. She absentmindedly threaded her fingers through her tangled hair as she grabbed some milk from the fridge and fired up the coffee maker. A dirty cup was already in the sink.

“Where the hell did you go?” Paige sat down to her breakfast. “Whatever.”

She scrolled through her emails as cereal crunched between her teeth and the grapefruit taunted her tongue with the promise of more acidity. It wasn't how she would have prepared one of her breakfast staples, but she didn't fault Rhea for being thoughtful enough to do *something*. It wasn't until Paige picked up the empty cereal bowl that she realized there was another note beneath it.



*Now that you're done with breakfast, you'll find a surprise in the shower.*

All right, this was getting weird. Fun weird, but weird, nonetheless.

“As it so happens...” Paige left her dirty dishes in the sink to wash later. “I was about to take a shower.” Those night sweats and the heat from the morning sunlight were exactly the kind of things to make her rinse off before officially starting her day.

She didn't know what to expect as she took off her clothes in the bedroom and stepped into the shower, where she and Rhea had left their preferred hygiene products the night before. Yet instead of her favorite body wash, there was a red bottle she didn't recognize called *Turn the Page*.

Cute. More than once she and Rhea had seen this in the store and joked that it was perfect for Paige, whose name happened to be pronounced the same way. Had Rhea bought this in advance to give to her wife on their weekend getaway?

How far had Rhea planned things, anyway?

The unfamiliar body wash smelled of hibiscus and rose. Paige's skin certainly didn't disagree with it, but she wondered where her usual soap had gone. Rhea wasn't the type to frivolously throw things away. Then again, she also wasn't the usual type to do things like *this*.

After washing and toweling off, Paige unzipped her overnight bag and discovered another note on top of her

things.

*All you need to wear is in the plastic bag.*

How strange! Paige didn't recall packing a plastic bag into her suitcase. *How crazy is this going to get? My wife is picking out my outfits for me.*

Paige had never seen the clothes in the white plastic bag before. The baggy linen overshirt was either straight from the swim section of a department store or from the men's section of their favorite thrift place. *Knowing Rhea, it's either one.* Rhea knew how to shop the men's sections to find the perfect thing to fit her womanly body. Rhea had picked out her style in her late teens and had stuck with it 'til the present day. She was the stereotype of a woman whose closet was half the size of her wife's. *I don't even dress overly feminine.* Paige's sin came from needing so much athletic wear, especially back when she thought she would become the next big fitness guru on YouTube. *All of the advice websites said I couldn't wear the same outfits too close together.* Which is how Paige Powell ended up with an entire dresser dedicated to her yoga pants, sports bras, and athletic shirts.

*Don't get me started on how many tennis shoes I own.*

This, though? The clothes in the plastic bag? A bit different from what she normally wore, either at the gym or in her personal time. She couldn't remember the last time she wore so much white. *Whiter than a plastic bag, that's for sure.* Paige waited until her freshly washed body was dryer before putting on the bra with padded cups and the drawstring linen shorts

that were *way* more comfortable than they had any right to be. They were going straight into Paige's rotation of comfortable loungewear as soon as they were back in Santa Monica.

The last piece was a large white overshirt that was *almost* linen enough to be from the same set as the shorts. But Paige instantly realized that the brand tag said something different, and the white wasn't quite the same shade. Even so, once she pulled it on over her shoulders and shook her hair out over the back, she looked sporty enough to be the athletic influencer she always knew she could be. *Eat your heart out, Ingrid*. She referred to one of her old coworkers, who had done exactly what Paige had during lockdown and chose to keep pursuing YouTube and Patreon instead of going back to the gym. For the first time since last checking Ingrid's profile, Paige felt like the hotter of the two.

Maybe that was because this was all *Rhea's* plan. Wherever she was.

Paige poured herself another cup of coffee and gazed out the kitchen window. There was no view of the lake from this side of the house: instead, she caught the sweeping sights of the mountains in the distance. The empty fields between the property and where the Sierra Nevadas began painted an isolated picture. The exact kind of thing Paige hadn't realized she needed.

Which only begged the same question again... where the hell was Rhea?

Paige took her admiration of the great outdoors to the front porch, where she sat in a wooden chair allowing the perfect view of the lake only a few yards away. The tranquil breeze tickled her bare stomach, but it was already so warm at that late in the morning that she didn't think twice about sitting there in a ridiculous outfit picked out for her by her wife.

*There she is.* Coming into view from right along the lake was Rhea, her shorts and T-shirt somehow more revealing than what she normally wore. Paige certainly didn't mind. Her wife had a nice figure, no matter how much Rhea tried to compare herself to the woman she married – a professional fitness instructor, no less. Yet the curves Rhea had only enhanced the way she walked and took in the world around her. The way she shielded her eyes even with sunglasses on her face was too cool for a jaded woman like Paige to bear.

They briefly made eye contact, but Rhea did not immediately approach the porch.

*What game are you playing still?* How did this fit into whatever fantasy Rhea now had about their marriage? Was picking out what her wife wore everything she needed to get off now?

Of course not. There must be more to this than that.

Rhea picked up a rock and skipped it across the lakeshore. Paige watched with mild fascination.

Only when Rhea finally turned around and headed up the path leading to the cabin did a ripple of anticipation chase away the doubt in Paige's sinew.

“Where have you been?”

Rhea leaned against the post holding up the porch roof. She did not remove her sunglasses. “Needed to clear my head before I have my way with you.”

A small smile almost broke Paige’s carefully crafted veneer that she *totally* wasn’t into this at all. *Maybe I want to play a game, too.* They both had roles to play. Paige understood hers almost as much as she understood that this was probably an affair Rhea had psyched herself up for all week. She must have rejected Paige’s advances for a reason! This was a woman who never said no unless she was sick, fretful, or injured. *She says so herself... always ready to go whenever I am.*

So why the weird games? Paige supposed she was about to find out.

“Your way with me, huh?” Paige crossed her legs away from Rhea, who barely paid her any attention beyond the creak of her wife’s chair. “What makes you think I want to do something like that at lunchtime?”

“How late did you get up, exactly?”

“Oh, so you would have had your ‘way with me’ at ten if I were up earlier?”

Rhea’s hand slipped into her back pocket. “Maybe.”

“Maybe I don’t want to play along.”

At first, the heavy silence between them was peppered by the rustling of the breeze in the treetops and the calling of a bird by the lake. Rhea was not perturbed, though. She kept her cool

demeanor when she said, “Suppose you’ve got a safe word for those feelings, now don’t you?”

*Too much.* That was how Paige described the excitement slightly arousing her senses. Who was this woman? What was her goal? Sex? *Can’t just be sex. This has to go deeper, right?* Was this a response to Paige’s recent reawakening as a sexual being who desired her wife? Because nothing had yet to compare to that night in the club when Paige had never felt so wild in the heart and loins – and Rhea had responded exactly how Paige needed her to.

Sure, their playtime at home was fun, and Paige was feeling more satisfied than ever... but nothing had the urgency and crazy inhibition she experienced in Hellfire.

This might come close, though.

“I want to make something clear,” Rhea said as she pulled her phone out of her pocket. “I’ve spent the past few years pining after you like a dog at the dinner table. There you always are, looking too hot for me to touch... like if I bring my fingertips close enough, you’ll send me to the hospital with nothing but pain to answer for my sins.”

“You flatter me, honey.”

“One of the reasons I married you is so I can sleep with you every night. It was the perfect plan, you know? Make the hottest girl on campus fall in love with me so I could put a ring on it and access her body every damn night I wanted.”

Those words stole the breath right out of Paige's lungs. Maybe some other woman would be offended to hear this "confession," but Paige immediately knew this was another part of the game. Some parts of it were truth, sure... yet Paige could say the safe word whenever she wanted, and that would be it. Back to a regular vacation with Rhea's face buried in a book when it would rather be buried in her wife's pussy.

*Aren't I lucky to have her?* Paige's hands gripped the arms of the wooden chair as she glanced away from the heated gaze hurling in her direction. "You're a dirty one."

"I only tell the truth. I had so little opportunity in college to tell you how I felt, but I spent many nights wishing I was the girl you were taking back to your dorm."

"You make it sound like there were *so many*." Paige had counted once. It was fewer than ten over those four years, with a decent break with Rhea right before graduation. "Are you sure you weren't jealous about how many girlfriends I had back then? Because you didn't?"

Rhea chuckled, the phone still steady in her hand. "More like it killed me that they were all sleeping with you when that could've been me on the other end of your body."

*That's almost sweet.* "So, what are you going to do about it now? Tell me what to eat and how to dress so we can have some fun on our weekend getaway?"

"*Honey.*" Sarcasm dripped from the lips Paige had kissed hundreds of times before. "I already told you. I'm going to have my way with you. All afternoon."

“All *afternoon*, huh? What makes you think I can go that long?”

“It’s about building up anticipation, isn’t it? Make you hungrier for more and more until you’re bursting for me.”

“Do you think it’s that easy? Lead me along until I’m horny enough for you?”

“What makes you think you’re not ready enough now?”

“A quick scan of my body tells me that you’ll have to do more than flirt with me a bit. You’ve missed quite a few opportunities this past week to fuck me blind. Guess you were holding off until this quaint trip you surprised me with. Don’t know why. I’m having a good run right now. Plenty of my ‘body’ to go around, especially for women on the guest list, Rhea.”

“You sure do talk a lot sometimes.” Rhea lifted her phone. The tell-tale sound of a camera shutter clicking brought more questions to Paige’s mind. “We’ll have to fix that, won’t we?”

“Why are you taking pictures of me?” Paige was still wondering that long after her wife put her phone away and pulled a cotton piece of fabric out of her other pocket.

“Consider it me wanting to memorialize how you looked right before you learned what I am capable of.”

Every alarm bell in Paige’s mind went off as the cotton fabric came for her face. *You have got to be kidding me.* It was barely noon! What had gotten into Rhea?

And where had this side of her been all this time?





This had all been a part of Rhea’s plan ever since she made the reservations a week before. Finding this cabin out in the middle of nowhere, let alone on a placid, empty lake by the mountains had been a stroke of luck. Everything else fell into place because of her God-given ability to make her wife happy.

Roxy had been right. They needed new scenarios to keep Rhea going. If coming up with these wild getaways drained a lot out of her afterward, then she needed to make it count. She had to give Paige the vacation of the decade, all without burning herself out.

So the cabin had been booked a few days before Rhea came up with her final plan, and she literally took a page out of her own book when she thought about what she wanted to do with her wife over a long weekend.

It was right there in one of the first erotic vignettes she wrote for her amusement. Although the main character in that story was a naïve and inexperienced college student, she ended up in *quite* a sexy predicament when she gained the attention of two best friends who wanted to have “fun” with her. That included taking Miss Naïve College Student to a secluded cabin in the woods where she was tied up, gagged, and taken on the ride of her life – all consensually, of course, because as much as Rhea tried to go *there*, her brain stopped her.

She never thought it might come true sometime before the end of the summer. *I'm not young or naïve. I'm also not a pair of women. And this is my wife.* Yet Paige never signaled she wanted this to stop when Rhea tied the cotton fabric around her face, silencing her. Somehow, it made her hotter in the outfit Rhea picked out for her.

The white linen was practical. It breathed well, no matter the weather. The white reflected heat while highlighting the figure Paige worked so hard on through her job. This was equally about Rhea's fantasies, after all. If she was going to do this, she wanted to see every inch of her wife's heavenly body.

Rhea was required to go crazy, too – crazy for someone she had seen naked so many times she could recite every freckle, every minute curve or muscle to a reconstruction artist.

There was a reason she wanted Paige showered and fed before they started this day-long scenario. She had to be prepared to take on Rhea. All. Day.

Unless Paige gave the signal at some point... Rhea would cross that bridge when they came to it.

First, they had to reach the highs of love that they had been ignoring for much too long.

## Chapter 19

Paige had no trouble going along with this. Not when she knew that Rhea had put so much thought and effort into this getaway weekend.

The secluded cabin. The tranquil lake with nobody around. A busy weekend when most of the country was elsewhere and too distracted to loop them into phone conversations.

It was perfect. From the way Rhea gently kissed her throat after blindfolding her, to the gentle way she guided Paige back into the cabin with a promise to treat her like a queen.

Paige had a feeling that was like a *sullied* queen who was getting her just desserts from one of the villagers, but she didn't mind. Wasn't that what fantasies were all about?

She was sat on the couch in the TV-less living room. With her knees askew and her hands shoved behind her back, Paige was paradisaically helpless as Rhea straddled her lap and covered her in the kind of heavy kisses that made a woman moan in anticipatory pleasure.

*Right there*, she wanted to say when Rhea's mouth dipped into the cleavage supported by a *very* generous bra. *Tell my nipples how bad they've been*. Rather difficult to say those things, though, when Paige was gagged.

Besides, she knew that Rhea had no interest in taking her right there. This was an *all-day* affair. Paige had a feeling she wasn't getting what was coming to her until that evening. Everything before that was foreplay. The kind meant to drag her to new heights that promised nothing but a divine fall from grace as soon as her foot slipped on the edge.

And it was that kind of foreplay that made this all the sweeter. Because Paige knew that Rhea *suffered* as well. She couldn't *just* kiss her wife's body and stop there. Nor could she *just* take off her shirt and grind against Paige on the couch without fulfilling a sexual promise to her own body. Rhea was also taking herself to those same heights and stepping back. They were edging each other, and Paige barely had to move.

So she reveled in the despondent look on her wife's face when Rhea pulled herself away and put her shirt back on. Her nipples poked right through her sports bra and her cheeks were so flushed with sexual desire that Paige almost laughed. *How are you going to survive today, huh?* Big talk from a woman whose bra was already falling down her chest. Rhea had felt her up so heavily that it was a wonder that Paige wasn't naked and satiated. The only thing she missed was kissing her wife back. Yet this wasn't about what *she* wanted. This was about Rhea having her delightful way with a woman who had done that same thing to others for years.

*It's my turn.* Rhea may have always been the top in this relationship, but Paige finally felt like she was put in her place.

“I’ll take off the fabric,” Rhea said after pacing two laps around the room, “but in return, you’ll be blindfolded. You have to pick one all day.”

Paige shrugged in agreement, her gaze locked on her wife’s. *Plenty more I can do with my mouth than my eyes.* She already knew what Rhea looked like in every state of desire. She’d rather kiss and taste the world around her.

She didn’t miss the view once the blindfold was on. Everything she needed was in the kiss to the lips she soon enjoyed.



There was something strangely serene about that whole afternoon.

Paige simultaneously knew what to expect and had no idea what would happen. Anything Rhea wanted her to do could either be for the sake of sex or because it was more convenient than what completely banal thing Rhea wanted to do. Like playing a game of solitaire with a pack of cards or making herself a snack of carrots and hummus. She offered Paige a bite at the dining table, but only if she agreed to spend the next hour on the couch, lying down with a pillow propped beneath her hips. So Rhea could give her sexual relief? No! Paige had no idea what her wife was doing during that time because she couldn’t see a damn thing.

But her imagination went into overdrive, and that was almost hotter than anything Rhea could actually do to her.

Almost.

The clock chirped at the top of every hour. And every hour, Rhea asked if her wife needed anything, like food or a trip to the bathroom. Only once did Paige take her up on that with the understanding she wouldn't be allowed to do anything for the next hour. If she didn't need either of those things? She was played with like Rhea's personal doll.

*And it's pretty damn great.*

At two, she was propped against the back of the couch and lightly swatted on the ass while Rhea fingered the wet and ready place in front of it. As Paige stimulated herself against the couch and quickly reached a peak close enough to climax, Rhea pulled away and gave her wife a final spank that echoed in the cabin.

At three, she was tied to the large lounge chair in the corner of the room, Rhea grinding against her for the better part of ten minutes while Paige leaned her head back and accepted every kiss and grab to her ass and chest while losing herself to the moment. Paige encouraged her wife to use her until the finish line, but her dirty words fell on deaf ears when Rhea silenced her with a finger and denied herself orgasm once again.

At four, Paige admittedly needed a snack and to use the bathroom. Although the trip to the back of the cabin told her she was ready enough to take on a football team's worth of Rheas, she was relegated to the dining table, where a peanut

butter sandwich and a banana awaited her. She had to eat with the blindfold on because she couldn't very well eat while gagged, now could she? Yet it also meant that for the rest of the hour, Paige had to sit at the table, nothing except the sounds of Rhea playing cards again to keep her company.

*Would you fucking fuck me, damnit?*

Paige hated how much this was turning her on. Any other day, she would be so over this by now. Yet the safe word – or signal – never left her. She wanted to know how long this could go on and what else Rhea had up her short sleeves. The woman could nonchalantly play more solitaire than anyone had before, but Paige knew her patient wife was *dying* inside. *She wants this as much as I do.* Paige wanted it so badly that she began stimulating herself against the table, one hand curiously creeping between her own thighs.

Rhea caught this quickly, and while admonishing her wife, tied her hands behind her back and pulled the chair far enough away from the table that Paige was *helpless* with her sexually charged body that begged to be acknowledged. By anything. Human. Object. It was becoming all the same to her.

At five, the mood changed again. Rhea asked Paige if she needed anything for the hour. Paige promptly said, "I need you between my legs before dinner. We're having dinner, right?"

She almost worried that Rhea hadn't heard her, because it took too long to hear a response. Then, "I'll be having something for dinner. Don't know about you."

A few minutes later, Paige was untied from the chair and led down the hallway. She was soon in the darkened bedroom, where she was tossed onto the bed, hands tied behind her back.

The door slammed shut. Rhea arranged Paige on the bed to her satisfaction before sticking in a pair of earbuds and lying right beside her.

“I think you’ll like this one.” Rhea whispered that right in Paige’s ear – or at least she would have if something wasn’t already there. “I spent the better part of an hour picking out the perfect one to torture you.”

Paige knew it would be porn, but she wasn’t prepared for the intense moans of a woman in the throes of ecstasy that soon hit her brain.

*Damn you.* This was what *she* should sound like. At the very least, Paige was overdue making another woman cry out like the faceless lady now overtaking her imagination. As her body strained against her linen clothing, Rhea sat up on the bed, dropping her phone on the nightstand and pulling open Paige’s nearest leg.

That separation of her thighs was almost enough to make Paige moan as loudly as the woman in her ears. She had no idea what was happening to the actress with the voice of a siren. Nor did it matter, when her erotic fantasies filled in the gaps. Because what happened to her must be what soon happened to Paige, whose shorts came off thanks to Rhea’s grip in the dark.



Paige knew something good was coming her way, but she didn't anticipate her wife's tongue directly on her clit so soon.

“Ah, *fuck!*” Paige soon couldn't hear the actress in her head over her own moans of coasting satisfaction.

This was it. This was what she had wanted all week, and now that she had it? She knew it wouldn't last!

Yet Rhea took it farther than her wife anticipated. *She's not going to actually let me come, is she?* Even if she did, Paige wasn't worried about lacking the ability to go again. Maybe even right away. Whatever Rhea wanted? She could have!

*Tell me I taste like dessert. Tell me you can't get enough of it.* Paige wanted her ego inflated like she wanted more of Rhea's tongue in her pussy. *Try to tell me but find yourself under your own gag order because you can't get enough.* Paige forewent more thoughts. It was either that or scream senseless obscenities because Rhea's tongue had gone wherever it dared.

Paige no longer heard the voice in her head. She no longer thought about the context of the situation she found herself in. She wasn't the pawn in her wife's game of chess. She was the queen, and some other piece had come to take her off the board.

*Take me somewhere. Anywhere.*

She was right on the cusp of climax. Rhea must have known. Of course, she knew. How long had they been married again? *I am the opposite of rocket science when it comes to sex...* Rhea

was the bigger enigma. Something Paige had always envied until now.

“Please...” Paige knew it was hopeless when her wife stopped giving her oral pleasure and instead kissed the length of her leg. “A little more.”

Rhea unceremoniously closed Paige’s legs. Her underwear fell back into place. *Damnit. You’re kidding me.* How much longer could Rhea take this? Didn’t she want to *fuck* by now?

It wasn’t six yet, but Rhea gave her wife a choice. Did she need anything, or continue?

What did she think the answer was!

Paige didn’t think anything about being taken out into the hallway. For all she knew, Rhea was about to make her get on all fours right there and pretend to be an animal in heat. *I mean, I could do that. Pretty easy.* Yet that’s not where they stopped. Nor did Rhea halt their advance in the living room, where this all started.

The floor changed from carpet to linoleum. They were back in the kitchen, but that was a soft breeze she felt.

*Are we going outside?* What in the world!

She was stopped on the porch long enough to have her blindfold taken off and turned into a gag again. Once Rhea had it the way she wanted, she gestured to the front steps, where she took Paige and leaned her against the main post.

“If you make it through this...” Rhea dangled the fuzzy handcuffs before her wife’s face. “I guess I’ll take us both to

home base.”

Paige could only imagine what that meant because the craziest thing she could not have conceived was happening: she was shoved up against the post, facing the lake, her wrists handcuffed behind her and tennis shoes propping her up on a small sliver of purchase separating her from the ground below.

*This is ridiculous!* She thought with the kind of delightful glee that hit a woman when she had a fantastic idea for something that would *never* happen. *This is something you read in a smutty story, Rhea. You don't actually do it.* That was the thing. “*You don't actually do it*” was the very thing to turn Paige on. *Not that I need help with being turned on.* She didn't think her body could yearn for her wife any more than it did right now – and yet...

Something about being left out here, utterly defenseless, *killed* her.

“Be right back.” Rhea patted Paige's cheek before going back inside. Paige pulled against the handcuffs keeping her arms wrapped back around the post. Faintly, in the distance, evening frogs croaked. A light breeze rippled the otherwise calm lake surface. Paige's shoulders scrunched up against the post as she bit down on her gag and wondered what the hell would happen if anyone picked *that* moment to come by on a kayak.

When Rhea returned, she put a small key fob on the porch barrier. “Press this if you don't want to play anymore. Or, you know...” Rhea shrugged. “Someone's walking down the

driveway and are about to call the cops. No sense letting our fun be ruined by someone wandering where they shouldn't be." That wasn't all she carried, though. In her other hand was a small, black velvet bag that screamed it contained the kind of toys Paige had ordered through a halfway-decent website.

What now!

"No? Not too much?" Rhea bit back a smile of genuine amusement that was girlish enough to soothe any of Paige's worries. The gentle woman she had married was still in there. This was simply... someone else. For now. "How about this?" Rhea unveiled the beginner nipple clamps that instantly made Paige's eyes widen. But she didn't shake her head. Nor did she shy away when her wife placed her palm on Paige's chest and eased open the white overshirt that had been perfectly made for this ridiculous moment.

If anything, Paige begged for more.

At first, she assumed that Rhea would place the nipple clamps on the *outside* of her pushup bra. Yet that implied Rhea wasn't ready to go all the way with their mutual fantasy. What was the point of going all the way with tying her wife up to a porch post out in the middle of nowhere if she wasn't going to give Paige the full experience? She was meant to be displayed like the piece of meat she was. Paige didn't get to stand up here and pretend that others wouldn't be scandalized by what was unveiled with her body. The whole point was to push their boundaries as a couple. She had asked Rhea to step out of her

comfort zone as the top in this marriage – now it was time for Paige to hold up *her* end of the deal by doing the same.

She closed her eyes and groaned when Rhea kissed her throat and pushed down the front of her wife’s padded bra. Paige didn’t feel self-conscious to acknowledge the truth of her chest size, though. Not when the padded tips of the silicone clamps pinched one nipple before coming for the other.

This was heaven. The perverted version of heaven that Paige never once heard about in her Sunday school classes as a kid.

And her angel was digging into the pouch for one last thing that was sure to make Paige get on her knees and beg – if she could move, anyway.

“Theoretically,” Rhea purred into her wife’s ear as the gag muffled another groan, “this will leave you for dead on this post.” Paige didn’t disagree when she saw her favorite vibrating bullet straight from her nightstand drawer. Except this wasn’t the same color. Nor was it the same material. What the hell had Rhea done *now*? “While also keeping you so turned on that you won’t say no to me when I come out to get you.”

“*What are you doing?*” Paige wanted to ask. “*Tenderizing me?*”

Perhaps she got more than she bargained for, however. Because this was a woman not at all prepared for letting it all hang out on the porch of this getaway lakeside cabin. Once the vibrating bullet was slipped into her underwear, she knew

exactly what was about to happen, even if it didn't occur right away.

Rhea offered her one last kiss before going back inside the house. Paige was stuck where she was left, overwhelmed by the sensations cascading across her body as she gazed at the empty lake and concentrated on the tops of evergreen trees. What should have been a picturesque scene was now as confusing as it was liberating. Paige didn't know if it was her fear of being caught that impaired the moment, however, or if it was her deep-seated insecurities that told her she wasn't *hot* enough to be caught... and get away with it.

She was only given a few minutes to enjoy the view like this, though. Because wherever Rhea was, she was close enough to remotely turn on the vibrator.

“Mm!” Paige almost launched out of her handcuffs when the bullet, nestled right against her nether lips, exploded in an avalanche of sweet, intense waves of vibrations. She didn't know what setting Rhea had it on, but she was going all out. Unlike Paige's plain bullet at home, this one didn't simply take on three different speed settings and keep the action at one pace. This was an *experience*. It almost made Paige feel like she rode upon a ship on chaotic storm waves, the ascent up one crest tumbling her down the other side as if she had felt nothing at all. She swore she heard it buzzing in the air. Or maybe that was her heartbeat pounding sweat from her forehead to her thighs. If it weren't for her underwear, Paige would never hold on to that bullet!

Rhea was right about one thing, though. Paige was going to come, either against her will or with the full-body embrace of a woman who couldn't imagine anything better.

She was here. She was trapped in a moment choreographed just for her. It was a gift from the woman who had loved her more than any other.

What the hell wasn't there to love?

“*Mmm!*” Paige's back popped off the post, her whole torso suspended high above the ground until she regained control of her muscles. She couldn't help it. Her whole damn body was alive with the ecstasy of a woman who had never experienced pleasure like this before. *Pure, uncut carnal goodness.* The physical touch of another human had its merits, but this? Straight out of the demented mind of a woman who knew every inch of her body? Paige couldn't say no!

So she said *yes*, closing her eyes and marrying her mortal body to the natural world.

The breeze was louder. The evening fauna prepared for the end of the day. Every kiss of the air to her exposed skin was another declaration that Paige Powell now belonged to the universe, and the universe shared all of her wavelengths.

Was this what it meant to be alive?

She didn't realize that the bullet had turned off until long after she came down from her high and acknowledged that the world was moving on without her. Paige heaved a sigh of relief. She kept her eyes half-closed and her breaths heavy as

Rhea slammed open the screen door and stood a few feet behind her wife.

“Good thing I gagged you,” she said. “I could still hear you in there. Can only imagine what the fine neighbors of this mountain community might think.”

Paige’s chuckle was only restrained because she was so worn out. Yet, as Rhea had promised, she reawakened to the presence of another woman’s touch. Rhea unfastened the handcuffs and held onto Paige’s arms as she steadied herself.

The plastic chain of the nipple clamps jangled when she was turned around and faced the woman who had made this all happen. Paige flung her arms around Rhea’s shoulders and removed her gag to say, “Please tell me there’s more.”

A firm hand landed on her ass. “Only if you beg.”

Paige tasted her dried lips. “Please.”

Rhea returned the embrace as they rocked together on the front porch. Paige didn’t care that her tender nipples were still pinched and pushing into Rhea’s chest. Like she didn’t mind that slightly opening her thighs meant the vibrating bullet threatened to fall from her grasp.

“You sure you can handle it?” Rhea asked. “Because I intend to use you up until I can’t possibly have another bite.”

Paige had never sounded so drunk after an orgasm when she said, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Rhea kissed her, the fresh sensation of her mouth rejuvenating everything it touched as her tongue searched for



Paige's.

She wanted to be taken to bed.

That's where Paige was led as the sun disappeared behind trees so tall that it created the illusion that sunset came much earlier in that part of the world. The bedroom was already cast in mellow shadow when Rhea pushed her down, Paige's sore but delighted nipples catching her fall first. Long before her hand, which reached for the pillow shortly before her wife grabbed her by the hips and flipped her over. The whole bed shook as the headboard slammed against the wall.

Still wet with Paige's bitemarks, the piece of fabric was back over her eyes. Paige almost protested how one of her senses was always diluted that day, but she actually didn't care. If this was what her wife wanted for her, then Paige was willing to go along.

She knew it would be good.

Besides, being blind to the room meant she heard things that she might have missed before. Like the famished grunts in her wife's throat or the harried way she removed her own clothing and tossed everything to the floor. Every new creak to the bed and jiggle to Paige's body was another chance to live in the moment. With her mouth open, she could kiss those lips coming for hers and cry out in hearty acquiescence when her wife fucked her with a strap-on familiar enough that Paige actually found it endearing.

Although she couldn't think about much else for long. Rhea made sure of that.

There were no thoughts. No cues. Only one woman going at the other as if she had something to prove, and it was all Paige wanted.

Because was it too much to ask to be destroyed a *little*? Could Rhea find it in her heart to annihilate the noisiest parts of Paige's brain, to make her forget who she even was for a whole day? All Paige wanted was for her body to also belong to the woman who already owned her heart.

*There's no one better for building me back up than her.*

People said Paige could have had any number of women she wanted. Not only in college but now as well. She had the figure, the face, and the access to some of LA's most desirable women. Those openly out, those in the closet, and those who never knew they wanted to be on the other side of a woman's lust until they met Paige Powell, a chemically charged blond who had seen everything growing up in Anaheim and now ruled The 10 between Santa Monica and West Hollywood. Sowing those wild oats as an underclassman had been a statement about her sexuality. Settling down with Rhea was perfect timing.

Because she could have kept screwing around, with enough notches in her bedpost to whittle her furniture down to nothing. She could have become a legend in Los Angeles.

Except she wouldn't have love. She wouldn't have the deep, binding understanding of a woman who had been with her for nearly fifteen years.

There was no denying it. Their marriage had been renewed with such vigor that Paige no longer wondered if they had what it took to last. *Of course they did.*

The proof was right here, slamming into Paige as she screamed in triumph because her whole body, her whole free spirit, was attached to someone who wore her down in bed to nothing before allowing her to bloom again. This time, as someone she better recognized as herself.

She lived for the wild moans landing on her skin and the purposeful vacancy of the movements coming at her thighs as if Paige were a goddess to venerate at the altar of holy matrimony. What was more sacred than the rough sex that set this weekend apart from every other getaway they had ever embarked on?

Paige didn't experience one singular climax that marked the end of her sexual resistance. Instead, she rolled with one high wave after another, swearing that this was a result of Rhea's obsession. She didn't need dirty words. Nor did Paige need to be told she was beautiful. All she needed to hear was the cry of surrender as Rhea finally admitted that she was too tired to continue and instead gave herself to her cataclysmic high that resulted in her thrusting into Paige's wide-open body and staying there indefinitely.

Paige held Rhea close to her chest, her thighs relaxing for the first time since she could remember. There had been nothing before this moment. Only them.

“I love you.”

Not until a second later did Paige realize she was the one who said that first. Rhea's only response was a languid kiss to her wife's throat as she continued to catch her breath.

"Fuck, I love you." Paige spread her arms wide. Rhea was still inside of her, making Paige feel like the most pinned-down woman to ever live. *Liberating*. She no longer had to think or plan a damn thing. Rhea had it all figured out for her. "Best weekend ever."

When Rhea finally had the energy to sit up, she isolated the movement to her torso. *Heaven forbid we become disconnected now, honey*. Paige began giggling uncontrollably as she quickly realized she was consumed with the kind of post-sex feelings that made her higher than a hot air balloon. Rhea slowly pulled the strap-on out of her wife. It was the gentlest thing she had done since slapping Paige on the ass.

"I spent a long time planning all of that." Rhea placed her hand on her hip as she gazed down at her wife with a sweaty visage. "Was kinda worried I might have gone too far a couple of times."

With a salacious moan in her throat, Paige sat up and traced a line between the two large freckles on her wife's arm. "Not possible." She tugged the strap-on, knowing that the tiny nubs on the other end were probably perfectly aligned with Rhea's clit. Sure enough, Rhea went down, a feminine gasp dancing in the air.

*This is what you've done to me*. Paige couldn't stop. She wouldn't stop until Rhea made her, and based on the way she

groaned when her wife's tongue flicked against the strap-on? They were going to stay here a good while longer. Dinner could come later. Right now, all there was in Paige's world was bringing more pleasure to the woman who had gone all out for hers.

## Chapter 20

Rarely did anyone from Rhea's New York publisher come to LA. As it so happened, the acquisition's editor was in town for an award gala that had nothing to do with Rhea but went out of her way to treat one of her authors to lunch in Beverly Hills.

*Jimmy's gonna love this.* Her agent had no idea she was going straight to the source and bypassing him entirely. Then again, as long as Rhea was signed with him and still having work picked up by her publisher, he got his cut. *Less work for him.* And since this lunch was on the publisher's dime? Rhea sprung for the prime steak lunch that came with a glass of red wine and chocolate mousse for dessert. It had been so long since her lunch was more decadent than her dinner that she might skip the evening meal altogether.

"We're looking at a summer 2024 release right now," said Parvati, who was more concerned with the texts coming through her phone than the salad in front of her. "You'll have your first round of edits back at Halloween. If you meet your

New Year's deadline, we should have the galleys done by Memorial Day. Cover art by Easter..." She sat back and scratched her chin, eyes still glued to her phone. Rhea had put hers away as a courtesy, but she forgot this was a *business* lunch. "Yes. Make that late summer."

"Sounds pretty quick for you guys." Rhea personally knew some independent authors who put books out *way* quicker, but New York usually worked on a two-year publishing cycle. "You must really want this book out."

"Rhea, babe!" Parvati finally looked up, although her eyes darted between Rhea's face and the phone between them. "You're about to blow up as one of the hottest literary authors this side of the Rockies! Why do you think I'm taking time out of my day to have lunch with you? I'm here to talk business, sure, but I also want to praise you on all of your success."

"Really? Have I missed something?"

"'Stage Kids Having Brunch' was one of our bestselling titles last year and was nominated for several awards. Have you forgotten?"

Rhea cocked her head in mild bemusement. "Sure, but it didn't win anything."

"*Tsk!* Nominations are almost worth more than actual awards. We can collect more of those for the sales page. People love a nominee who never won anything. Almost as much as they love authors who never get nominated for anything but still collect fans every time they sneeze out a few words."

“I see.”

“The current book needs work, sure, but what manuscript doesn’t?” That was the harshest thing Parvati had said during this lunch, but she uttered it so flippantly that Rhea let it slide off her back. “We’ll get it cleaned up in record time. We’ve got Florence on it right now as we speak.” She referred to the usual line editor Rhea worked with on her books. Because Parvati was an *ideas and networking* editor who saw a hit in the making, not the kind of editor who corrected Rhea’s grammatical faux pas. *Is this the real Hollywood experience right here?* Rhea was tired, and not only because she lived in Los Angeles County.

“I’m flattered you believe so much in my work.”

“Of course we do! That’s why we give you that nice advance, babe.” Parvati flagged down the waiter and ordered another soda water. “You’ve got a natural talent for this whole ‘literary fiction’ thing. Trust me. I have an eye for it. Who do you think convinced the boys on the board to take you on as an unknown? I haven’t had a win like that in *ages*. Which reminds me... are you hard at work on your next masterpiece yet? What’s it about? You must tell me. I want the inside scoop before that agent of yours tries to take credit.”

When the waiter returned with Parvati’s water, Rhea asked him for a to-go box for what she couldn’t eat. She sat back and folded her hands in her lap, elbows hanging over the arms of her chair. “I’ve been taking a bit of a creative break from lit-fic. Refilling the well, as they say.”



“Oh? I hope it’s worth it. Are you working on something we might be interested in?”

“Uh...” Rhea couldn’t help it. When a woman put her on the spot like this, she blushed. *Someone call Paige and tell her it happened. I’ll owe her five bucks.* When Paige heard her wife was having lunch with the “pretty acquisitions editor” she claimed that Rhea would stutter at some point. *It’s almost like my wife knows I’m attracted to feminine women in short dresses.* Parvati had dressed for the summer LA weather, all right, and Rhea had done her best to not stare at the eye-catching thighs beneath a Saks Fifth Avenue skirt.

“Don’t tell me it’s horror. We can’t do shit with *horror*.”

“I know some people who might call it that...” Rhea couldn’t bring herself to describe what she had been writing. Not in front of a woman she barely knew, not in public, and definitely *not* with a (male!) waiter boxing up half a steak into a take-out box. “I mean, it’s not genre horror. It’s low-brow stuff.”

Parvati laughed. “Personally, I love me some ‘low-brow’ fiction in the bath after spending my whole day talking about stuffy tales of disenchanted businessmen and doped-up housewives plotting murder. You know, you strike me as someone who churns out some cozy mysteries.”

“I’m not sure what those are.” Rhea had a decent idea, based on her multiple trips to libraries and bookstores over the years, but the “cozy” part eluded her. It was either like *Murder, She Wrote*, or *Fargo*. *Those are not the same, right?* At least now

Rhea had the image of Angela Lansbury taking Frances McDormand's role in the iconic '90s movie.

“So, what is it?”

“It's really not something I planned on publishing,” Rhea lied. “Let alone something I think you guys will be interested in.”

“Whatever it is, it can't be terrible enough to tank your career. I've seen some pretty crazy things happen this past decade.” Parvati kept talking, even though she claimed to give Rhea plenty of opportunities to answer. “That's the new digital age we live in. Since e-books finally took off, people are openly hungry for some of the craziest drivel you've *ever* read. I love it. Makes my job as a professional reader so much more interesting! So what is it?” Parvati leaned across the table, removing her sunglasses. “A campy slasher book? Schlocky sci-fi? A Tom Clancy ripoff that will certainly get us sued into oblivion?” Parvati was still laughing. “Can you imagine! You really do look the type to read some Clancy, Rhea.”

“My dad reads a lot of Tom Clancy. Does that count?”

“Ha! I love it.”

Rhea shifted her gaze to the other diners on the shaded Beverly Hills patio. Although a large plant and a fountain separated her from the other people having business lunches in that part of town, she was still too shy to loudly proclaim, “It's more like a *Fifty Shades* knockoff.”

“Oh?” Parvati's elbow slid off the table. “*Oh.*”

“Yeah.” Rhea already regretted this. “Just for fun. I wanted to try writing things totally not like what I usually submit. Purge some ideas that were knocking around my noggin.”

“Interesting.” Whatever went through Parvati’s mind was as elusive as a chilly Santa Ana breeze. All Rhea could say was that she wasn’t confident in that scheming look on a New York editor’s face.

“As I said, I wasn’t planning on submitting it to you guys, or anywhere else for that matter. It’s for fun while I figure out what ‘serious’ thing I want to write next. Maybe it’ll give me ideas.” She was already toying with a plot idea involving a woman rediscovering herself through ridiculous fantasies that would never come true.

Parvati still tapped her lips with a perfectly painted pink nail. “We do have our other imprint, you know,” she said, voice low. “The *Forever Escapes* line. It’s basically all *Fifty Shades* knockoffs.”

“Oh?” Rhea genuinely didn’t know.

“Of course, we don’t bill them that way, and erotic romance is older than Harlequin. But... are you sure you don’t want to publish the current thing you’re working on? Honestly, you write quickly enough we could get two names going at once under different imprints.”

Rhea’s heart tumbled toward her stomach, hitting every rib along the way. “I would fucking die,” she flatly said.

Something about her discomfort made Parvati laugh again as if Rhea were *so real and relatable* that this jaded New York cynic couldn't keep herself from falling in love with such wholesome wit.

“Honey,” she exclaimed, “it would be under a different name, *obviously*.”

No, Rhea knew that. In fact, she would demand it should it come to fruition. *My dad can't know. My friends can't know. I don't even want Paige to know.* What Rhea wrote was private. It was for *her*. She was as interested in sharing her sexual fantasies with the world as she was sucking her wife's toes. *We've all got our boundaries.* Foot worship was one of Rhea's.

“Why don't you send me some of what you're working on?” Parvati took out one of her business cards, which Rhea already had. Instead of handing it straight over, though, she wrote something on the white side. “This is my personal email. As long as it doesn't hit my work email, we can consider it off the record. I can tell you if there's something we can work with over at *Forever Escapes*. Of course, you'd be passed to their head editor, but I can attest the woman knows a hit when she sees one. She's the one responsible for Codie Savage and Grace St. Michaels.” Parvati realized she had to explain to Rhea who those women were. “Codie Savage won a Rita Award from the Romance Writers of America, and Grace St. Michael's latest release broke the record for longest run in the New York Times top ten for a romance novel. Trust me. If Sheila over at *Forever Escapes* likes you, it can open new avenues.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Hey, don’t send me something if you don’t want.” Parvati shrugged. “I’m simply telling you that we might be interested in changing your life yet again. You can’t tell me that we haven’t been very good to you, Rhiannon.”

Rhea pretended she hadn’t been called that name. “I’ll think about it. Can’t say I’m jonesing to be a part-time romance writer. Besides, you’ve got to know that I’m gay, right? I’m not writing anything sexy between a man and a woman. It’s women all the way down.”

“Publishers *love* gay stuff these days. We haven’t met our quota for next year yet, so you’d have a real shot if Sheila likes it.”

*Our quota. Gotcha.* This was exactly what Rhea wanted to avoid. Her literature was rarely about her and more about the random characters and stories that appeared in her head. She could write about a jilted housewife with three kids going to her high school reunion where everyone expected her to still be cheerleader chic, but only if she didn’t have to write *intimate* scenes with the main character’s husband. *I wouldn’t know the first thing about it.* Everything Rhea knew about straight relationships, let alone sex, came from the media and what her friends openly talked about. Last she checked, the masses weren’t exactly champing at the bit to read the lesbian *Fifty Shades*, no matter how much lip service they offered on their social media profiles.

“I might.” That was all Rhea would commit to as she willed this meeting to end. “Although I am working on a new lit-fic novel. I promise.”

Parvati scoffed. “Don’t get me wrong, we love the awards and buzz that come from our more literary fiction, but it’s the dirty romance that pays the bills in the company.”

Rhea wasn’t surprised to hear that, but she was still reticent to commit. Like a lot of things in her life lately, that sounded like something with the power to change things for the better... or the worse.

She had to consider her options carefully. The last thing Rhea wanted was to rock the boat too much. Both in her career... and in her marriage.

Yet some things were already past the point of no return, weren’t they?

# Part 3

## **Rekindling the Love**







## Chapter 21

The summer wore on toward September, a time when Rhea often felt her most human. She hated to admit it, but she *was* the woman who loved pumpkin spice, cozy sweaters, and kitschy Halloween décor that went on clearance two days before the big day. Living in LA her whole life, though, she rarely had a good excuse to indulge all three at once. It was like searching for snow on Christmas.

In her case, she had to go to San Francisco if she wanted the full experience of foggy autumn mornings full of fluffy coats and pumpkin-spiced lattes.

San Francisco, however, was not where she lived. Instead, Rhea's life took a very different direction as she and Paige became regulars at the local swinger's club, as Rhea casually called it. And every time she referred to Hellfire as *the swinger's bar*, Paige rolled her eyes and reminded her wife they weren't ready for *swinging*.

Didn't stop Rhea from chortling every time, though.

It surprised her, however, how quickly they fell into a routine whenever they attended a party on the weekends. *Not every weekend, but often enough I'm on a first-name basis with some of the employees.* They arrived, they checked their coats, they got their free drinks, and they either wandered around by themselves or hung out with their friends until everyone naturally broke off to do whatever fancied them that night. In Rhea and Paige's case, that often included catching whatever show was on stage if it appealed to them or finding the ladies' only room to do a different kind of people-watching.

If Paige had more than one drink in her, she openly watched other couples as if this was her best-kept secret.

"It kinda reminds me of those Greek parties," she said one night when a half-naked woman had wandered into the room and instantly had couples fighting over her. "Except way fewer frat guys. The sorority girls could be as crazy. Remember?"

Rhea was usually too shy by then to admit to anything but breathing. She didn't *hate* being a voyeur, but it was challenging for her to face some of the very things she now wrote about. Because she hadn't started on her "next great American novel," but she pretended as if she had whenever someone brought it up.

Most of the time, they came with friends and hung out with them in the main room long enough to call it a night before anything else happened. Neither Paige nor Rhea were dancers, but as the weeks turned into months, they were more

comfortable with showing overt affection in front of others – both strangers and friends.

On the weekend after Labor Day, they attended the monthly “Blackout” night, which requested guests to either dress in all black or dark-inspired clothing. *If they wear clothing in the back at all.* Rhea had seen more bare ass that past summer than she had in her whole life. At some point, those perky cheeks lost their luster, didn’t they?

Paige had completely cleaned up in a black halter dress with a plunging neckline. Her hair was done up on top of her head, teardrop earrings dangling against her neck. Rhea wore black trousers and a suit jacket over a dark blue camisole that would soon be the only thing she wore up top as the heat got to her. Their friends were likewise decked out in their best black duds that didn’t always cover what they boasted beneath their clothes. Like Jocie, who never met a halter top or push-up bra she couldn’t wear in public. The woman was more skin than clothes, yet Rhea felt completely comfortable around her. *It’s how she dresses outside of work all the time!* Probably at work, too. Paige knew more about that.

Jocie’s girlfriends also wore black, but they couldn’t be more different from her. Loren wore leggings with a black vest, her short hair recently cut to put more emphasis on her natural makeup. Maya sported an off-the-shoulder dress that complemented her dark brown hair and the tanned hue of her skin. All three looked more Californian than Rhea, who still couldn’t believe she hailed from the beach-bum capital of California, let alone *America*.

Nobody there was a natural exhibitionist, yet it didn't stop Maya from sitting in Jocie's lap and sharing a drink with her, their lips comically smacking together every time they sipped at the same time. Loren sat beside them, rolling her eyes and looking at Rhea as if to ask, "*See what I put up with?*" Rhea didn't see the problem. She knew Loren was as freaky as the rest.

It also served as a lovely reminder that Rhea had no interest in introducing a third to her marriage, not even as a plaything first, girlfriend second. That was the kind of stuff that stayed in her stories... where they belonged.

"Let's play a game." Jocie squeezed Maya closer to her as she made her magnanimous announcement to their group of loveseats. "Called 'two truths and a lie, with a twist.'"

"No," Loren instantly said. "Absolutely not. Your games suck."

Jocie poked her in the thigh. "All the more reason for you to play, *sweetie*."

Paige refrained from drinking her cocktail. "What's the twist?"

"The twist is that whoever's 'it' doesn't talk until the end," Jocie explained. "For example, if my sexy biscuit here was *it*..." Maya squealed in embarrassed delight as Jocie kissed her right on the heavy cleavage, "I would say two things about her I knew were true, as well as something I was like 99% sure was a lie. Everyone else has to guess the lie. If everyone

guesses, I take a drink. If it turns out it's *not* a lie, I have to chug the whole drink in one go."

"Interesting," Paige said. "What happens if nobody guesses the lie?"

"Then the person who's 'it' takes the drink."

Loren looked at her girlfriend as if she were crazy. "How is this fun?"

"For that," Jocie announced, "you're going to be *it* first, and I'm the one who is going to guess two truths and a lie about you."

"If you want to get drunk, just get drunk," Loren muttered.

"Because you hate me when I'm drunk!"

"Wrong. I hate it when you throw up in my toilet and are too hungover in the morning to admit that you're not twenty anymore."

Paige glanced at her wife before saying, "Sure. Let's play."

"All right." Jocie shoved the drink she shared with Maya into her girlfriend's hand. "Loren, you're up. You're in the hot seat."

"I'm *always* in the hot seat around your ass."

"Okay, but you like it."

"You sure like to think that I like it."

Rhea nudged her wife beside her. "When do you think their wedding is?" she whispered.

Paige snorted. "I hope we're invited to that shitshow."

"Ladies and gentleladies..." Jocie sounded like an MC as the dance song playing from the DJ's booth conveniently transitioned into "Moulin Rouge." "The two truths about our lovely Loren Hamilton, associate professor of Religious Studies, is that she became a vegetarian to impress a girl at St. Francesca's... and she has a schoolgirl uniform fetish."

Loren gasped. "I think you mean that's the lie!"

"No, no," Maya interrupted. "You went nuts when I wore a uniform that one time. You said something about how it reminded you of the good times."

Loren was so red in the face that Jocie erupted in laughter. Even Paige, who knew Loren the least out of everyone there, couldn't help but shake her head in amusement. "I'd love to know what this supposed lie is then."

"Because you go fucknuts for the schoolgirl look..." Jocie wagged a long finger in her other girlfriend's face. "You always have at least one student waiting for you in your office."

"I'm going to kill you."

Jocie whispered something in Maya's ear. Seconds later, Maya threw back her head and laughed so hard that she almost fell off Jocie's lap.

"Both of you," Loren added. "And I actually like you, Maya."

“It’s okay if you don’t like me,” Jocie said. “As long as you love me enough to keep sleeping with me.”

“I don’t have to love you to keep sleeping with you.”

“Well?” Rhea prompted the throuple sitting across from her and Paige. “Is that a lie?”

“Of course it is! Jesus, Jocie, you could get me fired!”

“I’m still getting back at you for getting me expelled all those years ago.”

Before things could get more heated, Paige volunteered to go next. The onus was on Rhea to come up with two truths and a lie about her wife, all while Jocie took a large drink.

“You were not a virgin when we met,” she said, keeping with the adult theme. “You secretly ghostwrite for me, and you have a crush on one of your clients.”

Silence fell across the women on the other couch. Paige shot a single dagger at her wife while she crossed her arms. “Speaking of getting people fired...” she muttered.

“I know for a fact that she doesn’t ghostwrite any of your stuff,” Loren said. “I’ve read enough to guess.”

“Which begs the question,” Jocie continued for her girlfriend, “about that last statement. *Do* you have a crush on one of your clients? Because I need to know who it is before I throw any more WNBA players at you.”

Rhea already took a drink as she was so easily discovered in her lie. While liquor burned all the way down, Paige said,



“You’ve seen some of my clients. They’re hot as hell.”

“I need to know who, though. Because it’s killing me.”

“I’ll never tell, Joce.”

“It’s the porn star, isn’t it?”

Everyone was silent again until Maya asked, “Porn star? I guess they’d have to go to the gym a lot.”

“Like I said, I’ll never tell.”

Jocie turned to Loren. “It’s definitely the porn star. She’s the hottest shit in that gym, but not as hot as our Maya.”

“I wanna know what she looks like!” Maya exclaimed.

“Her name is Carmen Coyote, right?” Jocie didn’t wait for an answer. “Time to hit up the search engines when we get home. I think you’ll like her,” she said to Loren. “If you love Maya’s thighs, you’ll go gaga for Carmen’s.”

“Nobody’s thighs are better than Maya’s. Definitely not yours.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m a celery stick.”

Rhea felt bad enough about outing her wife’s crush that she said, “I’ll go next. Who wants to guess my fake secret?”

Before anyone else had the chance, Paige volunteered. “Nobody knows you as well as I do, right?” she quipped.

Rhea wasn’t opposed to her wife throwing tit-for-tat. Considering how different their marriage was these days, she was willing to hear Paige’s perception of how things were going.

She wasn't quite prepared for what soon came out of her wife's mouth.

"You are a terrible swimmer for having grown up in Malibu," she led with, "you have slept with at least *two* people sitting across from us, and..." Rhea already dreaded this. "You've got a dirty mind, but you've written at least... I dunno... five filthy sex stories."

Rhea wondered what gave her away. Was it the sudden jerk of her shoulders, or the paling of her face? Because the only thing worse than blushing every five seconds was being so scandalized that she turned pasty vampire white.

"Uh..." Jocie coughed through her disbelief. "I have a feeling that *all* of those are true."

"What?" Paige laughed. "Rhea doesn't write smut."

Loren, who didn't defend herself against accusations of having slept with Rhea before, raised both of her eyebrows. "I wouldn't be surprised if she had. Lots of sexual tension in those books she's written."

"What?" This time, Rhea said it. "What are you talking about? My books are tame!"

Maya spoke up. "Trust me, as a romance reader, you don't have to write about sex for it to drip from every page."

"You agree with her?"

"Did Paige ghostwrite that book about the angry housewife you write?" Jocie asked. "Because that was like the most sexually frustrated book I've *ever* read on a plane."

“Rhea...” Paige slowly turned toward her wife. “Are you writing dirty stories?”

“I haven’t told anyone except my editor.” *And Roxy.* Roxy wasn’t here!

Everyone was laughing, including Paige. *I’m glad this is amusing because I want to die.* Was Loren still offering to kill people? Because Rhea was happy to go first.

“When do we get a live reading?” Paige asked.

As if she sensed Rhea’s discomfort, Jocie reached into her bag and unveiled what was beneath the false bottom where she kept her wallet and whatever she thought she needed to party in Hellfire. “I’ve got a better question.” She pulled out a small Ziploc bag of brownies, except Rhea already knew those were no ordinary baked goods. “Who wants an edible?”

Loren was exasperated enough that she was definitely the most likely one to take the first bite. “You’re going to get us kicked out of here!”

“Sorry, next time I’ll bring us some blow for the bathroom if that makes you feel better. We could be like those fancy heiresses you know.”

Loren lightly shoved her girlfriend, who shoved her back before slamming the corner piece of the brownie into her hand.

“Eat it, Hamilton. God knows you need it.”

Rhea jumped forward and grabbed herself a piece as well. After what she and Paige exposed about one another, it was no wonder her wife was right behind her.

Except Paige took a *much larger* bite. Rhea knew things were about to get interesting. Maybe too much so.

## Chapter 22

Paige didn't know what was in Jocie's brownie. All she knew was that she *loved* it.

*Oh, yeah, this is how you enjoy a party.* Paige was high enough to feel like giddy liquid as she maneuvered through the crowd and danced with total strangers. Rhea sat on the sidelines, slightly slack-jawed as Paige cheered on someone in the dancing cage who had taken off everything but her underwear.

Rhea informed her that she was not getting any more alcohol. *Honey, if you think this is booze doing the talking, you're square.* Paige hadn't smoked or bitten an edible in way too long. Since when? *No idea. Don't care.*

She knew Rhea walked down to the local dispensary every other month to stock up on "writing supplies," as she called it. Whenever she was hit with writer's block, she either lit up by the pool or snuck something out of the fridge. Preferably from the storage box marked "DON'T EAT!" As if that ever

stopped Paige after a tough day at work. There were times when pot hit the spots alcohol couldn't.

*I'm getting blitzed every time I come here.* Maybe they weren't supposed to smuggle outside food and drink, regardless of what was in it, but it wouldn't stop her from having a hit before leaving the car. Just enough to be loose and into the moment. She swore.

In this case, she might have bitten off more than she could chew.

*Whoa.* Almost falling into her seat was the funniest thing that ever happened. Now that the throuple of Jocie, Loren, and Maya had flitted off elsewhere, Rhea was the only one to keep an eye on Paige. When she looked up into her wife's eyes, the marijuana hit her with so much guilt that she blurted, "I'm sorry! I had no idea you were writing sexy stuff!"

It took Rhea a moment to realize what Paige was talking about. "Don't worry about it," she coolly said. "It's something I've done for fun. Takes some work coming up with scenarios for Miss Prima Donna Power Bottom."

Paige wrapped her arms around Rhea's shoulders and squeezed her until gasps for breath turned into heady giggles. "You come up with some of the best, too," she purred against Rhea's throat. "Don't suppose you have anything fun lined up for tonight?"

"Can't say I do."

Any other night and Paige might have pouted. Tonight, though, she was too high on the moment – and other things – to care. “I want to read your tawdry stories. Are they about me?”

“Not exactly.”

“Come on.” Paige tapped her fingertip against Rhea’s cheek. “You can tell me. Maybe I like the idea of you writing porn about your wife. You know, the woman who you’ve been fucking like an animal as of late.”

Paige truly had no complaints as of late. Surely, it was what Rhea had always wanted, too. *We’re having more sex than ever before.* At least twice a week, which was a new record! If it happened more often? It was a delicious quickie early in the morning or right after work, in those moments between walking through the door and making dinner. *Sometimes while making dinner...* The first time Rhea surprised her with sex right against the counter next to a pot of boiling noodles, Paige swore they had never been more spontaneous.

And as long as the unknown kept coming for her, Paige was into it. She didn’t even mind the purely vanilla nights after a long evening of cuddling on the couch. Rhea was like a renewed woman when she got beneath the covers – and Paige had never been more attracted to her.

She wanted more weekends like the Fourth of July at a remote cabin. She wanted more sharing of their fantasies. If reading Rhea’s dirty stories meant learning more about what made her sexuality tick, then Paige was all for it. *Tell me what*

*kind of sick and twisted shit is in your head. Maybe we can make it happen!*

Was it too much to ask that right now?

Apparently.

“Twisted?” Rhea waved her off with nary a kiss to the knuckles. “I wouldn’t call anything I write *twisted*. It’s silly fantasies.”

“I want to know all your fantasies.” Paige couldn’t stop touching this bouncy cheek that beguiled her with every pore. “I’ll tell you mine.”

“You’ve been a font of inspiration lately, this is true.”

While a whole bachelorette party erupted on the dancefloor, complete with hoots and whistles, Paige drank a large breath and exhaled all over Rhea’s head. *Totally my finest moment!* “I want you to take me right here. In front of all these people.”

“I don’t think we’re allowed to do that in this room.”

“Fiiiiine. Then in the other room. Ooh. Maybe we could go home with your friends.”

“Come on.” Rhea snorted, her incredulity duly noted. “That’s silly.”

“Why!”

“They wouldn’t be interested, for one thing.”

“So you get to know what they’re like in bed, but I don’t?”

“That was when we were teenagers. It’s been almost twenty years, Paige.”



Well! That wasn't very fair, now was it? Paige couldn't quite put her finger on *why* it wasn't fair, but she blamed that on the substances in her body. While those substances made her feel *great*, they also amplified everything coursing from her heart to her brain. Everything was turned up to max.

"Sooo..." Paige flopped onto the far end of the loveseat, her legs dangling apart and one of her boobs threatening to pop out of her plunging neckline. She had forgotten to include the fashion tape before leaving the house. "Here I am. Left to my own devices."

"You're a bit high, hon," Rhea apologetically said. "It's probably not a good idea to do something too crazy. If you want, we could go dance..."

Except Paige didn't want to *dance*. She wanted to explore what every fiber of her being was screaming about! "It's cool." She popped back up, hair jostled on her head. "I'm going to the bathroom. Maybe get another drink. You want anything?"

Rhea shook her head. "You're gonna be annoyed at me for saying this, but I don't think you should have more alcohol."

"I *wasn't gonna*, jeez. I could go for some Perrier right now. Ooh. A Diet Coke."

Paige left on that note. She managed to keep her composure while navigating toward the women's restroom, although she was well aware that her legs wanted to buckle and her vision was not its best. *I might be a bit inebriated, yes...* Two drinks and an edible went beyond the current limit for Paige, a physically fit woman who (mostly) ate healthy but was no

longer in college. Rationally, she knew to cut herself off from all substances if she didn't want to wake up with a sickening hangover. Such things had long lost their appeal.

But could she help it if she looked at everyone else having fun and felt a *little* jealous?

She came out of the restroom thinking about Diet Coke and chocolate, not necessarily in that order. Where was Jocie? Did she have any brownie crumbs left in her illicit baggy? Could Paige lick the plastic?

*That's how you know you're hitting rock bottom, girl.* Paige brushed a fallen bang out of her face and took a stroll through the club, avoiding the roped-off VIP areas as if she weren't high enough to catch the attention of the employees in a busy club. *This is when the paranoia sets in.* Surely, everyone knew she was too far gone to be in a place that forbade outside alcohol and all drugs. Yet only a few visits to Hellfire confirmed that people snuck in cocaine, MDMA, and painkillers to heighten their partying experience. *I'll be the one who gets us all kicked out and banned.* That was why she had to be careful about how she presented herself to the other club members who were staring at her because she stumbled about and talked to herself – not because she tried so hard to act straight that she moved as stiffly as a robot.

*This is dumb.* She eventually sat on a round couch in the middle of a room, closing her eyes to steady her balance. When she opened them again, a familiar pair was in front of her.

“Look who it is! Long time no see!” Irene, was it? Paige didn’t see the husband with her, but she did see someone else.

“Sorry. I don’t recall your name,” she said to the young woman with curly dark hair and a fake ID card. Or so Paige had heard from reliable sources. *Honey, if you turn me in for the edible, I’m turning your ass in too.* Mutually assured destruction!

Irene didn’t give her young date time to respond. “Are you here by yourself tonight?” She sat next to Paige as if they were already the oldest of besties.

“No. My wife is around here somewhere. We came with friends.” Paige sniffed. “What about you? Where’s the guy?”

That made Irene laugh. “Josh isn’t in town with us this weekend. He had to attend some big, fancy meeting in St. Louis. Go figure.”

Paige glanced at the quiet yet attentive girl with curly hair. “See you made friends since the last time we met.”

The girl glanced at Irene, who nodded in some unspoken approval. “It’s nice to see you again. Paige, was it?” That husky voice still caught Paige off guard, who wondered what this girl’s game was both times they met. “Yeah, I haven’t forgotten you.”

Paige gestured to her cleavage. “Hard to forget these, yes. What was your name, again?”

“Helena is one of the best treasures we’ve found in this city,” Irene cut in. “She’s been like our off-and-on pet ever since we

met that... well, I believe it was the same night *we* met as well. How fortuitous. Did you know she's not even from LA? Just happened to be in town the same weekend we were."

"That's cool." Was Paige coming down? Was that why she suddenly took this conversation so gravely and *seriously*, like the uncoolest aunt to ever look at a twenty-year-old girl and think "*WTF are you doing getting involved with a married couple? Go to school!*" No wonder Rhea had gently rejected her.

Shit. Rhea! She probably wondered where the hell her wife was!

"You know," Irene leaned back, the circular sofa making her movements more languid as her chin came closer to Paige's shoulder. "We came here tonight hoping to meet some old – or new – friends. I hear there's quite the party going on in a VIP room if you know what I mean."

Paige sniffed. At least she hadn't been tempted by cocaine. Not that she ever went for the *hard* stuff. *My body is a temple, yadda yadda yadda...* She really regretted that alcohol and edible combo now. It would be a miracle if she didn't require to be carried home because she kept falling asleep. *How old am I, again?*

"I can get you in," Irene continued. "You and your wife, of course. It's a real girls' party in there. Ran by some famous actress who likes to surround herself with beautiful naked women. Oh, you have to be naked. Would that be a problem?"

Paige chewed the inside of her cheek as if that would hold back the discomfort plaguing the poorest part of her stomach. “That sounds *fun*, but I don’t think Rhea would go for it.”

“Oh? Too bad. It’s such a bummer to be held back by the person who is supposed to enjoy these things with you. Josh lets me do *whatever* I want.” Irene looked at Helena when she said that. “Doesn’t he, lovely?”

“You let him do whatever he wants, too.”

“Isn’t that the recipe for a healthy marriage?”

*Maybe I don’t want to go.* “Believe it or not, if Rhea doesn’t want to go, that’s enough for me. I don’t want my wife to be miserable with whatever we’re doing.”

That should have been a powerful statement, but Paige couldn’t combat the acid in her stomach: she burped so loudly that Irene was instantly taken aback and Helena’s eyes widened, almost impressed. *That’s how you know she’s a freakin’ baby. She thinks burps are cool.*

That was when Paige desperately wished Rhea would come find her. Before, it had been easy enough to cross this crazy club without an escort, but Irene’s presence was so off-putting that Paige couldn’t help but covet Rhea’s powerful shyness that created an instant barrier between her and any overtly sexual person whom she didn’t know. *Throw in a man, and she’s more likely to run out of the room than I am.* Paige wasn’t exactly bisexual, either, but she wasn’t as put off by male anatomy or their flirtations as her wife was.

“Have a great time.” Paige slumped down to the circular couch, elbow propping up her torso as she watched a half-naked woman coquettishly lure a man into another room. Helena watched after them with minute interest; Irene also saw but scoffed. “It’s a hot night for the little black dress look.”

Her elbow slipped out from beneath her, cheek pressing against the couch cushion while Irene got up and gestured for Helena to follow her. Paige was alone again, but this time? The high wasn’t the best companion.



Rhea didn’t know what was taking Paige so long in the bathroom, but she had a feeling that someone got distracted on her way back to the main room.

“Sheesh.” Rhea maneuvered through an increasingly rowdy club as dance music pulsed through the springy floor and women in black lingerie ordered yet another round of drinks at the biggest bar in the club. Somewhere between the restroom line and the first back room, two different men hit on her: the first was a man who completely misread her predilections, and the second completely misinterpreted her gender. When Rhea wished him the best of luck finding a “daddy” of his dreams, they both parted with flushed cheeks. “Where the hell are you, Paige?” The locals were restless, and the tourists were absolutely feral!

Her hunt was only hindered by how popular the party was that night – and the fact that everyone was dressed in black,

aside from the few who had not heard about the theme ahead of time. The number of blond women in black dresses with plunging necklines was too damn high. How was Rhea supposed to find her wife, let alone gauge if panic was on the table?

She saw Maya, though. She stood in the shorter, albeit still time-consuming restroom line toward the back. “Do you know where Paige is?” she asked her old schoolmates’ girlfriend.

Maya shrugged. “Haven’t seen her. Maybe Jocie and Loren found her. They went that way.” She jerked her thumb toward a cozier room in the back corner. “If you see them, let them know I want to get Del Taco on the way home.” When she saw the confused look on Rhea’s face, she explained. “There was this huge debate between them and Taco Bell. Guess who was fighting over it?”

That was enough for Rhea, who followed Maya’s gaze into another room. Paige was not in here, either, but she did find Jocie and Loren... very, very busy on one of the couches where they thought nobody could see them.

“Never mind.” Rhea had no desire to interrupt them. Those two probably needed a moment to themselves after all the flirting.

She was about to ask for help from one of the employees when she recognized another female couple sitting by themselves in front of the stage, waiting for a show to begin.

“Well, well.” Irene, was it? Rhea only remembered the woman’s name because she had made such an impression the

last time they met. As for the younger person with her? Rhea didn't remember *her* name, but she recalled thinking she was probably too young for this place. "If it isn't Paige's other half."

That was the most surefire way to ensure Rhea paid attention. "Have you seen her? I've been looking for her since like fifteen minutes ago."

Irene looked like she would only part with that information if Rhea gave her something in return. "She's around. Offered to get you two into a raging party in the back, but it sounded like *you* wouldn't be interested."

Rhea put her hands on her hips. Behind her, the stage prepped for a show between two men and one woman. *I better get out of here before I see something that does not click with my brain.* Rhea had a feeling that the woman about to go on stage was the one lounging in the front row, glass in her hand and feet kicking up in the air behind her. She was cute, but not cute enough for Rhea to watch her... do whatever she was about to do.

"Was she okay? She, uh... she's had a lot to drink tonight."

"We last left her back that way." Irene gestured in another direction than Rhea had thought to go. "This place is a maze, isn't it? The huge room with all the stripper poles is my favorite, though. Gosh, I'm such a voyeur."

The other girl laughed. Rhea didn't know what to make of that.



“Guess I’ll go find her, then. I think it’s about time to take her home.”

“My party offer still stands!” Irene called after her with a hand cupped around her mouth. “I think you guys would have a *lot* of fun.”

Rhea didn’t know what that was about, but she was more concerned about finding her wife, anyway. Sure enough, Paige was where Irene said she would be, half-passed out on a couch with her eyes half-opened and a hostess standing nearby, speaking with one of the bouncers.

“Is this yours?” the large, burly man asked Rhea. “Probably a good idea for her to go home. We’ve been keeping an eye on her, but at some point, we have to call 911.”

“Yeah, that’s my wife.” Rhea offered a sheepish smile. “I’ve been looking for her.”

They wandered away to continue their jobs as Rhea sat behind Paige.

“Ready to head home?” she asked her wife.

Paige’s tongue parted her lips. “I don’t wanna go home. I wanna... fuck, I dunno.”

“We can do a lot of that at home.”

“Fuck?”

“A bunch of ‘I don’t know.’”

Paige allowed her wife to help her sit up. “I think I ate too much of that brownie.”

“I think you did too.”

Her cheeks puffed, Paige blew so much air through her lips that more than one person glanced in her direction. Rhea patted her on the thigh before asking if she needed to go to the bathroom once more before they got an Uber home. Paige shook her head.

Maya had moved to the front of the restroom line by the time they slowly walked by. Rhea asked her to tell Jocie and Loren that they were leaving. When Maya – and Paige – asked why she didn’t tell them herself, Rhea bluntly painted a picture of them being busy.

Maya abandoned her prime spot in line to go see it for herself. Rhea wrapped her arm around her wife’s shoulders and guided her toward the entrance, where there was a separate door for those leaving and waiting for rides.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Rhea asked as they waited for the Uber she ordered.

Paige relied on holding her wife’s hand to stay up on her feet. “I found out you write dirty smut. Is that fun?”

“Only if you don’t insist on reading it.”

“Maybe I wanna.” Paige’s hair lightly brushed against Rhea’s shoulder. “You’re a pretty good writer. I bet it’s utterly scandalous.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Is it about me?”

Headlights shone in the distance. “Not really, believe it or not.”

“Is it about *you*?”

“Not everything is about someone other than the people who live in my head.”

Paige repeated that statement to herself, fumbling for the meaning. In truth, Rhea wasn't sure what that meant, either. She simply knew it sounded good for when her loved ones pried way too deeply into her personal projects.

A woman was allowed her secrets. Now, Rhea had a feeling those secrets may come up in conversation a little too often.

## Chapter 23

**D**r. Seville always welcomed her clients with a smile and a handshake if they wanted it. Paige reached out to secure her fingers around the therapist's. Rhea, however, was timid enough to look like she didn't even know how to shake someone's hand when presented with the option.

Which was silly, of course. Paige knew her wife was perfectly adept at socializing and leaving a good impression on people. But the deer in headlights look every time she walked through the therapist's doors did not inspire confidence.

"Tell me what's been going on since the last time we spoke," Dr. Seville said after they all sat down. Paige turned off her phone and tucked it into her bag. Rhea left hers in the back pocket of her jeans. Every time she received a notification, she straightened her spine with a start. "Are things still progressing nicely in your journey to rediscover one another?"

That was such a strange question, but Paige couldn't refute the truth. "We've learned a couple of things we didn't know when we went out this weekend." She glanced at her wife,

who remained stoic where she sat. “For example, my wife writes spicy stuff on the side.”

“Oh?” While Rhea stiffened, Dr. Seville’s poker face did not completely hide her surprise. “It’s good to have your outlets for the thoughts in your head.”

“That’s what I told her,” Rhea said.

“She won’t tell me what it’s about, though,” Paige teased. “I’ve asked.” She had, too. The more she thought about it since that night in Hellfire, the more interested she became in what compelled her wife to write about *anything* sexual. That wasn’t to be confused with the fade-to-black love scenes that already existed in Rhea’s literature. Paige had read most of them. They weren’t anything but the standard vanilla kisses and giggling on the way to the bedroom.

So, what was Rhea writing? How raunchy was it? Would it tell Paige anything about her wife’s desires?

What burned her wasn’t Rhea having a personal outlet for herself. Paige had her own, didn’t she? *I merely want to know what’s going on in her head.*

“Is there a reason you don’t want to share, Rhea?” the therapist asked.

A shrug only irritated Paige more. “If I had it my way, she wouldn’t know about it at all. I like having a safe space where I can let out whatever’s in my head. Like purging my deepest thoughts.”

“I like getting to know you better,” Paige said to her wife. “It’s like finding out you have a new favorite restaurant you love going to, but you won’t tell me what it is.”

“Those two things are a *little* different.” Rhea put her finger and thumb into position.

“Okay.”

The therapist looked between them. “What about your wife’s hobby interests you so much?” Dr. Seville asked. “How do you think it could help you connect more as a couple?”

“Well... if she shared something with me... maybe I’d know what she likes in the bedroom. Besides what I already know, I mean.”

“What do you think about that response, Rhea?”

Another shrug. “I don’t think she would glean much from it.”

“Are you afraid she might judge you for its contents?”

Finally, something set Rhea off balance. “It is pretty intense. That’s the whole point. It’s stuff I can’t put in my regular novels. Stuff that doesn’t even belong there in the same context. Like I said. It’s an outlet.”

“I get that,” Paige said. “I’m simply curious. It’s fine if you don’t want to share and it’s all for you. I simply found it interesting.”

Something about leading with this rubbed Paige the wrong way. *You’re both completely overlooking the point.* Paige

wasn't only nosy – she genuinely thought she might learn something from her wife's erotic writing. *Maybe there are ideas in there you're not even aware of, Rhea.* After that bombastic weekend in the cabin, Rhea had been more withdrawn in a few ways. Their sex life remained more stable than it had been before couples' counseling, but there was a new distance between them. Never before had Paige been so involved in their relationship and gotten pushback. Just that past week, Rhea had announced she was a bit touched out and needed a short break from anything overly intimate. That included cuddling on the couch. *Who is she? What's going on?*

Was Paige being too much? Had a monster been unleashed? Had their rekindling romance ignited a wildfire that endangered their very marriage?

There Paige went, blaming herself for everything again. *I either don't want any sex or too much sex.* It didn't help that her newfound kink curiosity had made Rhea admit that it took a lot out of her. Not only the physical act of sex itself – coming up with new and exciting ways to make love and “keep things interesting.” *Her words.*

Paige had hoped to address some of those things this week. Yet the awkward silence in the therapist's office made her bite her tongue instead.

“Is there anything you'd like to talk about, Rhea?”

Paige heard the counselor's words, but she barely registered that they were directed at her wife, who unlinked her legs and folded her hands in her lap. “I wouldn't know where to begin.”

Panic gripped Paige, and she didn't know why.

“How about in response to learning something about your wife?” Dr. Seville prompted. “What have you learned about Paige since we last talked?”

*I'm supposed to patiently wait for an answer?* Paige couldn't figure out what her wife might say. Since their ill-fated date at Hellfire, Rhea had been a bit of a loner and Paige focused on her work. They were coming out of the summer season at the gym, which meant her athletic clients demanded more of her time but the celebrities became scarcer as they planned their vacations or moved on location for movie shoots. Only online celebs, like influencers, kept their regular once or thrice a week appointments. Her whole schedule was in flux.

Rhea finally spoke. “I've learned more about her crush on one of her clients.”

Paige was as white as a sheet. Dr. Seville curled her bottom lip into her mouth. “Is that so? Do you have a crush on one of your clients, Paige?”

“It's not like that,” she insisted. “I'm professional with her, but I won't lie that she's very attractive, and I've mentioned that to Rhea. It's not something I'm keeping a secret.”

“Why do you think Rhea brings that up, then?”

“I dunno...” Paige turned to her partner. “Why *do* you bring it up?”

“Why do you have to bring up what I write for fun?”



Paige was taken aback. “She asked me what I learned about you since we last came here. That’s what I learned.”

“Maybe I like that it was a private thing only I knew about,” Rhea slightly snapped. “You know it’s a big deal for me to openly talk about things like sex. I blush whenever our friends talk about it in front of us. I can’t even watch a movie with a slightly dirty sex scene without wanting to eject myself to the moon. I didn’t grow up like you.”

“Huh? Grow up like *me*?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t!”

Rhea’s sigh was so heavy that she melted into the couch. “Fine. I wasn’t like you by the time we got to college. I wasn’t completely comfortable with myself. I didn’t put myself out there and date a lot. It wasn’t normal to me yet. I couldn’t even talk to a pretty classmate without sounding like a twelve-year-old boy going through puberty. It’s embarrassing to even talk about.”

“All right,” the therapist interrupted. “I think we’ve locked on to something here neither of you were prepared to talk about. Paige...” Sparks flew from one side of the room to the other, and it was barely enough to rehabilitate Paige’s heart. “How does hearing this make you feel?”

Paige didn’t know – and that was part of the problem still percolating between her and Rhea, the woman who had a lot of feelings now that it had been nearly fifteen years together.

Every time Paige thought that was bearable, something new popped up to make her requestion everything.



Things were still tense when they returned to their car and headed home, where Paige would have to grab her work bag and head to West Hollywood, pretending everything was fine.

They were already stuck in traffic from the moment they left the parking lot. With one hand on the wheel and the other in her hair, Rhea leaned against the driver-side window, her nerves so obviously frayed that Paige was almost afraid to say anything.

“I’m sorry I brought it up,” she said after an unbearable silence. Not even NPR was on, which told her that Rhea *really* was stuck in her own head. “I thought it was okay. I didn’t realize that it being secret meant that much to you.”

Rhea said nothing as she lightly stepped on the gas pedal. They only moved forward a few feet, but such was traffic in Southern California.

“I only want to get to know you better,” Paige continued. “Which feels like such a silly thing to say as someone who has been with you for so many years. I *should* know you better than I do, but then new stuff pops up and I see a side of you that I didn’t even know really existed...”

Rhea finally glanced in her direction. “What are you talking about?”

“You know...” Paige watched a woman push a baby carriage up a neighborhood sidewalk as they waited for the crosswalk light. “That weekend in the cabin. I think about it a lot, and not only because it was hot.” She was aware of her wife’s hand not so far away from her. In any other circumstance, Paige would have held it the whole way home. “I’d never seen that side of you before. Like, sure, glimpses of it here and there, but...” She shook her head. “I guess I want to know that you wanted to do that, not only because you thought you had to so I’d be happy.”

Rhea’s nostrils flared, but no audible sigh erupted. “I don’t even know right now.”

“I wish you’d tell me. Wouldn’t it be easier if we were on the same page?”

“I don’t wanna talk about this right now. I’m tired.”

“Do you really think I was so comfortable with myself back in college?”

Rhea almost missed her opportunity to make a right turn before the car behind her laid on the horn. “What?”

Her exasperation only made Paige’s apprehension worse. “Because I wasn’t. I was a hot fucking mess who didn’t love herself beyond what she thought she was worth to other women. I was rebelling against a society that told me that... I dunno, because I was feminine, blond, and pretty, I had to be straight and cater to men. I desperately wanted to be a tomboy, but that didn’t fit my ‘aesthetic,’ so the next best thing was going after girls who had higher-pitched giggles than me. I

don't have to tell you, Rhea, I have a high-pitched giggle. Only reason I got as much ass as I did was because we went to such a large school and everyone was having a grand time 'experimenting.' Half of my old girlfriends post homophobic rants on Facebook now! You'd never guess they were such assholes, though, because they always begged me to fuck theirs!"

Rhea slammed on the brakes when they reached the next light. Paige's seatbelt locked against her chest and almost cut the bottom of her throat. The more she struggled with it, the more the seatbelt refused to move. Sweat beaded her brow as frustration mounted. Rhea looked like she was on the brink of tears.

"Could we *please* make it through one therapy appointment where we don't bring up what a slut you were!"

Paige gasped. Rhea immediately espoused regret.

"I get to call myself a slut," Paige gravely said. "You don't. Not like that."

"I'm sorry." Both of Rhea's hands were on her face. "I didn't mean that."

No, Paige supposed not, but Rhea still said it. Aggressively.

Its intent was to sting Paige, and it had worked.

"We're all on different paths, right?" Paige said with a voice so flat it was thinner than paper. "Fuck. Why does college keep haunting us?"

"Because we never really moved on."

It was the most poignant thing Rhea had said. Paige looked at her with a softened visage, her heart tearing into two as she silently pleaded for her wife's acknowledgment.

"I don't know what to do," Paige said as they moved again. "You talk about wanting to do new things and put yourself out there more, but then you close up and withdraw after the fact. I don't want you getting hurt. *I don't wanna get hurt.* The other night at the club..." She might regret bringing this up, but it spoke to her point. "I ran into Irene. You might not remember her—"

Rhea interrupted her. "I remember. The woman with the husband who flirted with you."

*I don't know if I would say that...* Paige ignored it. None of that was her point. "She invited me to some party. Said there was some famous actress at the center of it." The more Paige talked, the sillier it sounded. *Why am I even bringing this up?* The awkward laughter eking out of Paige's mouth wasn't because she thought the whole thing funny. If anything, she felt so awkward that she wished she could turn back time five minutes and say *nothing*.

Yet Rhea was staring at her. She expected her wife to finish the statement.

"I told her we weren't interested, because it sounded like a, I dunno..." Paige sighed. "A lesbian orgy. Didn't think you would go for it. Plus I was high as a kite."

"Not so high you don't remember that, I guess."

“I remember most of that night,” Paige said. “I’ve only blacked out from shit once in my life and that was when I was a dumbass college freshman who thought alcohol poisoning was cool. So yeah, I remember.”

Rhea continued to gaze at the slow-moving traffic as if she didn’t care that her wife was going to be late to her appointments if they didn’t get a move on. *Maybe I should call out sick.* It had been months since Paige last took a personal day at the last minute.

“You didn’t think I would go for it? You didn’t even ask.”

Paige almost sputtered her words. “As I *said*, I was too fucked up to consent to anything like that, let alone on *our* behalf. So sue me for turning down a situation that could have gone way south, *way* fast.”

With both hands gripping the steering wheel, Rhea closed her eyes and deeply inhaled.

“What?” Paige snapped. “Do you *want* to do an orgy with a bunch of naked strangers?”

“Do you?”

“Not really!” At least Paige had it in her to be honest about that. “Gives me flashbacks to some crazy sorority parties I’d rather forget.” She thought of one girlfriend who had been a higher-up in the powerful echelons of the biggest sorority on campus. While banging her blind in the sorority president’s office had been a wild ride, Paige would rather not think about how she was almost recruited into something that felt a *lot* like

sex trafficking. The fact her girlfriend could never explain what was going on at those parties was a big reason Paige dumped her senior year. *When I started to get really jaded about dating.* The only girls who dated her were either in the closet and using her for their personal fun, or *crazy*. Like mob boss levels of crazy!

When the light became green, Rhea swerved their car toward their street. Paige grabbed the handle above her head and braced herself for possible impact into someone's Jeep. Her adrenaline only settled when they coasted through their neighborhood right at the speed limit.

"It always comes back to that, doesn't it?" Rhea sounded half-crazed enough to remind Paige of those same ex-girlfriends. "What *you* did in college. Who *you* fucked in college!"

"Hey!" Paige snapped back. "No, it doesn't!"

"Maybe you don't mean it that way, but it does. It *really* does. Not all of us got to live our best ho lives in a big state college, Paige!"

"Is that what this is about?" The seatbelt once again threatened to end Paige's life. The fact that she could see their neighbor walking his dog down their sidewalk didn't make her feel better. That meant they were almost home! *Just because I can get out of this car doesn't mean it's a good idea.* "That you didn't get to be a big ho like me when we were in our twenties?"

Rhea glared at her finger tapping on the steering wheel. She was half paying attention to the road, half tearing her wife down with another scolding look. “Did I *say* that?”

“You’ve basically been saying it out of the corner of your mouth for the past few months.” Paige banged her head against the window. “Fine. Let’s go back this weekend so you can live out your craziest fantasies. We’ll put on our old alma mater sweatshirts and, I dunno, pretend we’re at a party!”

“You’re simply saying random shit now.”

“I feel like I’m *living* random shit! What the hell is even happening right now?”

Paige didn’t know when they ended up in their driveway, but she detested the idea of getting into her car and driving to West Hollywood. *Why bother?* Two clients? She didn’t care if one of them was the star of a primetime action drama or the other desperately needed to get back in shape to make her grand return as a champion cyclist. They could either be passed to another trainer or reschedule for tomorrow. Her mornings were wide open!

The car shut off. Both Paige and Rhea sat in silence, neither moving.

Paige could have punched the tension. “This is ridiculous. Why are we fighting?”

She didn’t realize until then that there were a few tears in her wife’s eyes. Rhea wiped them away and put on a brave face as she confidently said, “I don’t know.”



“Guess we’ve got some stuff buried between us.”

“Guess so.”

The air inside of the car already heated up now that the AC was off. “So...” Paige cleared her throat. “What do we do? I don’t feel like talking it out right now. Do you?”

Rhea shook her head. “I don’t even know what I’m thinking. I feel like shit.”

“Me too. Also, you need to go to work.” Rhea took her keys out of the ignition and removed her seatbelt. “I’ll feel better when you get home. I promise.”

“Rhea...” Paige missed her chance to say something right then. Rhea was already at the front door, fumbling for the house key. If Paige wanted to catch up to her before she went inside, then fighting with her own seatbelt and passenger-side door was imminent.

She wanted to talk. Even if they couldn’t decide what to say, she at least wanted that channel of open communication to remain between them.

Paige found Rhea in the living room, leaning against the couch. She had forgotten to remove her shoes. They both had.

“Rhea.” Paige left the front door open as she went straight to her wife and refrained from embracing her. She didn’t want to scare away the only person she had truly loved. “I’m sorry.”

“No... I’m sorry.” Rhea rubbed her eye again. “I’ve been such a baby lately.” She shook her head. “More like a bratty teenager. God. Insufferable.”

“I don’t think you’re insufferable.” Paige’s hands twisted together as she attempted to push down the lump in her throat. “I think you’re the coolest person I’ve ever known.”

Rhea scoffed. “Please. How am I cooler than a woman who has met more celebrities than the D-listers?”

“Um, says the woman who has written like seven novels *and* been on the bestseller list, let alone picked up by a major publisher. How many people can ever say that? You and I both know this town is full of wannabe scriptwriters who never get past the pitch stage. They go straight to ‘so-and-so stole my idea.’”

Slowly, Rhea nodded. “Yeaah.”

Paige sheepishly shrugged. “Guess we’re both pretty cool right now in our lives.”

“You mean present-day Paige and Rhea?”

“I was gonna say ‘Paige and Rhiannon,’ but sure.”

“You *would* say my real name.”

“Remember? It’s what the Justice of the Peace said when we got hitched.”

“He insisted on calling me by the name on my birth certificate, yes.”

“You mean ‘Rhiannon Kennewick?’”

“*God*, what a pretentious name.”

Paige laughed. “When did you add your mom’s name again?”

“After she died.” Rhea pushed herself off the couch. “Legally, the summer between senior year and college.” She put her hands on her hips. “My wife needs to go to work before she gets in trouble.”

*I’m already in trouble.* With her wife, whom she struggled to fully understand in a changing relationship that faced an ever-changing world.

“I’m going to call out. Literally anyone else there can take over my appointments.”

“You don’t...”

“I want to.” Paige slipped out of her shoes and kicked them toward the front door, which still remained open. “Even if we don’t do anything, let’s spend the day together.”

“I was gonna put together a work sample for my publisher, but sure.”

Paige could have asked if it was a sample of her more erotic writings but refrained. *Don’t open any wounds.* There were plenty between them, apparently.

“It’s a nice day,” she said. “The first not-God-awful-hot day in a while. How long has it been since we chilled in the pool? We could bust out the inflatable tic-tac-toe set.”

“We don’t have to.”

“No, but last I checked, we do pay someone to come by once a week to clean it for us, so...” Paige gestured toward the backdoor. “We should get our money’s worth out of that pool we had to have when we bought this place.”

“It *is* a nice pool.”

“I know you don’t like using it when no one else is around.”

“You almost drown one time as a kid...”

Paige took her wife’s hand. “Let’s put on our swimsuits and pretend we’re in a Hayley Kiyoko video.”

“You had to bring up my favorite homegrown LA celebrity.”

Paige gently tugged on Rhea. “It’s almost like I know you.”

She knew it wouldn’t take much more convincing. As soon as Paige called in to work, she threw on her favorite bikini, grabbed the sunscreen, and prepared a smoothie to share with Rhea by the pool. As soon as they were done relaxing on their chairs and drinking their lunch, they removed their coverings and dipped into the cold pool that was big enough for them to chase each other from one end to the other.

Paige knew the neighbors could hear their laughter as it bounced between high fences. She didn’t care if they peeked between the slats or grumbled to themselves that a married couple dared to have some lunchtime fun. It beat any of the alternatives.

Like fighting. Like forgetting why they had fallen in love in the first place.

Paige wrapped her arms around Rhea’s shoulders as they emerged from the water. When water sputtered from her lips, she planted a wet kiss on her wife’s cheek and was immediately dragged back under.

Always better than the alternative.

## Chapter 24

Rhea was almost too caught up in the sights of Malibu to make it to her father's house in one piece. Between that and the last of the summer tourists veering off the PCH to take pictures, Rhea was a few minutes late, which was not unnoticed by Danny.

“When I've got nothing else to do on Thursdays,” he said while looking down at his phone, completely killing his point, “every second I wait is another second I think you're dead.”

Rhea rolled her eyes as she restocked her father's fridge with healthy groceries. They were a mishmash of things out of her pantry and food she picked up at Whole Foods on the way. Her father had long stopped complaining about quinoa and mung beans. Whether he actually ate them or pushed them off to his neighbors was unknown to Rhea... and she didn't want to know. *As long as someone's eating it.*

She hadn't picked up any take-out on her way to Malibu. Instead, Rhea made her father a spinach and black bean salad wrap inside his favorite brand of flour tortilla. He claimed that

this particular local brand was the closest it came to his late wife's cooking. Unfortunately for him, Rhea's mother had never imparted any real cooking knowledge to her before passing away. That also went for tortillas, which were the biggest commodity in their house.

"More green food." Danny wheeled into the kitchen instead of walking. Even though he was allowed – nay, *encouraged* – to move around on his feet now, the man married the wheels whenever someone else was around. He claimed it was faster than walking. "Does this have to taste like the dirt it grew out of, too?"

"Yes."

Scoffing, Danny patiently waited for lunch at his small table. When Rhea finally delivered, it was with a pat on his shoulder.

"Admit it," she said, "you like spinach now."

"I've always thought spinach was fine."

*Yeah, right.* Rhea remembered him blowing his tiniest gasket back in high school after her nutrition and diet section of health class taught her the importance of eating leafy greens. When she brought home whole bags of spinach and started putting it on everything, a riot had been declared in the state of Kennewick.

"What's got you moping, huh?" Danny slammed his next bite of salad wrap into the ranch left on the side of his plate. "Never seen you walk in here with such a face."

"What face?"

“That face.”

She knew she wasn't getting a more solid answer out of him. The best she could do was address what hung from the ventricles of her heart. “Nothing. Just stuff going on at home.”

“So is it ‘nothing,’ or is something going on in your house?”

“When do you suddenly care about that stuff, huh?” Rhea was only mildly miffed that her father would bring this up. Like now. Like *this*. “I thought you didn't like talking about ‘domestic’ stuff.” She had made her own mini wrap since she had a light breakfast. Yet as she brought it up to her mouth, sliced tomatoes and feta cheese instantly threatened to spill onto her plate. Apparently, she hadn't wrapped it up as good as she thought.

“I've got nothing else to talk about,” he said with his mouth full. “The most exciting conversations I have in this house are with the nurses, and I'm lucky if they tell me anything.”

“I'm not used to you taking an active interest in my personal life, I guess.”

“Yeah, well. I got old.”

Rhea laughed. “You're still not getting any grandchildren. We've talked about a dog a couple of times, but I think that's Paige's way of getting me out of the house twice a day. What she doesn't know is that she's getting the morning walk shift.”

“Eh, I don't care about grandkids. Not like I'd be around long enough to be any decent part of their lives at this point.”



“Come on. Don’t talk like that.”

“I’m being realistic, kid.” Danny only accepted a napkin after Rhea shoved it at him.

While he cleaned himself up and contemplated the rest of his lunch, Rhea had a little time to decide what she wanted to say. “Can I ask you something personal? About Mom?”

Her father almost choked on a single crumb. “Is this your way of getting back at me?”

“No. I’ve simply been wondering something lately.”

“What is it? I’m not gonna talk about mushy stuff if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Rhea scrunched her nose. “No way. Why would I ask about *that*?”

“I don’t know! Everything’s topsy-turvy now. Parents talking to their kids about sex, kids talking to their parents about drugs, I don’t even know what high schoolers are up to these days.”

“Sex and drugs, mostly.”

“You better not have been.”

“Dad, I was in high school twenty years ago. That ship has sailed.”

“You *better not have been*.”

“Dad.” Rhea put down her wrap, elbows on the table. “I was a virgin until boarding school. There. Happy?”

He was quiet for a moment. Then, “I knew sending you there was a bad idea. Even though it was all girls... actually, that was the reason. Bunch of rich girls doing blow or whatever.”

“The biggest drugs of choice were pot and Ritalin, Dad.”

“You weren’t doing neither, right?”

She couldn’t look him in the face. “I have never abused Ritalin, no.”

Although the silence told Rhea her father figured out what that meant, he thankfully changed the subject. “So, what were you wanting to ask me? Because if it’s about your grandparents, I’m afraid I haven’t spoken to them since you got married.”

“Really? Thought it would have been when I graduated high school. They were never interested in my life.”

“Eh, they were mildly interested to know you were getting married. I only thought it right that they knew. Then they found out it was another woman and... poof. They were gone again.”

Rhea had figured as much. “Do you think that if Mom never got sick or died... do you think you’d still be married? Or would you have divorced in the years since she passed?”

She expected her father to take that question hard, but he remained blasé about the whole thing. “What makes you think your mother and I would have divorced? She tell you something?”

“No. Just wondering. Marriage is hard.”

“You’re telling me. We had our first big fight over your name. Thought she was gonna leave me because I wanted you to have a different moniker.”

“Really? Like what?” Here Rhea had assumed that her father was the one primarily behind the name Rhiannon.

“I wanted to name you Christine. Good solid Christian name, too, but your mother wasn’t having it.”

“Because she just really loved that song?”

“Because she was a huuuuuge Stevie fan.”

That took Rhea a second to interpret. “Wait. You mean Christine as in *Christine McVie*?”

“Who else named Christine am I talking about?”

This was almost too much for Rhea, who knew her parents were Fleetwood Mac fanatics anyway. Yet to take it this far? “You mean my name could’ve been Stevie?”

“But it wasn’t, because your mother had better taste than that. It was some Celtic goddess or whatever or ‘get the hell out of *mi casa*, Danny!’”

“She didn’t talk like that.”

“It’s how I remember her!”

“See, that’s the real reason you two would’ve divorced by now,” Rhae confidently said. “Your terrible stereotypical Spanish.”

“Like yours is any better.”

“*Si, tienes razón. Es muy mejor que el tuyo.*”

Danny stared at her, daring her to call him out for not knowing what she said. *To be fair, I only know how to say “it’s better than yours” because I wanted to tell my Puerto Rican roommate off for saying her family was better than mine.* She cringed to think about it now.

Her father finished his wrap with a smack of his lips. “I don’t think your mother and I would have ever gotten divorced. You know why?”

“Because you both can’t go to concerts by yourselves without spending your whole paycheck on merch?” She had seen his band T-shirts. Dozens of them, all neatly folded into his dresser drawers. He wore a Wings one right now!

Danny didn’t miss a beat. “Because your mother wouldn’t have let us get divorced without working it out first. She was too Catholic. Didn’t believe in divorce.”

*Next, you’ll tell me she didn’t believe in sex before marriage.* Rhea had done the math. She was born within a year of them getting married. Now, was she conceived out of wedlock? She’d rather drink a bottle of ranch dressing before contemplating that.

“I don’t have religion in my way.” Rhea realized what she said. “I mean...”

“Uh-huh.” Danny jabbed his finger in his daughter’s direction. “I knew this was what everything was about. You’ve got trouble in paradise.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“What’s your woman’s name again? Payne?”

“Dad.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know her name. I’m teasing.” Danny stacked his empty cup on top of the plate and tossed the napkin down.

“Paige. How long have you two been married?”

“Thirteen years. Together for about fifteen.”

“Jesus!”

“What?”

Her father choked. “Is that how much time has gone by since you dragged me into court to be your witness?”

“Yes, Dad. It’s been thirteen years.”

“Holy shit.” He slumped in his chair. “Swore it was like six at most.”

“I know. I can hardly believe it too.”

“Doesn’t the average marriage only last like seven or eight years now?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“TV, of course.”

Rhea nodded. “Naturally.”

“Ah, no wonder you’re wondering about divorce. You’ve already made it twice as long as your fellow Millennials. Zoomers? Gen-Xers.”

“Close enough.”

“Your wife causing you grief?”

“No.” Rhea had to rethink that. “I don’t think so. I haven’t told many people about this, but we’re going to couple’s counseling now.”

“Therapy! What the hell did you do?”

Rhea was instantly taken aback. “Excuse me? What did *I* do?”

“What the hell did she do!”

“Nothing!” The most important thing here wasn’t protecting Paige’s dignity – it was preventing her father from another heart attack. “We realized we’ve been so busy that years have gone by and we’ve grown apart. If we had kids, we’d blame it on them. So we’re blaming it on inflation and whatnot. Things are stressful.”

“Sorry to hear that. I don’t know much about two ladies in cahoots, but I know what your mom told me when we had that first fight about your name.”

Rhea remained silent, almost too afraid to open another Pandora’s box about Fleetwood Mac’s influence over her life.

“She said, ‘Danny,’” he adopted the stance of a new mother laying down the law in her house and marriage, “‘We can get through anything as long as there is mutual respect. Right now, I’m not feeling mutual respect.’ So, I guided the rest of our marriage under the presumption of there being mutual respect. Made the hard times easier because I knew she at least respected me as a person and a husband. Sometimes, though, I thought I might be sleeping outside... but I blamed that on the

baby hormones. Once you were three, four, things calmed down in our house. It's why we never had more kids."

"Really?"

"Your mom was a terror with a newborn. We both knew it."

Rhea picked at her food like a bird picking at the dirt. "Sometimes I feel like we're on different wavelengths. We respect each other, but do we have enough in common? I don't know."

"You love each other... you respect each other... what else is there? I swear you kids think marriage is supposed to be more magical than that."

Rhea thought about that long after she left her father's house and long after she crossed the Santa Monica city limits. *Is mutual respect enough?* Sounded great for a neighbor or roommate situation, but love? Marriage?

It wasn't that Rhea entertained fantasies of separating. If anything, the mere thought sent her into a spiral of panic. Being without Paige was almost as impossible to fathom as being without air.

Yet Rhea was realistic. The honeymoon period ended years ago. They had been coasting long before they decided to address the distance between them, and now? She almost didn't recognize her wife anymore. Or maybe there was another problem.

Maybe she recognized the old Paige *too* much – and Rhea's issue wasn't interest, but jealousy.

That wasn't Paige's fault, but it might be Rhea's if she didn't learn to control the green-eyed monster that throttled her fragile sense of self.



## Chapter 25

**F**or the first time in much too long, a Saturday rolled around that was perfect for a day out as a couple.

Paige had a few ideas. They could go to the movies. Maybe hit one of the regular clubs in West Hollywood, the kind that catered to queer couples, whether they were married for thirteen years or met yesterday. She didn't mind the idea of the zoo, either. How long had it been since they held hands while watching animals live their lives?

Which, when she thought about it, was a weird idea.

Rhea wasn't up for any of that. She wanted something more lowkey, like walking around the shopping districts and browsing for new books or office supplies. "We do that all the time," Paige said. "It's a nice day for something different."

Eventually, they consulted Dr. Seville's list of date suggestions.

"Hmm." Rhea held the list closer to her eye as she studied the small print. "*Hmm.*"

“What?” Paige remained on the couch, her wits frayed from indecision. “I don’t think this is the weekend to go skydiving.”

Rhea turned the piece of paper around. “One of the suggestions is to revisit your very first date.”

“That’s the Santa Monica Pier.”

“Which we don’t live too far from.”

“Only in terms of LA traffic.”

It was decided, though. As soon as Paige put on clothes suitable for a walk on the beach, she passed her wife the sunscreen and hopped in the driver’s seat of her car. The day was young, and she wanted to get there before traffic completely took over the parking lot.

“How long has it been since we last went to the Pier?” Rhea asked as soon as they left their neighborhood. “For a sizable amount of time? Like for fun?”

“When would we have gone without the goal being fun?”

“There was that time you did that fun run for charity. It was like two years ago.” Rhea was quite pleased with herself as she remembered. “You had to wear a mask when it was eighty degrees out. So it was around *that* time.”

Paige only vaguely recalled. So much from those early years of the 2020s eluded her. “I think I did that because I was about to reopen the gym for regular clients and wanted to make sure I was in shape.”

“You’ve always been in shape.”

“You know what I mean.”

Paige wished they had left even earlier because the parking lot at the Pier was already filled with cars, trucks, and SUVs full of tourists and kids. For every Californian license plate, there was another either from out of state or Mexico. Some families in shoes and cargo shorts made their way to Pacific Park, home of the only amusement park directly on the West Coast. Others, barely dressed in anything but bikinis and swim trunks, hauled beach gear down to the neighborhood surf. And, of course, there were the anglers with their rods and tackle boxes.

Paige knew her wife occasionally fished as a child. Wasn't she grateful that Rhea didn't want to do that now!

They tackled this date without any plan. Which made things more complicated when they stood outside the fee-free amusement park, waiting for the other to make a move.

“What did we do on our first date again?” Rhea asked.

Paige waited for a gaggle of kindergarteners to run past her. “We mostly walked around and talked. Then you offered to pay for us to ride the Ferris Wheel...” She had to think. “Was that before or after we ate out of the taco truck?”

“After. We went Dutch for dinner but then you covered the tip and I felt bad.”

“Did we buy that souvenir during that time?” Paige pictured the magnet still hanging on their fridge. “The one that came from the picture booth? Is that even still there?”

Rhea's face softened behind her sunglasses. "Babe."

"What?"

A shake of the head had to suffice. "That was from when we decided to get married. We got the magnet as a souvenir for that."

"Oh, riiiiight. You've gotta forgive me, though. That was barely a year later."

"You were wearing that flowy yellow tank top." Rhea leaned in, her lips right on Paige's ear. "With the cute white denim shorts. Could see the bottom of your butt cheeks hanging out."

Paige blushed. These days, she wore much more respectable shorts befitting a woman almost forty. *Still stylish, thank you.* She would never be caught dead in "mom cut" anything, but she also hated shorts that went all the way down to her knees. Unlike Rhea, who was wearing male shorts from the thrift store right now.

"What?" Rhea asked.

"Thinking about you in that red T-shirt you were wearing that day." Paige knew how to play this game. "Had that palm tree right on your boobs. Couldn't stop staring at them all day, because I wanted to get straight to bed with you."

"Is that right?" Rhea's hand disappeared behind Paige and smacked her ass. "Perv."

"Right back at you, grab-ass."

Paige took her wife's hand and led her toward the boardwalk. "Maybe that's what we should do today," Rhea said as they strolled. "Talk."

"About what?"

"I dunno. Things we've been wanting to say but never have the time? When's the last time we chatted about nothing?"

"See, the thing about that date is that it was organic. You can't recreate it with magic."

"Not trying to recreate it, per se," Rhea said. "Just trying to recapture the spirit."

Yet they were both quiet as they slowly walked hand-in-hand along the boardwalk, the sounds of the amusement park only occasionally drowned out by the roar of the Pacific Ocean. Every so often, one of them pointed out an interesting sight, usually a child throwing a fit right on the boardwalk or another couple on what looked like a first date. The one time Rhea found a young lesbian couple canoodling in the sun, she almost lost it.

"They're totally getting married," she loudly whispered in Paige's direction. "The butchy one is trying to figure out the right moment to propose."

"How do you know it's not the cute femme who is gonna propose?"

"Trust me, that butch already has a U-Haul rented. Scratch that. She got her CDL so they can move into the back of a semi-trailer."

Paige looked at her as if that were the most absurd thing she ever said. Yet she still laughed, because she remembered how quickly they got married, let alone moved in together. “It was like a fantasy,” she said.

“Hm?”

Although they had been walking in the direct sunlight for a while, the cool sea breeze and the comfortable clothes they now wore in their late thirties kept the sweat from slipping between their palms. “Those first years of our relationship. I think that was the happiest time of my life.”

“What about now?”

Paige should have known her wife would ask that. “You know what I mean. Sheer jubilation that I didn’t know what to do with. We were in our mid-20s and ready to tackle the world. Things seemed to be getting better. That life our parents sold us when we were growing up seemed attainable.”

“Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we own a three-bedroom with a pool in Santa Monica.”

“You know what I *mean*. Peace and harmony through globalization and the advent of the internet, a more diverse political sphere, and advances in medical technology. You talked about how the cure for your mother’s cancer could be right around the corner.”

“Ah, yes, then the 2010s came along and now the big conspiracy theory is that the government has had the cure this

whole time through alien technology they've backward-engineered from fallen spacecraft.”

“...What?”

Rhea shrugged. “Some other time, my lovely wife who never has time to read the news.”

They stopped by a frozen yogurt stand where they were offered the chance to guess the weights of their snacks. If they guessed down to the ounce, the yogurt was free. Paige was off by half an ounce. Rhea was off a whole pound, the teen boy behind the counter looking at her like she had failed high school math.

“Did that on purpose.” Rhea rearranged the Oreo crumbles on her mango yogurt. “Have to keep them entertained.”

“He was probably thinking that you should stick to writing books.”

“As it so happens I'm writing a physics textbook next.”

“You know...” They sat at a small bistro table the moment it opened up. Paige ignored the dirty napkins and half-eaten gummy bears left behind. “You've never told me what you've been writing in that ‘new project’ of yours.”

Rhea glared at her. *Who is she judging?* Wasn't she the woman actually putting her hands on the dirty sand-covered table? “I told you I wasn't telling anyone. Not even you, my dear.”

“Your publisher gets to see it.”

“They’re talking about acquiring it under a pen name if they think it’ll sell, but I dunno if I want to do that. I originally set out to write something for myself.” She licked her color-changing spoon. “It’s a bunch of trash. I’d be embarrassed for anyone else to read it.”

“Yet weren’t you talking about self-publishing it online or something?”

“Yeah, but nobody would know it was me... throw something together and see if strangers on the internet were into it. But also maybe not publish it. Bury it deep in a few folders in my Dropbox and move on to some literary masterpiece about family drama and what it means to be half-Mexican in modern Los Angeles.”

“Is that what you’re pitching your publisher next?”

“It was an example. You know them. They’re all about ‘own voices’ if they think they can make a buck off it. An openly gay Latina with a mustache? Woohoo.”

Paige leaned across the table but was still careful not to touch it with a single centimeter of her skin. “I like your cute little mustache.”

The breeze picked up, threatening to send the dirty napkins flying. Rhea grabbed the napkin dispenser and smacked it down on the sticky pile before they polluted the beach. “I like the cute little mole on your ass.”

Paige grinned. “I’m so glad I can’t see that mole you keep talking about.”



“I just get excited you’re naked enough that I can see the mole on your ass. I love it when you’re naked.”

“Tits out by the lake?”

Rhea blushed yet again. “Why you gotta bring that up in public? There’s a baby over there huffing public beach sand.”

“Better than the six-year-old about to get stung by a jellyfish over there.”

“What about the old lady staring at the lifeguard? Think she’s gonna go for it?”

“Absolutely. If I were straight, I would too.”

“Is that so?”

“I’d be a freakin’ terror if I were straight.” Rhea shoved a whole spoonful of frozen yogurt in her mouth. “I’d have like four boyfriends.”

“Honey, that sounds exhausting.”

“I was told by the internet that by being a woman I could get like six guys in one night. As a lesbian, I like those odds in my fantasies.”

“Is that what you’re writing about in your stories?” Paige asked. “Guys?”

Orange frozen yogurt was spat back out into its cup. “What?” Rhea gasped. “No!”

“Because, believe it or not, I wouldn’t judge you for that.”  
“Well, it’s not what I’m writing about. Absolutely no guys in any of my stories.”

“All right, all right. I was mostly joking, anyway.”

Still, Paige was curious. Finding out that her wife was putting men in her erotica, even if she wasn't interested in real life, would have been a revelation. A part of her was partially relieved that wasn't the case – because that sounded like a potential *minefield* – but it also meant Paige still didn't know what to expect from her wife's subconscious. She could respect Rhea's need for privacy. If Paige were writing *anything*, she wouldn't want her professional author of a wife to read it. Not until Paige was ready to share.

“I want to know what you're thinking.” Paige's spoon, licked clean from the last of her frozen yogurt, waved in Rhea's direction. “Doesn't have to be about sex, you know. That's the danger of marriage between two women. We are the epitome of, *Babe, what are you thinking?*”

“I bet she's thinking about another woman...” Rhea quipped.

“Really, she's thinking about what an actual Barbenheimer movie would be like?”

Rhea grinned. “Can you imagine?”

“Is that what you think about when we're lying in bed?”

“Yeah, sometimes during sex, too.”

“I knew it.” Paige wadded up her napkin and after grabbing the others that had already been there, shoved them into her empty bowl. “Thinking about Margot Robbie.”

“Aren't you?”

“Not presently.”

“Then what are *you* thinking about?”

Paige said the first character to come to her mind. “Kate McKinnon.”

“Come on. That’s a cop-out. We’re all thinking about her.”

“In bed?”

They both got up. “In bed, while making dinner, changing the car oil...”

“Destroying your favorite dolls...”

“They call it ‘playing too hard,’ get it right.”

“Were you the type of girl to destroy your dolls?”

“I felt bad if I even pulled a strand of hair out on accident.” Rhea gathered all the trash into her hands when they reached the garbage bin. “Why?” The door flapped shut. “Were you?”

“Maybe.” Her parents had not been impressed with Paige’s need to cut Barbie’s hair all the time. Didn’t she know it wouldn’t grow back?

“You would be the destructive doll player between the two of us.” Rhea helped herself to some of the hand sanitizer nearby before walking away from the frozen yogurt place.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

They held hands as they wandered back to the park. “You like to play rough, Paige.”

She leaned in closer to her wife when she asked, “Don’t you like it when I play rough?”

Although Rhea froze up, Paige thought nothing of it. If anything, she enjoyed how flustered her wife could get when the topic came up. *We don’t want to be too predictable.* People with little imagination looked at them as a couple and assumed that Rhea must be the “man” because she had short hair and rarely wore a skirt. First thing Paige always said in return? *“There is no man in this marriage. That’s the point!”* Yet she also thought about how much she appreciated Rhea not being predictable. Predictable was boring when it came to personalities.

They toured the small amusement park, stopping long enough to watch families with children take on the bumper cars and couples with too much bravado attempting to win prizes at the midway games. Both Paige and Rhea knew better than to try their luck. Besides, that cost money, and if they were spending anything...

It was a decent ride.

“That’s too on the nose,” Paige said when Rhea gestured to the solar-powered Ferris wheel. “Isn’t that where we first held hands? On accident?”

“Yeah, duh. Also, it wasn’t an accident.”

“Oh?” Even though Paige claimed she didn’t want to ride the Ferris wheel, they still got in line. “Are you telling me you played it smooth when we were on here for the first time?”

“I was capable of some smooth operation.” Rhea squeezed her wife’s hand as they awkwardly stood behind another couple who couldn’t stop making out for two seconds. “Not that smooth, though.” She jerked her shoulder toward the guy in a tank top. His girlfriend had almost completely fused with his limbs. Paige was almost impressed.

“Here I thought I was the one who made the first move.”

“You did when you asked me out.”

“I asked *you* out?”

“Do you have amnesia? We started hanging out in the main quad because we were in the same comparative literature class.”

“Uh-huh. Whose idea was that?”

“The professor’s? He was the one who assigned us to work on a short presentation comparing George Elliot to Sinclair Lewis.”

“Good ol’ *Silas Marner* vs. *Main Street*. Only one central town figure could come out on top as the speaking representative of their age. Anyway, the prof may have assigned us together for that one project, but it was my idea to meet up at the library to work on it. And it was my idea that we go outside to get some sun in the quad.”

“Yeah?”

“If we had stayed in the library, we would have finished and gone our separate ways. But since we were in the quad, we got to lie down and talk about more than whoever we studied in

that class. I still remember you going on about Nathaniel Hawthorne like he was the coolest freakin' dude to ever pick up a pen."

"He's still cool..."

"I read *Bleak House* because of you."

"That's Dickens..."

"Huh? Then what did I read?"

"You might be thinking of *The Blithedale Romance*."

"Is that the one about the cult?"

"Close enough."

"You've caught me. I only flipped through it because I wanted to know what a girl as smart as you was reading. Until then, I had only really read what I had been assigned. My favorite book was still *Superfudge* at that point."

"You're blowing my mind right now." It was their turn to pay for their tickets. Once they were shown to the next basket opening for business, Rhea quickly finished her thought. "I thought I made the first move when I 'accidentally' held your hand on this thing. You're telling me you orchestrated us even going out on that date?"

"I don't know if I would say *orchestrated*." They got on, Paige naturally leaning against her wife as the door closed. Things were finally quiet around them again. "But I decided I liked you by the end of our first work session. Because I didn't want you to go the way of the other girls I dated, I played it

slow. Decided to be more coquettish when we *mutually* decided to come to the Pier for a date.”

They ascended into the air. Rhea grumbled, “I totally held your hand first, though.”

“Look at us.” Paige wrapped her arms around Rhea’s torso. “Married for eleventy years.”

“If you can’t remember the actual number, it’s okay. We all get old.”

“Hey, now, just because I’m a couple months older than you...”

Rhea kissed the top of her wife’s head. “Thanks for being such a great study partner.”

“We’ve been studying a lot of things these past several years, huh?”

“Some of the best lessons I’ve ever learned have been in this relationship.”

Paige giggled. Once her energy lessened, she sagged against Rhea’s body and gazed across the ocean. For once, she truly felt the peace that had eluded her for too long.

*More days like this, please.* Her, Rhea, and the best parts the world had to offer.



The only thing Paige loved more than a slow and casual day at the Pier was coming home and heading straight to bed, where

she and Rhea made the kind of sensual love that reminded her that not everything had to be fast and different now.

She still needed tenderness. She still needed the softer, feminine side of her wife.

That was the thing about love for Paige Powell, the woman who had put her wild days behind her. She wanted it to be forever. She was that girl who tore apart her dolls because she played with them like the plastic things they were, but she also daydreamed about the perfect wedding and the kind of Prince Charming who would one day sweep her off her feet and show her a Happily Ever After.

Prince Charming didn't have to be a man, she learned when she reached high school and realized she liked girls. It was a gender-neutral term that referred to the soldier of love who would fight for Paige's heart.

Here they were, making her dreams come true.

*I'll do anything to keep this going.* She wanted Rhea to tell her what it took. Anytime.



## Chapter 26

Rhea finally found the courage to clean up some of her new stories and put them together in a single document. What killed her wasn't having to relive some of the fantasies she never thought she'd look at again: it was how neatly she put them into separate chapters, each with their own headers and the usual page numbering and attribution she gave her editor every time she submitted something for consideration.

Truly, life was strange.

She rubbed her forehead and massaged her sinuses as the printer spat out page after page of some of the raunchiest things she had ever manifested in her brain. *Why am I doing this?* What did Rhea possibly hope to achieve by submitting what basically amounted to “*Spank This Ass*” to her publisher? She had scoped out some of the books put out by Forever Escapes and knew that they could be *dirtier* than what Rhea thought sexy by her measure. *Who is the audience for this?* As she had proclaimed to Paige, there were no men in the stories. It was all women. Even the gangbangs. *Can they sell*

*this?* Were there enough people out there who wanted to read the story titled “The Perilous Plight of Patricia’s Pussy?” Rhea suddenly regretted naming the twenty-something Patricia. Since when was anyone in Gen-Z named *Patricia*?

She had an unassuming dark blue portfolio she neatly stacked the printed papers into. She thought about putting a combination lock on the outside, but what was the point? The cleaning lady who came here twice a month only dusted and vacuumed Rhea’s office – she never went through anything, *thank God*. And Paige? The only time she came in here when Rhea wasn’t around was if she printed something from her laptop. Rhea had the only printer in the house.

She left the portfolio on the corner of her desk. It was surreptitiously labeled *R. Powell*. She still hadn’t settled on a pen name that was sexy, related to her real identity in some way, and *not* taken by some poor doctor in Indiana. Rhea would rather die than have someone searching for “dermatologists near me” and find her erotica!

She was about to fix herself some lunch when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

The number was not immediately recognizable. Even the area code caught her off guard because it was related to Malibu but not her father’s number.

Nevertheless, something told her to answer it. Just thinking about her father calling made Rhea’s heart race with anxiety.

“Hello?” Rhea held her breath as the other end of the line remained silent. “Hello?”

“Is this Rhiannon?”

*There* it was. An older woman with the no-nonsense attitude of a home healthcare nurse, as well as the intercom announcements, squeaking wheels, and demanding questions of a hospital setting.

Rhea knew what had happened before the nurse said anything.

“I’m calling about your dad, Daniel.” The nurse went straight to it before Rhea had the chance to gasp. “He has had another heart attack. We’re at the university hospital with...”

The sound to finally ruin Rhea’s day wasn’t loud enough to silence the in-home nurse. Nor did it shatter her windows or summon her wife’s attention from halfway across Los Angeles. No, it was such a pathetic whimper that even Rhea questioned why she didn’t have it in her to scream in horror or shed loud, ugly tears of a daughter who desired to not yet be an orphan.

But the slight squeak of horror was real. There was only one thing Rhea cared about now.



She waited until she was in her car connected to her Bluetooth before calling Paige, who sent her straight to voicemail. Since she was probably in the middle of working with a client, Rhea called the gym’s front desk number and asked the man who

answered to leave a message, since Rhea had no idea when her wife would get around to checking her phone.

Even though the nearest hospital to her father's place was in Santa Monica, it took Rhea more time than reasonable to get there. When she arrived, she suddenly forgot where the hell to park without getting in trouble. All she could think was that her father was ill. He might not even be conscious enough to appreciate her arrival, but it didn't matter. When he last ended up at this hospital after the first heart attack, Rhea stayed by his bedside for three days. She would do it again. She was simply glad that this time she remembered to tell her wife ahead of time.

She hated that she knew the way to the ICU. She hated that she recognized the faces of the nurses, doctors, and janitors on her way there. And she hated the stench of medical supplies infiltrating her head as she shielded her eyes from the harsh fluorescent lighting that led the way to her father's wing.

It took her an age to find the nurse who had called her. Since she was still on the clock, the woman had patiently sat in the waiting area while anticipating Rhea's arrival. *I could hug her right now.* Yet Rhea refrained. The nurse had done her job when she arrived at Danny's house and discovered his state. All Rhea wanted now was answers, and who better to ask than a woman paid to know all about his health?

"Is he all right?" Rhea clutched the older woman's arms and resisted the urge to shake her. "How long had it been when you found him?"

The nurse calmed Rhea with a kind face. “I haven’t heard anything since I called you, but I think I found him in time. I rode the ambulance here with him and was there until they wheeled him through the ER. I promise he was stable the last I heard.”

“What does that mean, though? Will he be okay?”

“Hon,” the nurse said without a drip of condescension, “your father has had another heart attack. I can’t tell you how he will recover. Only the doctor in charge can.”

Rhea nodded, although she barely understood what that meant.

She was grateful to have someone here with her for now, even if that person didn’t know her from Eve and had their own family to get back to at some point. When Rhea finally heard back from Paige, it was through frantic texts asking what had happened and how it was going. Rhea immediately got her on the phone to hear the voice of someone who cared about her.

Paige promised to come by the hospital on the way home, but Rhea told her to not bother since the traffic through Westwood was at its peak ridiculousness. Paige awkwardly laughed until Rhea reassured her it wasn’t a joke.

Nor was it a joke when the doctor finally approached her shortly after hanging up.

“Ms. Kennewick?” the doctor asked, keeping her name short. “I’m relieved to report that your dad should be fine. We

were able to get to him in time and he's stable for now."

Rhea instinctively slapped her hand over her mouth before nodding in relief. When she lowered her hand, she said, "Thank you. Was it really bad?"

"It looks like a mild heart attack, probably concerning the one he had a few months ago. Secondary heart attacks are often more dangerous than this, so we're really happy to see that he *should* be fine after spending a few days here. I want to ensure he's completely stable before releasing him back into your care."

"My care?"

"We can discuss this more later, but I understand that your father lives alone, correct?"

"Y... yes. Is that a problem? He has at least one nurse visit every day."

"That's great, but considering your father's health issues, I'm highly suggesting that he stay with you or another family member for a while."

"I'm the only one he's got."

The doctor offered her a sympathetic look. "You could also stay with him, of course. Point is your father may be reaching a level where he needs around-the-clock care. His last heart attack was strong enough to land him in a wheelchair for a long while. He may be looking at that again. It's going to be a long road getting him on track. We're talking diet, medication..."

Although Rhea nodded along, she barely took it all in. *My father can't ever be left alone now.* The man had lived alone since Rhea moved out for college. It was why he sold the old house and moved into a one-bedroom bungalow in East Malibu, a far cry from how the family had lived before. It was cheaper in the face of rising Southern California costs, but he had never felt so isolated to a woman who was used to going out and doing as she pleased since becoming an independent adult... let alone married.

“Can I see him?” Rhea asked.

“He’s resting right now.” Although the doctor said that, it sounded like he had more to share as long as Rhea was patient. “You might be able to speak with him tomorrow after we’ve had time to monitor his status. Right now he’s fairly capable of consciousness and responds to our questions, but we don’t want to stress him out any more than he is. But...” The doctor sighed. “Suppose you can at least see him. Come with me.”

Rhea would take whatever she could get. Even if that meant standing on the other side of a window looking into the ICU room where her father currently slept.

The number of tubes attached to him was too high. The silver of his hair had dulled into pencil slate gray. The sagging lines on his face created the image of a man who hadn’t been awake in years.

Rhea didn’t recognize him, yet she knew that was her father. And she had never felt so much like a child who didn’t know what to do now that her daddy couldn’t help her.



Paige didn't eat when she got home. Even the concept of preparing dinner made her feel ill – after all, how was she supposed to know what state Rhea might be in when she came home?

Eventually, she forced herself to heat some canned soup on the stove. When Rhea walked through the door an hour later, Paige had already eaten, but she was more than happy to get more for her wife as she collapsed on the couch.

“I haven't eaten since brunch,” Rhea muttered into the couch. “Yet I'm not hungry at all.”

Paige encouraged her to eat by bringing the food over to a tray. After Rhea sat up and grabbed the spoon, Paige sat next to her and waited for her to speak between spoonfuls of soup.

She learned that her father-in-law would mostly be okay if he was allowed to get proper rest and be watched over by a small team of people for a few weeks. Maybe months. The more Rhea talked, the bigger the picture she painted of a future where Danny not only required thousands more a month in medical care... but was practically living with them.

“It's that bad?” Paige asked.

Rhea stared into the bottom of her soup bowl. “I don't know. I guess so. It was hard for me to understand with so much going on in a hospital. I was worried about my dad... I swear, when I last saw him, he was fine! I can't believe this



happened. The nurses always told me that he might bitch about eating the food they gave him, but he ate it. I have no reason to believe he was sneaking cheeseburgers every night.”

“It’s not always diet, you know,” Paige softly said. “I see it all the time in my job. We get some normal people who want to take their health more seriously because they’ve got things to live for. Lots of older guys have survived heart attacks and strokes and feel like they’ve been given a new lease on life. Some of them stay healthy for years. Others give up smoking, red meat, beer... yet they’re dead within two years of meeting me. From another heart attack.”

“No wonder you’re a health nut.”

“Honey, if I were a real ‘health nut,’ we’d be vegan up in this bitch.”

“When’s the last time we had red meat, and it wasn’t a hamburger at the restaurant? Even when we grill, it’s mostly vegetables with a side of turkey.”

“I’m just saying, we could still go harder.”

Rhea shook her head. “What’s gonna happen now? I mean, I’m grateful that he’s not dead, but this could change things around here.”

Paige put her hand on her wife’s. “We’ll cross the bridges as they come to us. He’s alive. He should be able to recover. That’s enough to get us through this.”

“Us?”

“Do you not think I give a crap about my father-in-law? I know he barely talks to me, but that man has been a part of my life for fifteen years. I’d be sad if he died. Sad for you, sad for the loss of a life. Not to mention everything that happens when someone dies... funerals, going through their things, selling the house...”

Rhea froze up before finishing her dinner.

“Oh, my God. I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to bring that up! It... came out.”

They sat together in silence, Rhea’s spoon occasionally clinking against her soup bowl while Paige berated herself for going “there” with her frightened wife. In reality, she had said that to cover up the things that she thought might be even more sensitive. *How will we afford the extra care? Does he have to move in with us? How will that change things? Can our marriage survive that?* Neither of them had lived with a man since moving out of their parents’ homes nearly twenty years ago. Let alone a man so... different from them.

A sick man.

A man who could hardly take care of himself right now.

Paige got up before she embarrassed herself. The reason she was crying wasn’t because she truly worried for Danny, whom she would eventually grieve but probably move on from so, *so* much faster than her wife, the man’s actual daughter. She cried because she already couldn’t handle how this might cause a rift between her and Rhea, the woman she only recently reconnected with after years of coasting.

It was always something, wasn't it?

## Chapter 27

If Rhea was grateful for one thing, it was that she had the kind of job that allowed her to take a step back whenever she needed. And since there was still some time before her edits came back from her publisher, Rhea felt zero guilt when she emailed Parvati to announce she was going on a short hiatus to take care of her father's health and she would not be able to mail those erotica samples for the foreseeable future.

It was a good thing because she did not have the wherewithal to do anything but fret over her father.

For his first week in the hospital, she spent every waking moment she could spare with him. Although she didn't have the chance to speak with Danny for two days, Rhea couldn't bear the thought of being anywhere but within easy reach should he open his eyes and ask to see her.

Of course, that was never his style. After his first heart attack, he insisted that Rhea stay home and take care of her matters. Didn't she have enough to worry about without him making her life harder? *"This is the natural order of things,"*

he had asserted before being discharged. “*Your parents get old, get sick, and die. Haven’t you been through this before?*”

Yes, Rhea had. Both with her mother *and* her father!

*This is the same hospital where my mother died.* She had always known they should move the hell away. Every time she came to this cursed place, she was reminded that the people she loved *died*. Even Paige had ended up here when her appendix burst shortly after marriage. She had claimed Rhea’s behavior was so hilarious that even the nurses laughed about it when she wasn’t in the room. Yet how could Rhea help herself? *This was where it ended.*

Nevertheless, her father gradually stayed awake and was willing to speak with her for more than five minutes. It didn’t stop him from chastising her for “wasting her time” at the hospital. Rhea knew he was on the mend when Danny quipped that she should be at Barnes & Noble signing books and taking pictures with her adoring fans. When she reminded him that such an event never happened, he told her it was because she spent too much time at hospitals.

His doctor was confident that he should be able to recover again, although there was buzz that “recovery” might look very different this time. A secondary heart attack brought with it a dozen conditions that spoke to underlying issues that couldn’t simply be overcome with a healthy diet and exercise. Danny had long stopped smoking – since before Rhea was born – and he swore up and down that he had been “eating decently” since the first heart attack. Genetics might have been

a source. So was stress, although Danny claimed he had little to be stressed out about now that he was bored to death every single day.

That was how Rhea knew that he couldn't just go back to his house in Malibu, where all he had to do was watch TV and talk to her and the nurses who came by every day. He needed to be more mentally stimulated. He needed a reason to take care of himself and be alive.

Except this was a man who had few friends left in an ever-changing world. He had retired from his blue-collar job the year before, right when he felt the effects of being in his mid-60s. Rhea wanted to believe that her father still had at least ten good years left in him. Yet no matter what she suggested – traveling, dating, taking up new hobbies – he rebuffed her as if she had no idea what she was talking about. He was from a “different time.” He had “his own thoughts” that were “none of her business.”

*Are they my business yet?* She sat in the chair in the corner of his hospital room, watching him have a small coughing fit in his sleep. Beside her, Rhea's phone was opened to her notes app, where she jotted down ideas to get her father feeling alive again.

She was keenly aware that she was the only one in his life. Never before had she felt such a crushing weight that she was his only family left in this world.

Sometimes, Paige came with her wife to say hello and bring by things both Rhea and Danny needed to make the stay at the

hospital more bearable. There were days when Paige dropped off her wife on the way to work and picked her up on the way back. To avoid her father's criticisms, Rhea sometimes went to the cafeteria or a restaurant across the street from the hospital, where she forced herself to read or come up with her next Great American Novel.

Danny had suggested she focus more on her own life – that included in her writing.

She brimmed with an idea about a family dealing with another health mishap among their ranks. Rhea sketched out a cast of characters who reminded her too much of the child stars who came together to grieve their abusive mother, but she didn't care. Her emotions overran her ability to think of anything else original. She was stuck in this hospital cycle, and she might as well do something with it.

*“Cassidy Quinton is the oldest daughter,”* Rhea wrote in her notebook while her coffee cooled on the restaurant table. *“Bold. Stoic. Divorced. Entrepreneur. Classic oldest child who had to figure out things on her own as more siblings came into the picture. She automatically assumes she is responsible for her father's care, let alone paying for it.”*

She sipped her coffee. Paige texted her, asking if she needed a ride home that day. Rhea kept writing.

*“Sian Quinton is the youngest daughter. Brash, self-absorbed, completely in denial that she has any part in this.”*

Paige texted again. This time she asked, *“Do you need anything from the health store?”*

*“Graham Quinton is the middle child. The only reason he thinks he’s absolved of middle-child syndrome is because he was the boy his father always wanted. He sees himself as his father’s spokesperson in the family. Only he knows what Dad wanted, but he has no money and no influence outside of the family. Has control issues.”*

Rhea stopped long enough to shake out a hand cramp. When she was comfortable enough to write again, she realized she had lost her thought.

So it went on for nearly two weeks, the length of time Danny’s insurance allowed him to stay. By that time, Rhea was taking him for daily walks around the hospital, which unfortunately only amounted to pushing him around in his wheelchair while an IV continued to drip beside them wherever they went. They often sat outside in one of the few nearby places where they didn’t have to stare at parked cars or nurses on their smoke breaks.

They often didn’t say much on those walks. Each excursion took enough out of Danny that he often stared at the greenery or the bright blue sky above his head. When they did talk, it was usually about recent local events or Rhea’s work. She tentatively shared that she was working on the bones of a new novel. Danny wanted to know more about it, but she hesitated to say too much – he might think it was about him.

“I don’t have three kids,” he curtly told her when she shared.

“You’re also not a former hotshot lawyer with a sizable inheritance to dole out.”



“Why are your characters always so much fancier than how we were? You should write more about the simple man. Even in LA, we’ve got those. Always have.”

“I know, Dad.” Rhea sighed. “Readers like characters who have ‘made it.’ When you take money troubles off the table for most people, it allows you to explore other things.”

“Not everything is about money, even when you’re poor.”

“I know, Dad.”

They sat in silence while a breeze rustled the few bushes growing around them.

“I’ll probably change the parent to a mom,” Rhea eventually said. “A completely self-made woman who came from nothing.”

“From an immigrant family,” Danny prompted.

“Sure. An immigrant family.”

“From Mexico.”

Rhea opened her mouth.

“Oh, make them Guatemalan, whatever. Point is, you’ve got all this other inspiration in your family to draw from.”

“I could make them Eastern European,” Rhea said. “That’s timely.”

“Sure, sure. Or you could make them Mexican.”

“Or I could make them Vietnamese. Taiwanese.” Rhea leaned in toward her father and narrowed her eyes. “Indian.”

“You could make them Mexican.”

“Or I could make them Mexican, sure!”

Danny laughed for the first time all day. It led to another round of coughing, but he composed himself. “I’m only saying, you don’t have to completely ignore what made your mother who she was because you’re writing about someone wasting away in the UCLA Medical Center. I think she’d be proud to know she inspired you to write about her family.”

“Wouldn’t they be my family, too?”

Danny sighed, hands slapping against his knees. His hospital gown fluttered with such intense movement. Rhea had already offered him her sweater to keep his lap warm, but she worried it wasn’t enough as the summer officially changed to fall. “It’s one of my biggest regrets,” he admitted. “You could have known your grandparents if I pushed for it more, but your mother had such a tumultuous relationship with them, even before we met. After the funeral... I was afraid you were too old for them to care about you. Last I heard, they had moved to Sacramento to be near extended family that had finally immigrated here.”

“It’s weird to think I might have this whole family out there from a completely different culture who doesn’t even know I exist.”

“I’ve figured that there was a reason your mother didn’t much want to do with them.”

“I wish she was still around so I could ask her about it.”

“Me too, kid.”

She hated how much effort some of their conversations took, whether because her father wasn't feeling well enough to speak or he shut himself up out of some preconceived notion that Rhea wasn't interested. *You know things about my extended family*, she often thought. *Yet you've barely told me anything about my grandparents.* That went for his late parents as well.

Between Rhea and the doctor, it was arranged for Danny to be moved to a nursing home for the rest of the month. After that, it would be up to her how she wanted her father's care to proceed.

But there was one thing weighing on her... and Paige.

“I don't see any other way,” Rhea said over dinner one night. Since her father moved to the nursing home, she now spent most of her day back at home – at least when Paige was there. “He might have to move in with us for a while.”

Paige picked at her food. “How long is a ‘while?’”

“It's impossible to say right now. A few months. At least.” Rhea averted her gaze from her wife. “Until he can take care of himself and he doesn't seem at immediate risk for yet another heart attack. The doctor made it clear that another would probably kill him.”

At least Paige was patient while Rhea recomposed herself. “I see.”

“We’d have to move him into the downstairs guestroom since he can’t climb stairs,” Rhea continued. “Which means moving some of the exercise equipment out of there. We don’t use it anyway.”

“Not since I went back to work at the gym, no.”

“I could easily arrange for the downstairs bathroom to be fitted with some handicap things.” Rhea had already thought this through, although she hoped Paige hadn’t noticed. “We’d still have a nurse come by most days. Especially on the weekends, so we can go out and do things if we want.”

“Would your father be okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t he be? I think he’d go nuts if he thought he was keeping us from having a marriage. He already thinks I’m nuts for visiting him every day.”

“It kinda sounds like having a babysitter for a grown man.”

“I try to not think about it that way.”

Paige neatly placed her fork at the top of her plate. “We do have a pool, and pools are great for people recuperating from all sorts of things. It’s a great way to get exercise without straining yourself.”

“The doctor *does* think it would be good for him to walk around the shallow end.”

“It creates enough resistance to give you a decent workout,” Paige concurred.

“Yeah. I wish he could go home, you know? That’s the house he picked out for himself, and he likes it there. It lets him think he has independence. I mean, he *does* have independence. He merely needs help right now.”

“Maybe you could stay with him overnight when the nurse isn’t there.”

“I’ve thought about that, but he only has one bedroom, and that couch sucks. I’d feel better having him here. We’re closer to the hospital and his doctor, too.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought a lot about this.”

“I’ve tried to anticipate every angle before pitching it to you. This is your house too.”

“He’s your father. Of course, we’ll do whatever it takes to make sure he’s safe while he recovers.”

Rhea couldn’t bring herself to eat another bite. “I often don’t know what I’d do without you, Paige.”

“This is what we deal with as a couple, right? Parents get sick and need our help.”

Rhea hadn’t conveyed her thoughts well enough, but she didn’t bother to try again. *Everything I say simply sounds weird.* She did appreciate her wife’s help, though. *I couldn’t do this without her.* Paige was her anchor. She was the woman who gave Rhea something to look forward to at the end of a long day fretting over her father and questioning her eventual mortality. The hit to their love life had come hard, but Rhea couldn’t even think about it right now.

Paige reached across the table. “These things happen.”

Rhea hadn’t realized until that moment that she was crying. Not so much that she couldn’t breathe, but enough that she had something to brush away when she touched her fingers to her cheek.

“I love you,” Rhea blurted.

Paige squeezed her hand. “I love you too. Your dad’s gonna be okay.” She smiled. “I know some great vegan recipes he’ll love.”

Although Rhea laughed, she couldn’t help but think, *Great, now something else for him to complain about.* At least her dad was still around to complain about something.



Was Paige delighted to have her father-in-law move in? Ha! No!

But she kept a stiff upper lip as she moved her gym equipment out of the downstairs bedroom and helped Rhea put fresh sheets and blankets on the double bed. She cleared the way from the bedroom to the bathroom across the hall, which now had to be retrofitted with handlebars and a seat for Danny to use when he wanted to bathe himself. Walking through the first story of her house and looking for all the ways a man in a wheelchair might struggle opened her eyes to the fact she and Rhea had too many cords running across the hallway.

She went to the bookstore and consulted recipes for those recovering from heart problems. She asked her coworkers for workout suggestions, and it so happened that one of the D-list celebrities overhearing the conversation went through the same thing with his father.

All that was missing was the therapist's perspective.

"You two have been through a *lot* this summer," she reminded the couple sitting together on her couch for the first time in weeks. "It's quite impressive you've navigated this as well as you have. Most couples find it difficult to communicate what's going on and what needs to be done, but you two seem to have come to a decision quite quickly?"

"I thought over all of the details before I told her," Rhea said. "I wish there was another way less disruptive to our life, but it is what it is. I've gotta take care of my dad."

"Do you agree, Paige?"

"Of course I do. He's family. I'm not going to tell my wife she can't do what she needs to do for her family."

"How do you think having an older male in the house is going to affect your marriage?"

Paige hadn't anticipated that question, and she had a feeling it was mostly directed at her. "When you put it that way... it's not like I've never lived with a father figure before. I grew up with a dad. He's still in Anaheim."

Dr. Seville grinned. "Not quite what I meant, Paige."

Rhea stiffened beside her wife. Paige took that as her cue to assuage some nerves. “It will be a huge adjustment, yes. Her father and I have never had much of a relationship. After fifteen years, I sometimes think he still sees me as the phase his daughter is going through.”

“That’s not true,” Rhea muttered. “He respects our marriage.”

“I’m sure he does. I only mean he doesn’t know how to relate to me at all. I’m not the guy he always envisioned you marrying. I’m not even a butch woman. Your father understands masculinity and the feminine people in his direct family. When you spend your whole life thinking your daughter is gonna marry a guy like you, *I* can be a shock.”

“I’m pretty sure my dad thought I was gonna marry some art nerd with glasses.”

“Hon, that’s *you*.”

Dr. Seville gave them new homework to focus on over the next few weeks. She asked them to concentrate more on creating small intimate moments in between the stressful stages of moving in an older man with health problems. For Paige, that wasn’t much of an issue. For Rhea, it all but killed her libido and the part of a woman who took complete ownership of “her castle.”

But it didn’t happen immediately. Paige merely anticipated it.



Danny moved in on a Friday when Paige was at work. She returned home at six to discover a massive wheelchair in the living room and Rhea giving a nurse the tour of the house. She was one of the nurses who would be stopping in every other day to check on Danny and allow Rhea to work and rest as necessary. Paige was relieved to know the burden of errands wasn't on her, especially since stopping at the grocery store on the way home often added another twenty minutes in traffic.

Yet she knew this was the end of spontaneous dates in the evening and on the weekends. It was the end of relentlessly flirting in the car because nobody else was there with them. It meant staying quiet in their bedroom because Rhea was convinced her father could hear them fooling around, even though he slept like a rock one floor below them.

"I promise he can't hear us," Paige softly cooed to her wife when they were in the middle of undressing beneath the covers. "Stop thinking about your dad while I'm feeling you up."

It had been longer than Paige wanted to admit. Was this how Rhea felt when her wife's needs lay dormant for so long? *So the tables turn...* Paige had spent the past two weeks fantasizing about her wife feeling ready to make love again. It didn't have to be bombastic or even a marathon session like the weekend by the lake. She was completely happy with a vanilla quickie right before they fell asleep. Besides! Even if her father-in-law *could* hear them (and he couldn't!) surely, he would understand that every married couple had needs? That they needed to bond the old-fashioned way?

Except Rhea would apparently rather die than have sex while one of her parents was in the same building, asleep or not.

“I’m sorry.” She rolled off Paige and covered her face with her hands. “I can’t get into it. I promise it’s not you.”

“It better not be me.” Paige tossed back the comforter and got up to use the bathroom. “I’ve been working out more often lately.”

That was true. It was another awkward time of year at the gym when some of her more high-profile clients were likely to cancel at the last minute because “something came up.” Paige either passed the time doing paperwork and using the facilities for herself. She had never been so limber from yoga or strong from bench pressing. It almost made her want to start up her YouTube channel again, but then she felt like she was running away from home.

To be fair, Danny was not the worst long-term guest they ever had. He mostly kept to himself, watching TV in the living room or napping in his room. The nurses helped him bathe if he was too tired to do it himself. Rhea hung out with him in the pool where he looked like “just another guy” shooting the shit with his daughter. Occasionally, the three of them walked around the neighborhood, Rhea pushing her father’s wheelchair to the local taco place or fish and chip stand. Danny never complained about going. He got out of the house, *and* he got to eat something that wasn’t “rabbit food,” as he called Paige and Rhea’s new cooking style.

That was what he grumped about the most, and he blamed Paige for it.

She took that blame with her head up, but she had her limits.

“Tell me what I have to do,” she teased in the shower when Rhea joined her one night before bed, “to get *you* inside of me.”

Rhea flicked one of the hardened nipples in front of her. Paige enjoyed the jolt of sexual frustration it gave her, but she feared it was about to go nowhere. “Honestly, I could use some caffeine. Between working on this new novel, getting back my edits on the *last* one, and helping take care of my dad...”

Paige sidled up beside her. “What if I smack your ass?”

“Will it wake me up?”

Paige told herself that this was temporary. Yet as the weeks went by and Danny showed no signs of good enough improvement to be left alone most nights, Paige was about to take drastic measures.

“Good God.” Rhea came out of the bathroom one evening to find her naked wife lying spread eagle across the bed. She already had the nipple clamps out and the strap-on beside her. “Is this a cry for help?”

“Yes!” Paige cried.

Rhea did her best that night, but Paige could still tell that she was a million miles away. It was enough for Paige to bring it up at their next appointment with Dr. Seville.

“These things can disrupt the natural rhythm a couple comes up with,” the counselor agreed, sympathy dripping from her voice. “As you’ve discovered, just because one of you is ready, it doesn’t mean the other is. Rhea, what do you think is the number one reason the shoe is now on your foot and you’re not feeling the sexual urges your wife is?”

That required a few moments of thought on Rhea’s part. “A lot is going on. Even if we have time and I’ve got some energy, it feels like I’m trapped inside my head. Our whole house feels so foreboding. I keep waiting for something to be wrong with my dad.”

“Do you think it might be feasible for you two to book a hotel room for an evening and attempt to reconnect *away* from the house?”

“Between the costs of a room and having an overnight nurse...”

Even Paige had to agree that a “getaway” might not be in the cards right now, as frustrating as it was to admit.

Still, something else had been bothering her, long before Danny’s second heart attack.

Rhea was hiding something. Maybe she didn’t know it. Maybe she subconsciously kept it to herself. Yet Paige still remembered her wife’s outburst in the car only a few weeks ago. *She claimed I didn’t know her.* As a wife. As a lover. Something was blocking Rhea’s ability to fully make love, and it wasn’t *just* her father’s presence, let alone his health problems looming over everyone’s heads.

It bothered Paige enough that she did the unthinkable.

She had to wait until both Rhea and Danny were out of the house for one of his checkups. Long after Rhea pulled out of the driveway with her father in the passenger seat, Paige called into work and announced she'd be late. *I'm a co-owner. What are they gonna say? No?*

Once she was sure Rhea and her father weren't coming back for something, she walked to the back of the house, past Danny's guestroom, and toward Rhea's office.

She knew where Rhea kept the portfolio she intended to send her publisher. Paige had seen it a week ago when she came in to collect something from the printer. When she asked Rhea about it, she got a stoic yet slightly concerned, *"Don't worry about it."* As if Paige needed more information to go off when Rhea tended to wear her truths on her sleeve.

Would Rhea be mad to know Paige had snooped? *Yes.* Was Paige willing to take that chance in the name of her marriage? *Yes.*

This wasn't curiosity she couldn't wait to sate. This was her desperately trying to tap into a part of her wife that begged to be acknowledged.

Paige was prepared for anything. She knew that her wife had written "raunchy" stories for fun and as an outlet for her fantasies. Yet when Paige sat with the portfolio in Rhea's reading chair that overlooked the pool, she immediately saw a title that made her double-take.

“The Butch’s Guide to Feminization.”

Those were words Paige knew. Singularly. Individually. She had no idea what they meant together in this context.

A cursory glance told her that these were not Rhea’s take on *Penthouse Stories*. The denizens of Hellfire wouldn’t look at these and yawn. If anything, Rhea might make some friends with a story titled “Midnight Stranger.”

“What the...” Paige had to go back to the start of the story. This was no run-of-the-mill tale of two people meeting at a bar and then having a passionate one-night stand. Nor was it a stepmother getting too close to her husband’s college-aged daughter while they swam together in the pool. *God help me, I thought that was hot already!*

What Paige’s wife had written in this story was something beyond that. It was the kind of sexual fantasy that could only be contained to a page, never translated to real life – otherwise it would be classified as a *crime*.

Paige skipped to the next story. *A gangbang in a sorority house?* Paige definitely didn’t hear about *that* hazing ritual when she was in school! *A secretary selling herself to her boss to cover rent?* The next story took the reluctance kink up another level. Yet the one that made Paige audibly gasp was the final story in the short collection, which was about the daughter of a mafia don giving herself to a rival boss to save her father’s life.

Every story had the same central theme, but Paige couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Jesus, Rhea.” Paige couldn’t stop reading once she got to the part about the don’s daughter telling her new mistress that she would never be able to make her new pet orgasm. Because of course she *had* to know how hard the main character climaxed only three pages later.

The dialogue was deliciously sinister. The descriptions of collars, leashes, and penetrative implements made Paige cross her legs. And the ending, where the don’s daughter finally admitted to the other’s face that she liked it? Paige had to take a break after that.

She knew Rhea was a good writer, but this was different. Beneath the dirty descriptions and depraved deeds, there was a sizzling hum that spoke to some part of Paige’s sexuality. She understood the kind of reader who gobbled this up in ten minutes. Because *she* was that woman.

Still, even after Paige collected herself, something confused her. She couldn’t put her finger on it. Nor could she articulate what real thread she discovered in all of her wife’s fantasies.

So, after putting the portfolio back where she found it, she did the only thing that made sense. She called out of work entirely and then promptly summoned the closest friend she had who was smarter than the average kinky woman.

If Jeanette didn’t know what was going on here, nobody would!

## Chapter 28

“It was some of the most depraved stuff I had ever read, and I think I have a decent imagination.” Paige sipped her iced coffee before slamming it back down on the counter. “Like, if I pulled this off the shelf at the bookstore I wouldn’t be *shocked*, but coming from Rhea? We’re talking about the woman who gets flustered if you outright ask her if she thinks someone’s hot. I dunno where these stories came from. Definitely nothing she’s told me over the years.”

Jeanette played with the paper wrapper to her straw, every crinkle between her fingers loud enough to drown out the hard rock music playing above them. “Are you sure? Even I know that Rhea’s a freak.”

Was Paige the one who was flustered? After everything she said about Rhea? “Has she shared some of her stories with you?”

“No, and if you were a worse wife, I’d be mad that you didn’t take pictures to share with me. Because you know me. I love dirty smut.”



“This mafia girl *sells herself* to the rival don. Who happens to be a woman, by the way.”

“Yes, yes, go on, tell me what I’m missing out on.”

“You’re into that stuff?”

“Honestly, who isn’t?”

Paige scoffed. “I mean... as I said, if it was written by anyone else, I could probably get into it. I just don’t know how *my* wife was the one to put that on paper.” Never mind, as Paige would not be wont to tell anyone, this was the woman who concocted that scene at the lake house. *I should have guessed. Absolutely, deliciously depraved.* Paige still thought about it and wondered when they could have Part 2. Over Christmas, maybe? Time went by so quickly now!

“The fact you went snooping through your wife’s secret, sacred smut says you’re desperate to get to know her, that’s for sure.” Jeanette finally wadded up the paper wrapper and dropped it on the café counter. “Though, what would Rhea say if she knew you had done that?”

Paige’s shoulders sagged as her frown grew and a grunt tumbled down her throat. “She’d kill me. Total, absolute annihilation. Right into the grave.”

“Why? Besides the fact that you breached her trust and now she can never have her own slutty stories to share with herself? Plus her publisher, from the sounds of it.”

“You know why!”

Jeanette did not respond to Paige's desperation. "Could it be because she's been trying to tell you about these things for a loong time, but you weren't listening?"

"What are you on about?"

"Let's say that Roxy and I have known you guys for a long while. Lots of things about your relationship have felt, shall we say... forced? I wasn't shocked when you went to the therapist. I was more shocked to see you guys show up at Hellfire keeping up your charade."

Paige was blindsided by these accusations. "What are you talking about? What charade?"

"Maybe we should back up." Jeanette held up her hand as a loud crowd of UCLA students maneuvered through the coffee shop with pumpkin-spiced everything. They reminded Paige that she hadn't eaten since her breakfast smoothie. Had she been at work this whole time, she would have had a short lunch of granola, yogurt, and the frozen berry of the moment always in ready supply at the gym. *I should get some bread.* The more Paige meditated upon what she read in her wife's office, the more carbs she wanted.

"Yeah, let's back up." Paige slapped her hand over the top of her iced coffee. "Because I don't know what's going on. You're saying my marriage is somehow fake?"

"I think..." Jeanette appeared to be considering her words carefully, but that only made Paige more nervous. *This isn't the kind of opinion I was looking for, Jean!* Did Paige have any idea what that was now?

Ha! No.

“I think you guys fell into a very comfortable routine that benefitted you more than her.”

Paige’s jaw dropped.

“Don’t get me *wrong*, Paige. I’m not saying you did it on purpose, or that it didn’t probably feel natural to you guys, but Rhea has been begging to come out of her shell for *years*. The kind of stories you’re telling me about what you read aren’t surprising to me at all. You’re talking to one of LA’s professional submissive wenches here.”

A manicured nail pointed directly at Jeanette’s face. Paige didn’t know whether she should laugh or respectfully nod. She was in the presence of greatness, after all. Wasn’t that why she called the only friend likely to understand what was going on with Rhea? If anything?

“If what you’re telling me about her writing is true,” Jeanette continued, “then think hard about a common thread through all of them. What was the main thing you noticed? Besides the kink.”

Paige hated to admit that she *had* to think about it. After all, one thing did stand out – that thing that was inscrutably difficult to put into words when describing her own wife.

At least she lived with a writer. She knew a few terms.

“They were all from one point of view,” Paige said. “The one who was put into the reluctant position. None of what I read was from the *doers* point-of-view.”

“Yesssss,” Jeanette said with a happy hiss. “That’s the shit right there.”

“Jean,” Paige said, “this isn’t supposed to be entertainment for you. Ahem.”

“Trust me, I’m paying attention.” Jeanette leaned against the counter, that nail tapping against her forehead. “I’m trying to lead you to *my* conclusion about what naughty things you read in your own home.”

Paige withheld the sigh about to rip her in two. “So, they’re all from the same type of point-of-view. There’s a woman, usually young and naïve, having something *very* inappropriate happen to her... or she puts herself in a situation that she doesn’t want to be in.”

“Go back to that mafia story,” Jeanette said. “When you first mentioned it, you said that the main character selling herself away was on the butchy side, right?”

“There were a lot of mentions about her more masculine dress and short hair, yes.”

“As far as you know, Rhea mostly likes femmes, yes?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Riiiiight, and the mafia lady? What kind of woman was she?”

Jeanette looked ready to fill in the blank herself, but she impatiently waited for Paige to get with the program instead. “Very feminine. With blond hair and an ‘athletic body.’”

The natural silence between Jeanette and Paige was deafening.”

“Oh, my God!” Paige exclaimed. “That was *me!*”

Jeanette politely clapped for her friend. “Excellent. We’re getting somewhere.”

“Are you implying that *Rhea* wants to be the...”

“The bottom? Yes. Definitely.”

“You’re kidding. This whole time?”

“You’re the one married to her, Paige. You tell me.”

Except Paige was a bit busy having her mind blown at the moment. “This whole time we’ve been... I mean she has been... even before this year when we started...” She thought back on their whole marriage, not only the past few months full of experimentation and the exploration of being kinky. *The whole thing*. Even the first time they made love...

It had been natural, hadn’t it? Once they got going, Rhea took control.

*Or is that what’s happening?* They had joked for years that Paige was a power bottom. *I’m the kind of pillow princess who makes things happen*. Rhea had never been bothered by it. And just because people always pegged her as the top didn’t mean... did it?

Jeanette interrupted her thoughts. “You want my professional but biased opinion?” She tossed the wadded-up paper wrapper into her empty glass. “That woman dreams of you tearing her

apart. Like, from the inside. Preferably through the...” Jeanette pointed between her legs. “Uh-huh. Yeah, that’s what she wants.”

“I mean I’ve been on top before,” Paige insisted. “It was fine, but mostly I haven’t done it since...” Great. Here came the loud *click* of a lightbulb turning on in her brain. Right up there with the gong ringing and the car horn honking.

She had figured it out. She realized why Rhea blew up in the car all those weeks ago.

“I was always the top in my other relationships.” Paige smacked both hands against the counter. “I dated *the* definition of pillow princesses, and I gave them what they wanted. When I reassessed what I wanted from a ‘real’ relationship, Rhea came along and got me addicted to being the bottom. Because I thought that’s what she wanted.”

“Damn, Paige.” Jeanette laughed. “Sounds like Rhea has spent the past fifteen years waiting for you to treat her like you treated those other girls.”

“Except it wasn’t great! I don’t know what she thinks it was like with my other girlfriends, but I didn’t feel anything. I mostly took over because otherwise nothing got done in the bedroom. You know how it is. You get these girls, *especially* in college, who flop around like fish either because they don’t know what they’re doing or because they immediately dissociate from whatever other trauma they’ve got going on.” When Jeanette suddenly frowned, Paige explained, “I dated a

lot of girls who should not have been dating anyone at all. College was wild like that.”

“Yes, I vaguely remember those times. You were the rebound, huh?”

“Took me years to figure out I was the campus queer rebound, yeah.” Paige tried not to think about it. For while Rhea may have romanticized her wife’s love life before they got together, the fact was that Paige shouldn’t have been going out with most of those girls. *There was nothing there. Nothing good.* Sure, Paige had good sex in college, but it came at a price.

They didn’t love her. She didn’t love them.

She never knew what love was until Rhea was in one of her classes.

Rhea hadn’t been fresh from a relationship when she went out with Paige. She didn’t ask to immediately forget whatever lover had come before Paige. She wanted to get to *know* her future wife. Who was she? What drove her to live and succeed? What did she want to do with her life? Where did she see herself in ten years? Twenty?

Did she want to get married someday? How did she feel about kids? What about settling down with a woman from Malibu? But not *that* Malibu? *She was so embarrassed the first time I met her father and saw where she grew up.* That was before Danny sold the original house and moved into his bungalow.

“I’ve got a lot to think about,” Paige said. “I never knew Rhea could be... complicated.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“How do I even broach this subject with her?”

“Maybe you don’t. Maybe you rely on what you know about her and...” Jeanette snapped her fingers. “Give her what she wants?”

“Is that what you would want Roxy to do?”

“That’s like a regular Friday night at the club for us. Do you know how many times we’ve played, *‘excuse me, ma’am, but I really must have you right now?’* It’s one of the hottest things in the world.”

“I’m not sure she’d go for something like that.”

“Hey, I should hope you know her better than I do. You’re the one married to her.”

That’s right. Paige was.



The strangest thoughts occupied her mind, no matter what she did.

Life went on with Rhea (and Danny,) but it wasn’t the same as before. Paige questioned everything she did, said, and experienced as she looked at her wife through a new pair of eyes.



She didn't divulge that she had read one of Rhea's stories. Or flipped through most of them. Not even when she accompanied her wife to the post office and watched her mail the portfolio to her publisher in New York. Rhea was visibly out of sorts afterward, and Paige now knew why – some other person was about to read her deepest, darkest fantasies and decide if there were enough readers out there who wanted some of that shit from an author who usually wrote literary family dramas.

They celebrated by having their first date since Danny moved in with them. A nurse stayed at home while Rhea and Paige enjoyed a quiet lunch at one of their favorite spots and watched a short movie at the local theater. It took Rhea's mind off sharing such a deeply personal part of herself, but Paige was going crazy.

“Will you ever let me read one of your stories?”

Rhea had been driving them home when her wife asked that. “Why would you want to read some silly erotic story I wrote?”

“Because *you* wrote it, for one thing.”

“Ah, well, it probably won't be published. If it is, you'll be the first to know.”

“It'll be published. I'm sure of it.”

Rhea was so red that Paige feared her wife's heart had pumped too much blood to her *everything*.

“Maybe I want to know what you're thinking about when left in your office,” Paige continued. “Maybe we could make

some of those fantasies come true.”

She never knew if Rhea heard that. Someone had cut her off at a light, and that was that.



“Where have you mentally been this past hour?” Carmen Coyote, who still came to the gym at least once a week to train with Paige, had become more confident in her relentless teasing of the only woman on the whole block who went as crazy as the guys for the adult film star. *I’ve never seen one of her videos, and I never will.* Even if Carmen quit showing up that week, Paige didn’t need her attraction to transform into something wholly inappropriate. Yet that didn’t stop Carmen from teasing her – and Paige letting herself be teased. “Every time I wait for you to tell me what to do next, you’re spacing off. You’re like this one director I worked with who was so high all the time the monkeys were running the set.” Carmen laughed. “Me. I was the monkey. I basically directed those films.”

“I’m sorry,” Paige apologized. “Personal stuff. I told you that my father-in-law has moved in with us for a while, yeah? Recovering from another heart attack.”

“Oh, my. Hope he’s feeling better.”

Carmen hopped off her machine and prepared to hit the showers. *God, sounds like the kind of story Rhea writes.* Every time Paige felt guilty for snooping, she experienced the

renewed vigor of a woman determined to do something with the information. She simply didn't know what!

“He's doing better. We don't know when he'll be well enough to move back to his place.”

They entered the women's locker room together. As usual, they were the only ones there. Paige took her spot on the bench that allowed her to engage in conversation without watching her client change clothes. Or, in Carmen's case, strip down to a towel before she took a shower.

“Must be hell on your marriage.”

Paige was not expecting that. It was enough to make her look at Carmen, who had stripped off her sports bra. Paige looked away again before she embarrassed them both. “Definitely has cut down on the number of dates we go on as a couple.”

Carmen gasped. “That's terrible!”

“I take it you've never had a sick parent that's had to move in with you or your partner?”

“Ah, no. I suppose it can't be helped. Do you guys have a nurse who comes by?”

“Sure, during the day. Sometimes on the weekend.” Paige leaned back against a row of empty lockers. “So she can work.”

She opened her eyes to see Carmen standing before her in nothing but a thin towel. It was not strong enough to contain the vast number of curves about to pop out.

“I know what you need.” Carmen held up a finger to stop Paige from interrupting. “Now, hear me out, because I am the biggest advocate for lesbians getting their groove on with their wives. I don’t know if you’ve seen my movie *Cheating Butch 2*, but that’s like... the whole five-minute plot of that film.”

“Cheating Butch, huh?” Paige parroted.

“*Anyway...*” Carmen grabbed her phone out of her opened locker and flicked through pictures. “I’ve got this hotel suite on standby every other week. You know, for work. Do you want it this weekend? I’m not using it. It’s sucking up my money. I’ve gotta go out of town.”

Paige could hardly believe what she was hearing. “Huh?”

Carmen showed her the pictures on her phone. They looked like semi-professional shots of a swanky hotel suite overlooking Downtown Los Angeles. Not exactly the most romantic place in the area, but Paige knew a good skyline view when she saw it.

“I rent it out every other Sunday afternoon,” Carmen continued. “You get a good bargain for an afternoon rate if you know who to ask. Anyway, you can have it for like six hours, I think. Noon and dinnertime. More than enough time for me to stream in a place with a nice view.”

“Uh...”

“They clean it between every visit, duh. Besides, I ain’t doing anything in there millions of others haven’t.”

Paige handed Carmen back her phone. “I don’t know what to say. That’s quite the offer.”

“You really should take me up on it. There’s a Jacuzzi. Highly recommended.”

“You’re saying it’s available *this* Sunday afternoon?”

“Uh-huh. It’s already been paid for. Normally they let me cancel with enough notice, but this is a last-minute gig that pays well up in Vegas. Can you believe it? Rich people will hire you to be naked at their parties.”

Paige pretended she hadn’t heard that. “We couldn’t possibly. It’s in your name...”

“It’s in my *company’s* name. Mine. I get to say who uses it, not my agent. If I put you and your partner on the list, you’ll get a key.”

“It does feel a bit weird to accept that kind of gift from a client.”

“Please, it’s the least I can do for being a terrible tipper. Besides, I’ve seen you checking me out these past few months, Paige. Let me throw you a solid since you’re married and all.”

“I have not...!”

Carmen held a finger to her lips. “Don’t *worry* about it. Look but don’t touch, right?”

Was this what it felt like to be Rhea? Blushing all the damn time?

“You’re cool,” Carmen said. “Your wife is probably cool. You two could use a hot afternoon to catch up and reconnect. Or relax in the Jacuzzi for a few hours. Who will know? The only cameras in that room are the ones I set up and take down when I leave!”

Paige couldn’t believe it – she was laughing at the dumbest joke she heard all day.

## Chapter 29

If there was one thing that triggered Rhea's soft spot of pity, it was the look on her father's face when someone had to help him into bed.

Most nights, he was fine. Danny was to the point that he could push himself around the house and take up whatever furniture he desired. He spent most of the day either at the kitchen table or a big armchair in the living room. A nurse would keep an eye on him as he rolled himself back to the bathroom and returned with a look that said, *"Hey, I didn't die. How about that?"*

Yet there were nights when he didn't have the energy to get himself into bed. He could put on his pajamas and brush his teeth, but pulling back the covers and climbing in for the night? He needed his daughter's help, and that was the most awkward thing of all.

"Doctor says he might be able to move back home in another month," Rhea said while sitting on her own bed. Paige was in

the bathroom, flossing and removing her beauty mask. “Everything’s looking really good. Although...”

“Hm?” Paige grunted.

“It’s weird. We had this whole conversation yesterday about what the future looked like for him. I had to broach the idea of selling his bungalow and moving into an assisted living facility. He didn’t say anything negative about it at all.”

“I’d think your dad would throw a big enough fit that he’d have another heart attack.”

Rhea snorted in agreement. “I think the last heart attack got to him. He knows he can’t stay here forever, and he knows he can’t live alone forever. I think he’s scared of what could happen in the middle of the night too. Doctor said he got really lucky that the nurse found him not so long after he passed out. It could’ve been bad, Paige.”

She spat into the bathroom sink. “I know.”

“Times like these I wish I had a sibling or two to split the responsibility with, but that wasn’t in the cards for my parents.” Rhea sighed into her pillow before changing subjects. “What’s taking you so long in there? I’m the one who shaves her upper lip.”

Paige peeked through the bathroom door. “I’m getting ready for bed.” She leaned one arm against the doorframe, the buttons on her long-sleeved pajama top hanging open. She was not wearing anything else, and Rhea could not pry her eyes



away from the soft skin leading her gaze right to her wife's dark blond pubic hair.

“The view is even better when I turn around.” Paige did exactly that, giving her wife an eyeful of an ass that spent a lot of time at the gym.

“Sure is,” Rhea said with a slight whistle.

She half-expected – and even anticipated – her wife to climb into bed with a Cheshire grin in the night. *I might be up for it, finally.* Rhea felt terrible that she was turning down Paige's advances lately, but she couldn't help it. *I'm so tired. So freaked out over my dad.* Slowly, things were improving and Rhea felt more herself. In a couple more weeks, she might be ready for another weekend at an isolated lake!

When Paige finally got into bed, it was with her sleep mask on and a firm grip on the covers. She said good night and turned over away from Rhea – but not before backing up her bare ass right into her wife's stomach.

“Tease,” Rhea muttered.

Paige lifted her head long enough to say, “Huh?”

“Nothing.”

Rhea shouldn't have been so surprised that her wife promptly fell asleep. She supposed that's what she got, though.



On Sunday, Rhea got up later than usual and discovered her wife was about to leave.

“A nurse is coming this afternoon, right?” she asked Rhea, who was still confused. “Cool. Do you think you could meet me somewhere later? Downtown?”

“What on Earth is Downtown?” Rhea asked with a yawn. “Where are you going?”

A rueful grin knocked Rhea over. “I’ve got a surprise for us. I think you’ll like it.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“I said it’s a surprise, Rhea.” Paige deposited her empty smoothie glass into the sink. “I should get going and get everything ready. I’ll text you the details later.”

“What in the world...?”

Paige grabbed her sweater out of the hall closet and jingled her keys over her head. “Text you later! Love you!”

All Rhea could do was rub her eyes and wonder what had gotten into her wife this time. *All I know is that it’s not me.* Nor was the feeling reciprocated.



Rhea sat in her car, staring at the text on her phone. She barely knew what to make of it.

*“Drive up to the fifth level in the parking garage. There’s an orange cone in the corner by the main entrance. Pull into that*

*spot and turn off the engine. Wait for me there.”*

That was the thing. Rhea had been sitting in that spot for ten minutes, wondering if she had picked the wrong hotel – let alone the wrong spot.

Yet she was on the fifth level of the appointed Downtown Los Angeles hotel parking garage. She had driven toward the exit and parked in the corner spot with an orange cone standing unobtrusively by the wall. Maybe that was a coincidence, though – and maybe Rhea was too dumb to understand her girlfriend’s cryptic text.

What in the world was going on?

For all of Rhea’s self-flagellation, she knew she wasn’t *stupid*. She knew that this was some rendezvous her wife had set up. What else could it be? Neither of their birthdays nor their anniversary was soon. They had both been busy with real life and had little time for each other. Exactly the kind of thing their therapist had warned them to address.

But Rhea didn’t know why Paige would reserve a hotel room in the middle of the afternoon without informing her wife. Would it have really diluted the fantasy if Rhea knew she was off for a hookup with her wife? No, something else must have been up. Something that made Rhea’s mind run a mile a minute as she attempted to figure out *what the hell was going on*.

Paige was the more adventurous one. So had she arranged a threesome with someone? *That’s nuts. She would have cleared it with me first.* Yet that was all Rhea could think about as she

sat in the driver's seat of her car, engine off and cabin filling with hot air.

Or maybe this wasn't a sexy rendezvous at all. Maybe she was about to encounter one of her worst nightmares: a divorce attorney in a snazzy hotel room to soothe the pain.

*I'd rather have a threesome with a divorce attorney, thanks.*

Rhea sent another *I'm here, where are you?* text to her wife before deciding to turn on the car again, if only to have cool air blasting at her face and keeping her calm. Yet the moment she attempted to turn the ignition, a shadow appeared behind the car.

Rhea instantly knew that was her wife. The silhouette, the wavy hair, the stance as the woman in a trench coat stood cocked to one side with her hands in her pockets... it was Paige.

Rhea lowered her hands from the steering wheel. The thought of accidentally backing up and running over her wife made Rhea feel sick.

The silhouette of her wife slowly rounded the back bumper of the car and approached the driver-side window. Rhea rolled down the window but said nothing.

"Nice of you to arrive, Ms. Kennewick." Paige was out of reach as she stood with her hands still in her pockets. "I've been expecting you. We don't have a lot of time."

Rhea leveled a shrewd gaze on the woman who still gave her chills after all these years. "What's going on?"

Finally, one of Paige's hands emerged from her pocket and landed on the door. "I'll be asking the questions," she snapped. "You may not know it, but you have entered *my* territory. This isn't our house. You have no idea how neutral we kept it."

Rhea hesitated before removing her seatbelt. As much as she hated to admit it, this new side of her wife was... well, it was hot. Hot enough to boil Rhea alive in her car.

"Who *are* you?" Rhea asked the woman now leaning against her car, blond hair falling off her shoulders and revealing a coat with not much else beneath it.

Paige grinned, her bare teeth making her smile more sinister. "I'm either your dream come true," she purred, "or your biggest nightmare."

The pair of fuzzy handcuffs landed on the door. Rhea jumped.

Paige was 100% serious.



Rhea didn't know what titillated her more: that a dozen cameras must have caught them in the parking garage and hallways, or that Paige clearly didn't give a shit if anyone saw.

They walked down those long hallways and rode up an elevator with a tenuous silence hanging between them. Rhea's wrists were handcuffed behind her back, her jacket hanging loosely from her shoulders and covering her excited shame.

She had no idea what to expect. Not from Paige, who kept her cool while looping her arm around her wife's, nor from herself. Rhea had no idea what to expect. She didn't know what she might be capable of doing once Paige pushed her buttons.

Because this couldn't possibly be happening, right?

She asked a couple of questions but was quickly cowed into silence by glowers from Paige's darkened eyes. She rarely wore her makeup like this. Gone was the natural palette of everyday life or the bright, feminine colors of a night out. Paige was nothing but eyeliner and earth tones, all the way down to her dark brown lips. Even her trench coat was neither green nor black. It was a steely, overcast gray that hugged her body and proclaimed that she was the ruler of this high-end domain.

She was Paige, but she was also the Other. The kind of woman who didn't merely haunt Rhea's adolescent fantasies, but proudly pranced from one side of the campus to the other.

The only difference now? Paige Powell was not untouchable. Wasn't that her arm wrapped around Rhea's?

"You should probably tell me what's going on now," Rhea whispered when they rode up to one of the top floors on the elevator. "I don't want to be a killjoy, but I'd like to at least know what to expect." When Paige continued to stare straight ahead, Rhea said, "Is there someone else waiting for us up there?"

That was what finally got her wife's attention, and it was with a slight raise of her eyebrow that made Paige say, "Not this time."

*Not this time!*

The doors opened. Paige led the way, although she and Rhea walked side by side.

They did not detach until they stood before the door to a high-rise suite. Rhea was intrigued, but her nerves won out and kept her from asking the *real* questions percolating from her piqued interest.

When they entered the suite, Rhea's eyes nearly fell out of her head.

How the hell had Paige afforded this place!

The view was damning enough to their bank accounts, let alone the Jacuzzi tub in the corner of the room. Separating the king-sized bed from the tub was a long couch naturally leading guests to a separate sitting area overlooking the breathtaking view of city high-rises and the San Gabriel Mountains in the distance. The lights didn't have to be flicked on. Why bother, when so much natural light streamed through these floor-to-ceiling windows?

Rhea almost forgot her hands were cuffed behind her back. Not until she tried to shield her eyes from the sun was she reminded that Paige had plotted *something*.

"Over there." Paige pushed her wife to the couch separating the bed from the Jacuzzi. Rhea fell right in the middle, nearly

sitting on her hands as her jacket landed lopsided on her torso. Paige stood before her.

*Yes*, Rhea thought as her mind forgot everything else going on, *this is really hot*.

“You and I are going to have a chat about the future of this marriage.” Paige did not apologize for leading Rhea here under false pretenses. Nor did she care to explain the existence of this expensive hotel room boasting one of the greatest views in LA. “We’ve been operating under the wrong idea for years. I must take the blame for it.” She pulled some of her blond hair out of her face. “I let you believe I had *changed* from my old ways, and I foolishly let you continue to flourish under the pretext that you exist independently of *me* and *my* needs. No wonder I was so out of it for years. I had suppressed myself to make you happy when I should have been using you to make *me* happy.”

Rhea didn’t have a response to that. She was so blindsided by Paige’s sultry tone that she almost didn’t catch the meaning of any of those damning words.

“I’m willing to negotiate, though.” Paige pulled her hands out of her pockets and toyed with the ties holding her jacket closed over her body. “After all, divorces are *so* messy.”

She did not drop the D word!

“Ah, look at you.” Paige took one step closer. “Did I make you think you don’t get anything out of our new arrangement?”



Rhea truly didn't know what to say.

“Look, I've let you have your fun for years. This summer? You had too much fun. It made me think about what I *really* want out of my life. Why, being in charge for one thing...” Paige didn't come close enough to touch as she rounded the side of the couch and drew her fingers along the back of the red velvet upholstery. “Let's face it, Rhea. I make a steady income. I won't bemoan your ability to pound out the novel of the year and get a nice, juicy advance and royalty share. Which is why you will be allowed to continue that going forward. I only want you to remember where our health insurance comes from.” Her fingertips almost touched Rhea's shoulder. “Me.”

“What...”

Paige interrupted her. “I've spent a long time thinking about this. Ever since the Fourth of July, really. Remember? You took me to the lake and had your way with me for the whole weekend.” Paige plopped her forearms down on the back of the couch and lowered her voice as her lips came dangerously close to Rhea's cheek. “Naughty, naughty. It was like you were trying to put me in my place after all these years. When we *both* know why you agreed to go out with me in the first place.”

Rhea steeled herself.

“Because you thought I could make your virginal dreams come true.”

Finally, Rhea was allowed to say something. “I was not a virgin when we first went out.”

“The details you care about.” Paige stood back up. “Don’t matter to me. You know what I mean. Listless. Suppressed. Naïve and foolish. You wanted me to do something about that, but I never did. Not even when we fell in love and got married like two young people are wont to do. Hmph. We’ll be forty, soon enough. I don’t want to hit my fourth decade and not have the power back in rooms like these. Tell me, Rhea.” Paige slapped the spot right next to her wife’s head. “How does that make you *feel*?”

“I have no idea.” In truth, Rhea’s whole body was charged with erotic electricity. The depths of the unknown that Paige now offered were almost *embarrassing*. How could Rhea see this through and keep her wits about her with Paige talking like that? *This is all a set-up for sex. Nothing serious.* Rhea knew that, but her heart told her to hear her wife out *just in case*. Her head? It yelled at her to keep quiet. Keep her mouth shut.

It was her stupid pussy telling her to get excited.

“I think you figured out what I like to hear.”

Paige finally grabbed Rhea’s shoulder, yanking her back against the couch. As her spine squished her fingers, Rhea was jolted awake like someone suddenly coming back from a near-death experience. Her heart couldn’t take it!

“If there’s one thing I thought was attractive about you...” Paige traced her finger along the part in her wife’s hair. Being

handcuffed and unable to touch Paige back was about as delightful as watching her wife dally with another woman. *I want to touch her. I want to be a bigger part of this.* Whatever *this* was. “It’s your willingness to please me. Remember the first time we had sex?” Paige chuckled. “You couldn’t wait to show me what you could do.”

Something hissed between Rhea’s teeth. It was her breath, heavy and staccato.

“That might be when I first fell in love with you.” Paige’s breath lightly touched Rhea’s ear, but she was nowhere near close enough to kiss. “Deep down, I’ve always wanted a wife who would let me use her.”

The feeling deep in the pit of Rhea’s stomach turned. She was either about to pass out or throw up. *I know which I prefer.* At least if she passed out, Paige could still have a turn at her...

“Hm?” Paige studied her wife’s demeanor. “What are you thinking right now?”

*That I would 100% be okay with you taking advantage of me in my sleep...* Rhea could hardly believe what she was on about. For one thing, if she was passed out, she couldn’t enjoy the sex! *Because that’s the problem here!*

“We’ve gotten off track.” Paige braced both hands against her wife’s shoulders, pushing her palms down the front of Rhea’s chest. “We’ve forgotten what roles we were meant to play. I don’t care how good you are when you get on top of me.” Her thumbs hooked into the cleft of Rhea’s shirt. As a nail tickled her wife’s cleavage, Paige said, “I’m better on top

of you.” *This is like right out of one of my stories...* Which one was it? Rhea had written so many that past summer she almost couldn’t recall it between the surprise gangbang at a conference and the mafia daughter getting in way over her head. But it sounded familiar.

*The cheerleader who lures a tutor into her room...* That was the one. Rhea had printed it out but ultimately didn’t include it in her anthology because she wanted to age the characters up before letting anyone else see it. In its purest form, it was about two high school seniors. *The popular cheerleader who invites over the “smart” girl for tutoring...* Only the cheerleader wanted to use the tutor for a very different purpose. A purpose that had her classmate shuddering in absolute delight and begging to be treated like a piece of meat until they graduated.

There was no way... Paige hadn’t seen it, right?

“Going forward, I’m in charge in the bedroom.” Paige was in front of Rhea again, hands on her hips and legs open in a powerful stance. She looked like one of Rhea’s fantasies, all right. Only instead of the gorgeous girl in the club Rhea got to have her way with Paige was the dominant femme who ate her lessers for lunch. “I think you’ve stood the test of time. Always so loyal. Soooo sweet and attentive. You give it as good as you take it, don’t you?” A chaotic laugh fell from Paige’s brown lips. “I think you can handle me from here on out. Whenever I want it. However I want it. You’re my personal toy I get my fun from.” She untied the front of her

coat. “My pleasure is the only thing that matters. Yours is a byproduct of getting to be with *this*.”

Paige opened her coat. Beneath it was a black lingerie set, complete with a push-up bra and garters. Rhea hadn't even noticed the tights in her wife's boots.

She was unfathomably beautiful.

In all their years together, Rhea had imagined her wife like this but had never truly seen it in the flesh. She had merely received glimpses and visions of endless possibilities. Paige was what was advertised on her original packaging. Smart. Intense. Self-centered and so damn beautiful she could have any woman she wanted.

And she wanted *Rhea* to be her toy.

Some primitive part of Rhea's brain loved this. Wasn't it what she imagined when she used to admire Paige from afar, watching her date and bed all those other girls who never lived up to her insatiable needs? *I could do it, though. I knew I could.* Young Rhea had been prepared when Paige asked her out. She didn't even mind that it took a few dates before they did more than kiss. Nor did she think much of it when they moved in together, married, and began a life as a contractual couple. One day, Paige would want this – and Rhea would be ready.

“This whole time you could have said no.” That was how Paige brought her wife back to the present, where they finally perfected their destined roles. “Yet you haven't said much at

all. Could it be because you can hardly believe your good luck?”

*She's totally read one of my stories.* It was the only explanation for this sudden scene. Yet Rhea could not be angry. That might come later when she had the chance to ask her wife where she got an idea like this. Right now, all Rhea cared about was having those tits in her face.

Maybe some other things in her face, too.

“Never mind. I don't actually care.”

Paige fully removed her coat and tossed it over the couch. Rhea didn't flinch as it came close to snapping against her face. She only had eyes for the woman swaying before her, sharp heels stabbing the carpet, and soft blond hair bobbing in a non-existent breeze.

“You awoke the old demon inside of me earlier this summer,” Paige said. “So get ready to keep this dragon tamed so I don't destroy the whole world.”

## Chapter 30

**A**lthough Rhea was *well* aware that there was a fine line between kink and trouble, she continued to find herself standing right on the precipice of jumping headfirst into *trouble*.

Or Paige was about to push her. She wasn't sure which, and she also wasn't sure if there was a difference.

All Rhea knew was that there was this hotel room of indiscernible origin. There was a bed big enough to swallow her whole, and there was a woman barely dressed in black lingerie who held none of the soft and girly charm of the woman Rhea married.

Instead, she was a selfish she-beast straight from the dregs of campus – and Rhea was *in love*.

She almost hated to admit it, but the ever-present adolescent inside of her had never been so happy to be taken advantage of. Not even when Paige pushed her down on the bed and

crawled on top of her, Rhea's T-shirt slowly ascending her torso.

And not when Paige roughly removed her wife's jeans. Nor when she smacked Rhea's ass and laughed at her crying out in surprise. This wasn't simply a reversal of their new roles: this was the kind of dream come true that caught Rhea completely off-guard. *I had no idea how much I actually wanted this...* A gorgeous, self-proclaimed bitch who could have any girlfriend she wanted. Not only did she choose Rhea, but she was willing to make her wife a *forever* and *only* addition to Paige Powell's stable of well-used women.

That was Rhea. Well-used and loving it.

"I should feel bad about being so lazy." While Rhea remained prostrate on the bed, hands still gathered beneath her back, Paige dropped the starter nipple clamps right on her wife's chest. "A good wife would make sure her spouse is well taken care of before taking her for everything she's physically got. I don't care. Funny how that works."

It didn't matter how ruthless and egotistic Paige sounded. It only turned Rhea on more, and she wondered what that said about her.

"I'd love to ride your face while you squirm for air." Paige leaned against a chair by the window, ankles crossed and fingers combing through her long hair. If it wasn't for the bright sunlight illuminating the hotel room, Rhea might wonder if she had walked into the wrong suite on the right night. "Kiss you all over and make you come as much as I



fancy. Ugh, but that's work. If you know anything about me, the word about town is that I'm only interested in girls I can play with until I've had my fill. I don't care about your pleasure. Only mine." Paige cocked her head while staring at her wife. "Does that sound about right?"

If this was her way of beseeching consent to continue, then Rhea knew one word. "Yes."

"Hmph." Paige grabbed the curtains and pulled them across the bed. Rhea was cast into shadow, but not Paige, whose physique remained aglow. She did not turn on the lights. "Is it weird that I don't care? All I care about is using you to get off."

For the first time since being escorted away from the parking garage, Rhea questioned if she should say something. *Dare I break the mood?* Was it worth it if she assuaged her worries for a single minute? Or was Paige not roleplaying as much as it seemed?

"As it so happens," Rhea croaked from her awkward position on the bed, "all I care about is getting you off, too."

Paige's gaze glistened from the other side of her shoulder. "At least we agree. I'm worth getting off."

She marched back to the bed, grabbing the nipple clamps off her wife's chest and pulling a pillow down the length of the bed. Rhea soon followed, her knees hanging far off the edge of the bed and her feet almost low enough to touch the floor.

Rhea swallowed the discomfort that had been building in the back of her throat. She didn't need it.

“You're exactly the kind of girl I could eat in one bite.” Paige stepped between Rhea's legs and loomed over her, the plastic cord holding together the nipple clamps dangling from her teeth. “Wouldn't that be something? I could start right here.” She circled her finger around the right peak of Rhea's sports bra. *I almost wore a normal bra today...* Rhea didn't own many, but they worked with certain outfits and on laundry day – assuming she had to wear a bra at all. If only she had foregone her favorite sports bra, which was all function, no form. Her nipple might already be in Paige's mouth. “Shake some salt on your breasts and see if you taste like tequila.”

“Why don't you?”

Paige cupped Rhea's face between her thumb and forefinger, her knee deliciously close to Rhea's underwear. “I don't have any salt, sweetie.” She dangled the nipple clamps over Rhea's face. “Although I do have these... and a few other things that might make you come faster than I do. How's that for a fair exchange?”

Rhea held her breath as her eyes slammed shut and her whole body arched to meet Paige coming down on her, the full brunt of her weight almost too much to bear. Yet what really destroyed Rhea's sanity were the two thumbs pushing up her sports bra. A hot and frisky tongue soon found her nipple and made short work of what decency Rhea had left.

“Ah...!” She forgot where she was, how she got here, or what Paige had promised with only a few words. She even forgot that weekend by the lake, when *she* was the one handcuffing and exciting the woman now in charge. As far as Rhea was concerned, this was how it had always been: her, Paige, and whatever flat surface they found.

A hard nipple was left behind when Paige removed her wet lips. She didn't waste any time. Before Rhea could say uncle, one of the clamps was on her, eliciting a powerful cry of submissive femininity. Rhea subconsciously knew she was capable of that sound, but she had never heard herself make it.

If Paige had, she was unperturbed as she tackled Rhea's other nipple with the same vigor. Rhea had completely lost her wits by the time she lay on the bed with her T-shirt and bra up around her throat and two clamps hanging from her taut nipples.

“You're already squirming.” Paige's hand remained on Rhea's bare stomach. “You're not supposed to make this difficult for me. I don't have a lot of time, *honey*. I want to get off in the next twenty minutes and get on with my day, and you're making it very difficult for me to enjoy the view. I'm not like you.” She stepped away, every stomp of her heel on the floor sending another shudder through Rhea's body. “I don't get wet on *command*.”

Shit, how did she know? Had they been married for the past fifteen years?

“If I have to, I’ll tie you to the headboard. That way you can’t get away from me when I come for you.”

Rhea only had to glance at the headboard to know that might be impossible without better equipment than what they had at home. Or maybe that was part of Paige’s plan. *Make me want to please her with idle threats.* Rhea would do anything. Threats not required.

“I’ve got plans for you.” Paige pulled Rhea’s left leg aside. Her hand was soon on her wife’s thigh, squeezing her warm skin and holding back no qualms about going straight for her underwear. “You’ll have to forgive me if I’m a bit rough and demanding. A lot is riding on this afternoon delight if you catch my drift.”

Rhea was still powerless to open her eyes as one finger immediately gunned for her pussy, opening her up enough to dive inside. While Rhea gasped in sweet surrender, her wife stoically sat on the bed as if she administered a medical antidote instead of marital pleasure.

Why in the world was this so damn hot?

Paige’s nose was only a few inches away from Rhea’s when she said, “Bet you didn’t see this happening today.”

That was the only sign of the “real” Paige her wife was offered that afternoon. Wherever she went after that, Rhea couldn’t fathom. She could hardly conceive what made Paige drive her middle finger into the desperate depths of her wife’s body.

All Rhea knew was that it felt *great*.

“See? I’m not completely heartless.” Paige followed Rhea halfway up the bed as one became overwhelmed enough to slowly inch her way up the length of the covers. The chain holding together the nipple clamps rattled against Rhea’s stomach before falling to one side, her right nipple tugged against until she undulated in pleasure. She had always assumed these things would hurt – at least a little. So why wasn’t she already sore? Why did Rhea only feel her wife’s piercing gaze and nothing else?

Paige’s finger ascended the length of her wife’s leg. Her weight left the bed. Rhea opened her eyes to find Paige adjusting her lingerie and kicking over a bag she had left by the window. “I did some shopping this week. It’s crazy what you can find online.” Paige opened the bag. Rhea’s vision was too blurry to make out what her wife had in her hand. All she knew was that it had a particular shape and a riotous color. “I mean, it’s ugly as hell, but once it’s inside you, I won’t have to look at it.”

Rhea was completely malleable in her wife’s hands. She easily rolled onto her back and allowed herself to be pulled back to the end of the bed. Instead of draping her legs over the edge, however, she kicked her knees into the air and opened her thighs as if she were welcoming her wife home.

“I hope you’re finding the new terms of our marital contract agreeable so far,” Paige sweetly said as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail before removing her bra. Rhea would say

yes to anything if it meant watching those beautiful breasts bounce before her eyes. “I know it’s *so* one-sided, but I can’t help it anymore. I’m at the worst impasse of my life. What I want is someone more than a wife.” Her bra landed on Rhea’s chest, covering her nipple clamps while tickling her tender skin beneath them. “I want a wretch who will do whatever I tell her.”

Paige lowered her underwear far enough to show off a patch of blond hair beneath. Rhea’s eyes remained fixated there as her wife inserted their bullet vibrator into the bottom part of her new purchase. The shorter end soon disappeared between Paige’s pelvis and her underwear. As she stood with an erect member made of something besides her flesh, Rhea cursed the world for not letting her touch herself. Didn’t it realize how *important* that was?

“Do you think that’s you?” Paige’s hands were on her hips as she stood straight at the end of the bed. She was perfectly framed between Rhea’s opened knees. “Are you my personal plaything who won’t complain when I use her like this?”

“Do whatever you want,” Rhea said, still lost in the haze this moment brought her. “I’m yours.” She couldn’t be a part of Paige any quicker.

With a satisfied grunt, Paige hopped on the bed and looped her hands beneath Rhea’s knees. She was brought forward, her handcuffed hands caught between her body and the bed covers. The nipple clamps attached to her breasts clinked against her chest and insinuated that she looked as slovenly as

she felt, with her shirt and bra still gathered around her throat while Paige's lingerie fell to one side of her torso. Rhea tried to keep her eyes open. She wanted to see her wife's half-naked body for the goddess-like statue it was.

Yet she couldn't keep her eyes open. She was too entranced with where her imagination took her in the coming minutes.

She was back on that college campus, watching Paige from afar. She was with some other girl – someone Rhea didn't know and didn't want to know. *She doesn't matter. Who was with Paige before me doesn't matter.* All Rhea knew was that Paige was the one. She had the finesse of a woman who knew what she was about and what she wanted from life. She got what she wanted... she *fucked* who she wanted. For Paige Powell, sex with someone else was merely enlightened masturbation. Whoever lay beneath her was granted access to a whirlwind of fast and ready ecstasy.

Rhea wanted to be that one. The sex-starved and somewhat suppressed girl she used to be couldn't imagine any other existence than one where Paige finally looked in her direction and decided "*That one.*"

Rhea was finally the girl whose disheveled clothing and early-morning walk of shame branded her as another willing accomplice to Paige's games. She had been tossed about a dorm room bed until the neighbors complained and the RA got involved. She missed her first class the following day because she was still too sore to walk and too wrapped up in the memories of what Paige had done to her in only an hour. *I can*

*still hear her orgasmic cries as she uses me.* Rhea had been born to do many things with her life, but she wasn't ashamed to say that servicing Paige Powell in the bedroom was at the top of the list of accomplishments.

She was at the peak of her new memories when she felt Paige thrust into her as if she were powered by something beyond the eager need to fuck her plaything.

The sound flying free from Rhea's throat was much louder in her head than out loud. As Paige likewise grunted and groaned, treating her wife like something to be penetrated as indelicately as possible, Rhea internally screamed in ecstasy. It was like her whole body was so wrapped up in what happened to it that she completely forgot how to make a single sound.

Paige was capable of doing so much more, though.

She said the dirtiest things that Rhea had ever heard come out of that pretty mouth. The woman who approached her public videos with sophistication and professionalism now spat the vilest words Rhea had ever heard in their fifteen years together. *Tell me more.* Rhea wanted to know how so much farther below she was to this gifted goddess who wielded a sex toy like she was no stranger to using it for her pleasure, whether by herself or with a lucky woman. *I'm the lucky one.* It wasn't an accident. Rhea was the only one who could take it like the one destined to be with Paige.

"Fucking you is the easiest thing in the world." Paige said that after pulling out long enough to crash back into Rhea only a second later. The third time was the real charm, though. Not



only did Paige hit her target perfectly, but Rhea had found the best position for her hips to receive her wife's love as efficiently as possible. Only now did she feel the forlorn pinch of the nipple clamps as the chain rattled across her chest with every one of Paige's unrelenting thrusts. "That's the real reason I married you. I wanted access to *this* pussy whenever I needed it. Like right now. I'd ask how it is..." Paige grunted hard enough to shake the bed when she reached between their meeting hips and turned on the vibrator. Almost instantly, Rhea finally cried out in pleasure strong enough to echo between the hotel room walls. "But I don't care."

Every time she said, "*I don't care,*" Rhea was taken to yet another place that called to her from afar. *I care. I care so much it hurts me when you don't use me.* For years, Rhea had waited. She was the patient girlfriend who offered sweet kisses and funny jokes whenever Paige was feeling down. They made tender love and, yes, sometimes took it up a few notches when passion prevailed. They married. They made a home. They had been through a lot, including a sexual dry spell that had almost driven Rhea crazy. Because what she *wanted* was this: Paige's undying desire to fuck her wife into oblivion.

Not only was Rhea on the receiving end of Paige's strong and heavy thrusts, but her wife had made it clear. This was about *her* pleasure, not Rhea's. Exactly the kind of thing that all but ensured that Rhea would orgasm almost as soon as they began.

With every sensation coming from every direction? It wasn't difficult to understand why.

Surely, Paige said more dirty things. This time, Rhea couldn't hear them. She was lost to her own pounding heart, the buzz of the vibrator, the squeak of the bed, and her own tumultuous cries that threatened to ruin her voice. She wished that this hotel suite was as cheap as a public university dorm. Rhea needed the whole world to hear what a good little wretch she was.

*I am the best. I am the only one a woman like her ever needs.*

And she knew Paige needed her. Why else would she be fucking Rhea with such intensity? With her sweat dripping down her perfectly made face, her breasts moving to the beat of her thrusts, and that perpetual growl marking Rhea as property of no one but Paige.

Soon, Rhea saw and heard nothing. She only felt free.



She lay on her side, naked, any and all apparatuses removed from her body. Rhea's face was submerged between two large pillows as she caught her breath and experienced the tender and hallowed kisses of her wife.

That kiss had originally begun on her lips shortly after Paige finished their scene. Yet Rhea was too overwhelmed to reciprocate. So, here she was, the tired and worn-out toy of a woman who could have kept going all afternoon.

When Rhea finally opened her eyes and lifted her head, she saw Paige before her, patiently waiting for her wife to rejoin

the world.

“Talk about that being something else...” Rhea almost couldn’t say the words. She was still too tired.

Paige had pulled one of the hotel bathrobes over her shoulders. “I may have been inspired by something I read lately.”

*That* was what roused Rhea from her stupor. “You didn’t...”

“We can hash it out later. Right now, I want to admire how beautiful you are in this light. You’ve got a great body. Have I mentioned that lately?”

Rhea gave up the thought of arguing over Paige reading stories she had no business snooping through. *I don’t care right now*. Later. They could discuss it *later*.

“You’re the knockout here. Jesus, I thought I was going to die when you first brought me in here. When’s the last time you did your makeup like this?”

“I don’t think I ever have.”

“I like it. Next time we go to the club, more that, less Barbie.”

Paige snorted. “Next time we go, I might not be as docile as you’re used to.”

“I’ll put on a skirt for the first time in ten years if it means being your bitch for the night.”

Paige was so caught off guard by that comment that they both ended up awkwardly laughing until Rhea rolled onto her

back and accepted her wife into a sideways embrace. *What a wild ride.* She didn't question any of it. Not how Paige reverted to her "real" self shortly after the scene, and not what they said to each other now that every barrier had fallen. There was nothing sacred. Rhea thought that was true before, but it had never been as real until *now*.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Paige eventually said, a smile struggling to fall off her face. "There were about one dozen chokepoints in the plan that made me seriously question everything. Like you asking for a divorce afterward."

"Trust me when I say this is exactly what I needed."

"I know." Paige planted a soft kiss on her wife's forehead before getting up. "Aren't you going to ask how long we have this room for? Because it's not the whole night. We've got to get back home at some point anyway." She stood by the Jacuzzi as if debating whether to fire it up. "Probably by dinner. We should pick something up on the way home."

Rhea almost couldn't comprehend so many words. "How much did this room cost?"

Did her wife just wink? "I got it for free. I'll tell you how later."

Rhea got up but did not yet leave the bed. "Do we at least have time to have a bath?"

"Thought you'd never ask. Get over here and let me give you that sweet aftercare we're always reading about."

As much as Rhea enjoyed that thought, she still had one thing on her mind. She waited until Paige started the Jacuzzi, the bubbles as loud as the thoughts thumping in Rhea's head.

“Yes?” Paige sat on the edge of the tub, legs crossed and hands wrapped around her knee. “Is there something you need? Besides me, of course.”

Rhea almost ate her words. How was she supposed to request anything when that perfect face was looking back at her? “When we get out of the tub...” She cleared her throat. “Will we have time for a round two? Because I'd like to get something out of my system before going back home.”

A big, wide smile appeared once again on Paige's face. “I think we could squeeze in another fuckfest, if that's what you're asking.”

“Oh, good. Because I've got another request.”

Paige gestured for her wife to test the temperature of the water with her bare feet. While Rhea attempted to reach her leg over the edge of the tub, Paige said, “One might think you've completely missed the point of my spiel earlier.”

Rhea ignored her. “When we get out of this tub, I want to do something we've *never* done before.”

“If you want to eat the pillow while I break your ass, say so.”

If it were possible for Rhea to drown in only one foot of water, she was well on her way to figuring out how.

## A While Later

Paige couldn't remember the last time they had a cookout, let alone so early in January.

It was one of those more moderate winter days, though. The one thing Paige loved about her place of birth was how delightfully *mild* winter was. She wore a sweater out on the patio, but the sun was bright in the sky and the heat was fresh on her skin.

She did love good sweater weather.

“Why the hell is the pool still open out here?” Jocie was the most covered she ever got in public, with long pants and a long-sleeved scoop-neck shirt that hung loosely on her frame. Behind her, both Loren and Maya ignored her outburst while inspecting what Paige had cooking on the grill. *Plenty of vegetarian food to go around.* That was the theme of the cookout, and it wasn't only because one of the guests couldn't stand the smell of grilled meat. Although at the rate Loren's nose was lowering toward the grill, Paige might have to snatch it off with her tongs.

Rhea pulled herself away from Jeanette and Roxy to answer her other friend's pressing question. "Because we're still using it, Joce."

"My God. You've lost your minds. It's like a whopping sixty degrees out here." She lowered her sunglasses as she stepped out into the sun-blasted backyard. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Soon, Paige would have to reapply her sunscreen. "When's the food ready?"

Paige closed the lid on the grill. "Ten minutes. So hold your horses."

What Rhea never bothered to explain to her friend was that Danny was the one who still used the pool every other day. In prior years, both Rhea and Paige agreed that it saved money to close the pool between late fall and early spring. Yet ever since Danny moved in with them a few months ago, he practically lived in the shallow end of the pool even on colder, cloudier days. *As long as his doctor says it's okay...* The nurses never appreciated watching him in the pool, but their visits were becoming less common as Danny came closer to recovering.

Paige wished that meant he was about to move back into his Malibu bungalow, but reality did not deal such cards. As it was, Rhea spent the days her father *wasn't* in the pool helping him clean out the house in preparation for selling. Paige was pleasantly surprised to discover that her father-in-law was open to the idea of moving into an assisted living facility in Santa Monica. While a specific place hadn't been pinned down yet, they knew that besides geography, the most important

aspect was the level of independence he could maintain while having help only a button push away. *And someone checking in on him once or twice a day...* Rhea and Paige were already used to visiting him out in Malibu at least once a week. Paige also hoped that this meant her father-in-law would have a social life outside of his daughter again.

Until then, he still lived with them – but the balance between privacy and family life had gotten easier once Danny was able to do most things on his own again.

He made a big deal about that today when he emerged on the patio without the aid of his wheelchair. While he immediately sat at the covered table overlooking the backyard and pool, the color was there in his face and he had no qualms amusing himself with his phone. *At least he's not critiquing my grilling...* That might happen as soon as Rhea took over in a few minutes. Danny was a *lot* more open to criticizing the way his daughter prepared food than his daughter-in-law, who sometimes still only awkwardly existed around him.

That might never change, and Paige was fine with it. She had her parents down in Anaheim to contend with, such as during Christmas, when the three of them packed up to see Paige's whole extended family for two days. *Never again.* She wouldn't have blamed Danny if he suffered a third heart attack with all of the ruckus Paige's cousins and their kids caused.

“Rhea?” Paige called to her wife, who was the center of attention among all of their guests. “Could you take over the last of this while I grab the salad from the fridge?”



She walked over, taking the tongs from Paige's hand. "Oh, while you're in there," Rhea began, "could you pop into my office and grab that red folder on my desk? It's for Loren. Information from my publisher."

"Sure." Paige would do that first. The salad could wait.

She only barely knew what the folder was about – something regarding Loren getting into nonfiction publishing based on what she knew about archaic religious stuff. *I honestly don't know what she does.* Paige knew what Religious Studies was, but the fine details between history and modern context were lost on her.

Paige bypassed the kitchen and went straight down the hallway toward Rhea's office. The door was slightly ajar, and the whole room smelled of the peppermint-scented candle Rhea had been burning every time she spent the morning in her office.

Sure enough, the red folder was perched atop the desk. So was a regular manila folder marked for the acquisition's editor of *Forever Escapes*. There was a sticky note on top with Rhea's handwriting on it.

*"You know, you could always ask before snooping."*

Sounded like the *perfect* invitation for Paige to snoop!

They had been playing this game since autumn, and Paige appreciated it for the surreptitious rules it abided. Rhea had kept writing sexy stories in between her next "serious" project, and they would show up in the strangest places: the bathroom

counter, inside the kitchen, drawer, right inside Paige's handbag... Rhea 100% understood that any story left lying around the house was likely to land in Paige's grubby hands. (The trick was to not put it anywhere her father might accidentally find it...)

Paige leaned against the desk. Beyond the window, which muffled most of the conversations on the patio, she heard the faraway world that she had stepped away from.

Because in her hands was the only thing that mattered – a peek into her wife's dirty mind.

Whatever Paige found in here would fuel their next date night, be it roleplaying in the nightclub or stealing away to a hotel room for a night. It also kept the spark alive here in the house, where they agreed things had to stay more vanilla for a while. Yet Paige didn't mind. She enjoyed plotting the next scene with her wife, and having something *hot* to look forward to make the days go by quicker.

And Rhea knew how to plot out her own getaways, too. More than once, Paige had been on the other end of a conniving woman who only cared about getting under her skirt.

*This isn't anything like that, though.* The story on top of the folder was only a page and a half long, but Paige got the gist. *Virginal religious kid at college? Check. Sorority mean girl who wants to ruin the other student's reputation? Double check.* Now, Paige didn't like to be *typecasted*, but she

admitted she knew how to play a capital B Bitch in the bedroom.

Laughter from the patio cut into her thoughts. Paige shoved the paper back into the folder before grabbing the other one from the corner of the desk. On her way back out, she stopped by the kitchen, where one of the guests rummaged through the fridge for sparkling water.

“How’s it going?” Jeanette asked after shutting the door. “Been a while.”

Paige tapped the red folder against the island counter. “Not bad,” she said with a satisfied sigh. “Work’s good. Life’s good.”

Jeanette grinned. “You and Rhea doing good now too?”

“We’ve always done *good*,” Paige corrected, which made Jeanette playfully roll her eyes, “but things are definitely more fun right now. I told you about our recent revelations this year.”

Jeanette’s pursed lips reminded Paige that she was talking to a professional model. Which was hard to ignore even when Jeanette wore a turtleneck and jeans. If anything, Paige was forced to stare at nothing but Jeanette’s flawless features and symmetrical heart-shaped face.

Which always reminded Paige that Jeanette knew her way around a sexy nightclub. If there was anyone she could talk to about her marriage, it was the woman who once walked naked through the club – on ladies’ night, anyway.

“Glad to hear things are working out, considering everything that’s blown up the past few months.” Jeanette offered to help carry out the large bowl of salad to the patio. The only reason Paige accepted the help was so she could carry the folder to Loren, who conveniently stood near the door. She was grateful to receive the folder of information, and Paige shared a *look* with her wife, who currently plated grilled veggie dogs and veggie skewers.

They crammed eight people around one large table, leaving little room for the bottles of condiments and drinks that everyone needed to make their meal complete. Paige opted to skip the chair and sat directly in Rhea’s lap, who put on a show that no one heavier than Paige had *ever* sat on her before. Didn’t stop her from eating a hot dog, though.

“You’ve got something on your lip right there.” Paige referred to the mustard on the corner of her wife’s mouth. “No, the other side. No... oh, for fuck’s sake.” Paige had no choice but to slam her lips on Rhea’s, kissing away the mustard as they both erupted into laughter halfway through the act.

She expected Rhea to be mortified in front of her father, who sat on the other side of them, but Danny politely engaged in conversation with Maya, whose family was from the same region of Mexico as Rhea’s grandmother.

*Can’t get away with that again, then.* Yet it didn’t stop Paige from throwing her whole weight against Rhea, who begged for mercy from all of their friends.

The January sun wasn't hot enough to make Paige sweat, yet there it was, touching her eyes as she blinked away the laughter tearing her apart.

She might have to take off her sweater. That was how hot her wife made her – even after fifteen years together.

Good thing she knew the perfect way to cool themselves off. The pool called as soon as they were done with lunch.

## **THE END**

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# THE HELLFIRE QUARTET

Jeanette and Roxy are in Hellfire to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary, but paradise shakes wherever they step. For the past several months, the “happy” couple have been arguing more and more about the path of their relationship. For one thing, Jeanette wants to take things to the next level with the woman who wooed her with seductive dirty words and promises of a marriage full of the deviance clubs like Hellfire offer.

Except Roxy has not been herself for quite some time. What spark they had when they said “I do” has been soured over years of bills, stressful jobs, and extended family pulling them in opposite geographic directions. Can Jeanette help the woman she loves come out of her funk? Can Roxy find the fire within her to look at her wife the way she used to?

**GET IT HERE!**

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Former Marine Michelle “Mitch” Cruise has already lived through the most harrowing moments of her life. Between a kidnapping in Iraq and losing her family’s home to wildfires, she’s convinced that there is nothing left to harm her.

It makes her the perfect candidate for a golden opportunity. There is a woman – a rich woman – searching for a month-long girlfriend. Mitch isn’t naïve. She knows what this woman wants. So happens that Mitch is in the position to endure it.

She never, ever counts on falling in love with reclusive heiress Vanessa – to the point she’ll lay down her life for her mistress.

**GET IT HERE!**