

CASSIE COLE



The
INHERITANCE

A REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

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The Inheritance



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1



Robyn

The big Victorian mansion that belonged to Alistair Fritz Schreiber, locally known as the Schreiber Estate, came into view as I drove down the long paved driveway flanked by sprawling oak trees. I had come here every single day—even weekends!—for nearly a year. It was more than just a workplace for me. The sight of it, and the lone inhabitant within, used to fill me with boundless happiness.

However, today it held none of that charm.

Even as the iron gate creaked open and I pulled into the driveway, I struggled to keep tears from welling in my eyes. I didn't want to be here. But then I saw the familiar sight of a blue Honda Civic. *Chase is here already.* Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I thought about Chase, the guy I had been crushing on for the past year. At least I wasn't alone in all of this.

Parked on the other side of his Civic was a Santa Cruz Police Cruiser. All happy thoughts about Chase immediately disappeared.

As I got out of my car, I took a long look at the mansion. Four stories of red brick covered in vines and moss. Behind the walls, polished hardwood floors laid throughout twenty different rooms of the thousand square feet interior, along with a lifetime of collected antiques and enough dust and cobwebs to give Alice from *The Brady Bunch* a permanent scowl. It felt like home. In a lot of ways, it *was* my home. Or at least, it used to be. Everything was different, now.

I reached into my pocket for the key to the house, but stopped when I realized the massive wooden front door was ajar. I took a deep breath and walked inside.

New smells were the first thing I noticed. Alistair had worn the same Paco Rabanne cologne every day I had known him, but there was a different scent in the air. Something clean, but cheap. Like Old Spice deodorant. The marble

floors and high ceilings of the foyer caused the voices in the adjacent study to carry; three men speaking softly. Hushed, funereal voices. I knew I should go into the study straightaway, but there was an object in the foyer that I had never really paid much attention to. An object which I was now transfixed by.

The oil painting on the far wall was massive, at least as large as the front doorway. It was painted in the style of the Dutch golden age, with deep black shadows and realistic, almost life-like, facial detail. It showed a young man standing at attention, slightly turned sideways, wearing a suit and overcoat. Even if I had never seen it before, I would have recognized the man by his thick blond hair and piercing blue eyes.



I flinched as a voice called out, “Are you Ms. Winters?” I turned to find a uniformed police officer standing in the doorway to the study.

“No. I mean, yes. I’m Robyn Winters.”

“Good,” the officer said, pulling out a pocket-sized notepad and pencil. His boots echoed on the marble floor as he approached. “Do you have some identification?”

“I... I left my purse at home,” I said. “When I got the call about Alistair, I jumped in the car and came straight over. Is that a problem?”

Sighing, the officer said, “Don’t worry about it. We just have a few questions for you.”

The second officer came out of the study. She stood next to her partner and stared at me like I was the suspect in a murder investigation. Or maybe it was just my imagination. That reminded me that Alistair was gone, that this was just a big empty mansion now. Tears started shimmering in my vision.

“Hey, it’s all right,” the first officer said. “Don’t worry about your license. We won’t give you a ticket when you drive home later. Probably.”

“Ethan...” the second cop said.

“Kidding. I’m only kidding.” He rolled his eyes at his partner. “My therapist says I use humor as a defense mechanism. Anyway. How long have you worked for Mr. Schreiber?”

“Eleven months,” I replied. “Just under a year.”

“Yesterday, you came to work and did your job. Like any other day.”

He wasn’t phrasing it like a question, but they seemed to be waiting for a response. “That’s right,” I said.

“Walk us through everything that happened last night,” the female officer said. “Your last interactions with Mr. Schreiber.”

Behind them, a man I had never met before came out of the study and leaned against the door frame. He was wearing a black three piece suit with a solid teal tie. He shoved his hands in his pockets and watched us from a distance.

Who is that guy? I wondered. And why do I get the feeling I’ve met him before?

“Ms. Winters?” the second cop asked pointedly. “Excuse me, Ms. Winters?”

I gave myself a shake. “Sorry. Last night. I helped Alistair take his pills.

He's on nine or ten different kinds of medication, and he struggles with the bottles because of his arthritis. Then I poured him a glass of cognac, said goodnight to him, and went home."

"Was it normal for him to drink that late?"

I nodded. "He always took a glass of cognac in bed while reading."

"What about before giving him his medication?" the first officer asked. "Describe the evening for us."

"Before that, I cooked him dinner. He had steak, potatoes, and asparagus." The memory caused another bubble of grief to rise up inside of me. I felt my throat tighten. "After dinner, I escorted Alistair upstairs. The arthritis in his ankles was especially bad, so it took twenty minutes getting him all the way up the stairs. I suggested installing one of those chair lifts, but Alistair wouldn't hear it. He is a very stubborn man." I blinked. "Was a stubborn man." My throat began to tighten.

"It took him twenty minutes to get up these stairs," the cop gestured at the broad staircase that curved up above us, "even with your help?"

"That's right."

The two cops shared a skeptical look. "Was cooking him dinner one of your responsibilities as caretaker?"

"Not technically," I admitted. "He had a meal service plan. Those boxes that come once a week with ready-made meals that you microwave. I was mostly hired to help with his medications, change his bed, help him bathe. But one evening he found me in the kitchen making an omelet for myself. He asked if I could make one for him." I shrugged. "Since then, I cooked all his meals."

"Did you resent this extra responsibility?" the second officer asked.

"Resent? Not at all. I like to cook. Besides, I was required to be on-site from eight in the morning to eight o'clock at night. Most of that time I didn't have anything to do. Cooking made the hours go by faster." I took a deep breath. "I never thought I would be cooking his last meal. If I had known last night..."

I clenched my jaw to keep my lip from trembling. I wasn't going to do this here. Not now.

"Did Mr. Schreiber play with toy trains?" the male cop asked.

I gave a start. “Toy trains?”

“Toy trains.”

“Not that I’m aware of. Why?”

“We found a toy train set in the trash,” the female cop replied. “It seemed out of place.”

“That is strange. Then again, Alistair is a very strange, eccentric man.” I winced. “*Was*. Alistair *was* an eccentric man.” I clenched my teeth together to keep my lips from quivering.

I expected more questions, but the officer closed his notebook. “That’s all we have for you. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else. Thank you for your cooperation.”

They turned away.

“Wait!” I said. “Alistair... how did he die?”

The two officers glanced at each other. “How else would a ninety-nine year old die?” the second cop said. “Old age, probably.”

The painting of Alistair on the wall seemed to stare down at them as they left the foyer.



Robyn

Once the cops were gone, I turned away from the painting on the wall. I didn't want to be here anymore. All I could think about was Alistair's toothy smile while he cut into his steak, the last meal he would ever eat, and the tears were suddenly blurring my vision again. I quickly hurried to the front door to leave.

"Not so fast," the suited man said. He continued leaning against the door frame to the study, but made no move to stop me. "Robyn... Winters, is it?"

"Excuse me, but I was just leaving."

Keeping a hand out to stop me, the man said, "First, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Xander Carlisle. I was Mr. Schreiber's estate attorney." Xander was a slender man whose suit was perfectly tailored, and he would have been handsome if he wasn't scowling. Well, he was handsome even with the scowl, but he would have been more so if he smiled. He reminded me of a Doberman pinscher: lean, sharply attractive, and with a quiet intensity. "I'm the one who called you this morning. As soon as Mr. Schreiber's great-grandson arrives, I will be administering the reading of the will. It's not strictly necessary, a formal reading of the will, but Mr. Schreiber was quite insistent."

Everything he said set off alarm bells in my head. "That's all fine. But I was only his caretaker for the past year. I don't see any reason for me to stay for—"

"You are specifically listed in the will," Xander interrupted. Now a smile touched his lips, and glinted in his dark eyes. "Stick around for the reading. After that, you can go in peace. It should begin in about ten minutes."

Frown returning to his sharp face, he turned and disappeared into the study.

Only after he was gone did I turn away from the front door. Alistair left me

something in the will? He didn't have to do that. I didn't deserve anything, especially after the mistake I had made last night. Guilt rose up inside me again, especially as I glanced at the painting of him on the wall. I hurried out of the foyer, turning down the hall into the first room on the right.

Resplendent with dark walnut floors and comfortable leather furniture, the library was one of my favorite rooms in the house. Probably because it was Alistair's favorite room, too. In addition to the prize Underwood Golden typewriter displayed on a pedestal, the inner walls of the library held two stories of bookshelves that stretched all the way to the vaulted ceiling. Tall windows made up the curved outer wall, letting in plenty of natural light for reading—even at this early hour in the morning. That light was also the reason the room held at least thirty types of plants, arranged in windowsill planters and hanging pots.

Eyeing one of the plants was Chase Sutherland, the gardener for the Schreiber Estate. If Xander was a Doberman pinscher, then Chase was a German shepherd. Strong, sturdy, and fiercely loyal. He wasn't wearing his usual gardening attire, but I would have recognized his mop of chestnut hair and broad shoulders anywhere. I savored the moment before he knew I was in the room. He seemed perfectly at peace as he carefully rearranged the hanging vines from one planter, humming the song *Mr. Brightside* under his breath while he worked. There was a watering can on the table next to him, which seemed out of place in the dusty room filled with tomes.

Also out of place was the light switch to my left. Specifically, the strip of duct tape keeping the switches in the *off* position, with the words, *DO NOT TOUCH*, written in black pen.

"Creeper," Chase suddenly said, turning away from the plant. "Spying on a guy like that." He was grinning though, taking the sting out of the words. Chase had a big, open smile. The kind that made you feel like you were the only person in the world he was happy to see. My heart fluttered when he turned that smile on me.

"Hey, you don't need to do that," I said, pointing at the plants. "With Alistair gone, there's nobody to pay you to keep all the plants alive."

"Part of me knows that," he admitted, gazing at the plant lovingly. "But I can't just stop. Not while I'm here. I hate the thought of them going uncared for, and eventually dying." His smile disappeared, and he turned his hazel

eyes back to me. “I can’t believe he’s gone. Are you okay, Robyn? With... you know. Everything.”

“As okay as anyone can be, I guess.” The brief bubble of calm Chase had brought over me evaporated. “I’m fine.”

“Really?” He let the vine drop from his fingers. “Because you look like you slept rough.”

The comment almost made me laugh. *If only you knew.*

“I keep thinking about dinner last night,” I found myself saying. The words spilled out of me, like there was no room for them inside. “The cops even asked me about it. If I had known I was cooking his last meal...”

Chase took three steps toward me and wrapped me in a hug. It was the first physical touch we had ever shared, I realized, but it was exactly what I needed at that moment. A few tears rolled down my cheek, but no more followed. I felt myself relax in his strong embrace.

“I didn’t want to ask this before,” he said while pulling away. “I mean, I *did* want to ask, but I was hesitant because we sort of work together every day. I didn’t want to make it awkward. But now...” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Do you want to get coffee sometime?”

“Perhaps. But probably not.”

“Ah. Oh. Okay.”

“No,” I went on with a grin, “I’d rather get a *real* drink with you.”

That made Chase brighten up. “A real drink?”

Nodding, I said, “Yeah. With alcohol. At night. Over dinner.”

That beautiful smile lit up his face. “I’d like that way more than coffee.”

“I’m free tonight!” I suggested. “I guess I’m free every night, now that I’m technically unemployed.”

“Tonight works great for me,” Chase said.

Did we really just agree to a date? I’d been crushing on Chase since I started working here almost a year ago, but I didn’t think he was interested. He was always nice, waving and saying hello whenever our paths crossed on the estate, but he never flirted with me. He was always respectful.

I wonder what Alistair would think about this, I found myself imagining. *His death leading to the two of us finally going out.* It was kind of funny what

the mind thought about while processing grief.

I was searching for what to say next when there came the loud thumping of bass speakers. Chase and I crowded toward the window. His scent surrounded me as we peered outside, like fresh soil and lemons.

A Jeep waited as the iron gate creaked open on rusted hinges. Its engine revved once before it drove up the rest of the driveway, parking diagonally next to my car. The man who hopped out was wearing a salmon-colored bathing suit and a beachy tank top. His dirty-blond hair was pulled back in a twisted man-bun.

The sight of him stirred something primal inside me. He was *gorgeous*.

“Who the hell is *that* guy?” Chase said, perfectly encapsulating my own thoughts.

“It must be Alistair’s great-grandson,” I replied. “The lawyer said we were waiting on him.”

Chase shook his head as Mr. Man-bun jogged through the front door. “I can’t believe someone like that is going to inherit the whole estate.”

I gave a start. “Wait. The *whole* estate? I knew Alistair didn’t have many living relatives, but...”

“Just the great-grandson,” Chase confirmed. “Alistair told me one morning over mimosas. There’s nobody else in Alistair’s family to inherit the estate except him.”

“Speaking of inheritance, did the lawyer dude tell you about the will?” I asked.

“He’s the one who called me. He said I was specifically listed in the will.”

“Me too,” I said. “Well, now that he’s here, we should probably get this over with—”

Suddenly, Chase leaned in and gave me a tentative peck on the lips. It only lasted half a second, but electricity seemed to travel through the point where our lips touched, churning softly for a precious moment before he pulled away.

“Sorry,” he immediately said, running a nervous hand through his hair.

“Don’t be!” I quickly replied. *Oh my God. Chase kissed me.* My lips felt warm and numb all at the same time.

“It’s just... I’ve been wanting to do that.” That disarming smile spread across his face. “For a while.”

Before I could respond, someone cleared their throat in the doorway. It was the lawyer, Xander. He casually slid his hands into his pockets and said, “The final member of the reading has arrived. If you two wouldn’t mind joining us in the study...?”

Chase’s cheeks turned bright red—just like mine were, I knew. As we exited the library, I frantically searched for something to say to disarm the awkward situation with the lawyer. I pointed to the light switch on the wall. “Hey, do you know what that’s about?”

“I think the cops put the tape there,” Xander said. “To keep people from turning on the ceiling fan.”

“Why would they do that?” Chase asked.

“To keep evidence from blowing around,” he explained. When we still look puzzled, he added, “This is where they found Alistair Schreiber. This is the room where he died.”

3



Robyn

The study where the lawyer led us to felt like the spiritual opposite of the library. Dark. Windowless. Devoid of any plants or life. And there was the man who'd driven up in the Jeep.

"Here we all are," Xander said as we all walked into the room. "These are the two other individuals listed in your great-grandfather's will."

"Everyone's here? This is it?" Mr. Man-bun turned toward us with a curious look on his face, then immediately replaced it with a big fake smile. "Brody Schreiber. Pharmaceutical sales." He handed each of us a business card.

"Kind of you to have us here," Chase said. He and I shared a private look. *Who keeps business cards in their swim trunks?*

"Everyone's welcome at the Schreiber Estate," Brody said warmly. "That's what Papa Alistair always said. He meant it, too."

You probably have no idea what Alistair wanted, I realized. Chase's normally-welcoming face was drawn tight with suspicion. I immediately decided that Brody was like a Golden Retriever: blond, energetic, and would rather be playing with a ball than doing anything serious.

Shoot. He's also really cute and I want to pet him. I shook off the thought, but Brody must have noticed it.

"What are you doing later?" he asked me in a smooth tone. He had the most amazing blue eyes, which seemed to sparkle warmly as he regarded me in the study. "Want to learn how to surf?"

"I'll think about it," I said noncommittally. "Maybe later."

"Later, totally, that's what I said," Brody replied smoothly. "Later, like, after all the formalities of the will are out of the way."

Looking at each of us, Xander pointedly said, "Shall we begin?" He went

around the big mahogany desk in the center of the room and sat down. “I do not anticipate this taking long.”

Upholstered chairs were positioned on our side of the desk. Chase scooted one out and smiled at me. But before I could sit in it, Brody immediately sank into it with a sigh. “Thanks, bro.”

“No problem,” Chase said dryly. Brody didn’t seem to notice. Chase held out the second chair for me, then remained standing. I could feel the heat radiating off his body behind me. Or maybe it was my imagination. *We finally kissed. And now that’s all I can think about instead of Alistair’s death. Am I a horrible person?*

“Let me introduce myself again. My name is Xander Carlisle. I’m an attorney with Hapsburg, Whitney, and Shaw. Mr. Schreiber selected me to be the Executor of his will. I am licensed by the state of California to read the will and make any arrangements pertaining to—”

“Okay, bro, I think we all get it.” Brody chuckled and looked at me and Chase like we were all on the same team. “You can skip all the legal mumbo-jumbo. High tide is in an hour, and I’m jonesin’ to carve up some sick waves.”

Chase snorted behind me. I managed to keep my face blank. *His great-grandfather is dead, and all he cares about is surfing.* I decided that the sooner I was out of the same room with Brody, the better. No matter how good-looking he was.

“Know something funny?” Chase asked. “I worked for Alistair for three years, since I got out of college, and I never heard him mention you. Not even once.”

“The fuck’s that supposed to mean?” Brody demanded.

“He’s been dead less than twelve hours and you’re worried about missing the high tide,” Chase said.

Eyeing me like we were all crazy, Brody explained, “Uh, yeah. High tide is the best time to catch some waves. Papa Alistair’s will can be read any time. It’s not like he minds.”

Physically, I felt Chase tense behind me. Before he could do anything he would later regret, I turned and squeezed his hand. He immediately relaxed and gave me a grateful smile.

“Actually,” Xander said, “the will *cannot* be read any time. Our law firm was given strict instructions that the will must be read out loud for everyone in this room without delay, which is why I called you all here first thing in the morning. So if I may continue...?”

I nodded along with Chase. Brody shrugged and leaned back in his chair.

“Now then. Mr. Schreiber’s Last Will and Testament.” Xander bent down behind the desk and came up holding a wooden chest with ornate metal bandings. It looked like something a pirate might dig up.

“This was held in a safety deposit box with keys only available to our firm.” The box rattled as Xander placed it heavily on the desk.

I leaned forward to examine the chest while Xander removed a letter opener and a key from a sealed legal envelope. There wasn’t a lock that I could see; on the front of the chest was a lump of red wax, the kind typically used to seal written documents. Xander used the letter opener to chip away at the wax. Clumps fell to the desk, large and small, eventually revealing a dull iron padlock. The key fit inside perfectly, and the lock opened with a satisfying click.

“Not gonna lie,” Brody said with a chuckle. “This all feels like overkill.”

“Gauging from the contents,” Xander said as he tilted open the top of the chest, “I am inclined to agree with you.” He tilted the chest so the rest of us could see.

Inside the chest was a stack of documents wrapped inside protective plastic.

“Are you sure that was held in a safety deposit box?” Chase said. “And not on some remote island in the Caribbean?”

Brody barked a laugh. “I know, right?”

Seeing his reaction, Chase looked like he regretted the joke.

Xander carefully unwrapped the documents from the layers of plastic—of which there were three, we counted out. The papers were yellow and faded, giving the impression of significant age. There was also a stack of envelopes. Xander quickly flipped through the main papers, then returned to the first page and cleared his throat formally.

“The people gathered in this room, and so listed individually in this will, are those dearest to me in this world. Broderick Schreiber, my great-

grandson. Chase Sutherland, the gardener to my estate. Robyn, my trusted caretaker. And..." Xander shrugged. "And that's it."

I glanced over my shoulder at Chase. He looked just as sad as I felt. The people dearest to Alistair in the world were his gardener, caretaker, and a great-grandson who would rather be surfing than grieving. Suddenly, I felt like crying again.

"To each of you, I have written a personal letter, to be opened privately after the completed reading of this will." Xander handed sealed envelopes to each of us. Mine held my name, Robyn, in Alistair's flowing cursive script. There was no last name listed. I cradled it in my hands like it was precious.

Next to me, Brody was tearing the edge off his envelope. "That is to be opened *after* the reading of the will," Xander said.

"What are you going to do?" Brody demanded. "Invalidate my claim to the inheritance?"

"Legally, I could," Xander said dryly. Brody sighed and shoved the half-opened envelope into the pocket of his swim trunks.

"I bequeath the following items thusly," Xander continued. His dark eyes cut to me for a brief moment. I held my breath. "To Robyn, I leave my personal bible. You may find it in the library. If you have reached a dead end in life, turn to that book for the answers you seek. Whenever I am stuck in a rut, that book always holds the key to escaping."

I didn't know Alistair was religious. Even still, I was touched by the gift. I never expected to receive *anything* when he died. Something so personal meant more to me than money. Chase put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed it.

"To Chase," Xander went on, "I leave the bed of prize roses on the side yard. I know how much time and effort you put into breeding the unique species for my pleasure, and there is nobody in this world who deserves to keep them now that I am gone. When you dig your fingers into the rich soil, I hope you will be reminded of me."

Chase took a shuddering breath. "He loved those roses. I spent two years cross-breeding species to get the ones we have now. They're hardier than most roses, and bloom longer."

"I'm sure that's really cool and stuff," Brody interrupted. "Flowers are

super interesting. But can we get to the best part? What did Papa Alistair leave me?”

Xander kept his sharp face devoid of emotion, but I got the impression he wanted to throw Brody’s part of the will into the fireplace. “To Broderick, my great-grandson and only living blood...”

Brody rubbed his hands together and leaned forward. “Here we go.”

“I bequeath upon you the chess set located in the upstairs parlor,” Xander read out loud. “The pieces are plated in silver and gold, but the value of this board extends far beyond its monetary worth. Now that my own proverbial king has been tipped, I hope you will become a master of the game, for the game of chess shares infinite similarities with the real world.”

I frowned at Brody. *A chess set is wasted on this guy.*

“Okay, that chess set is dope,” Brody said. “But what about the rest? What about the Schreiber Estate?”

“I’m getting to that part,” Xander said irritably. “The greater part of my fortune, my home and estate in Santa Cruz, as well as the various accounts and investments listed herein...”

He trailed off, jaw hanging open.

“Well?” Brody demanded. “Spit it out.”

“This, the entirety of my fortune, I bestow upon one of you in this room.”

All three of us gave a start. “Wait,” Brody said. “*One* of you?”

“In accordance with the rules listed herein,” Xander said, eyes widening, “and the clauses scattered throughout this house, whoever stays on the Schreiber Estate grounds the longest, without leaving the property for any reason, will inherit the entirety of my fortune.”



Robyn

Everyone looked as surprised as I felt. Xander's eyes scanned the will, re-reading what he had just announced. Chase mumbled "What the fuck?" under his breath. I sat in the chair, frozen. It was like my body had stopped working.

I might inherit all of his fortune?

"They might inherit his fortune?" Brody said in disbelief. "I might have to share everything with... with... who even *are* you two?"

"Robyn was Mr. Schreiber's caretaker," Xander said. "Chase was the gardener. All of this was explained previously in the will..."

"Why the fuck does the gardener get a chance?" Brody demanded. "Why would Papa Alistair even do that?"

"You would know why if you spent more time with him," Chase shot back. "This is *exactly* the kind of thing Alistair would do."

"He's right," I said. "I didn't expect it, but Alistair loved puzzles and riddles. A game to win his inheritance is probably the most Alistair thing I can think of."

"I don't believe it," Brody said. "There's no way that's what the will says."

Xander arched a dark eyebrow. "Are you implying that I'm making all of this up?"

"No, it's just... let me see what it says exactly."

"Here's the appropriate page with the clause." Xander removed a single sheet of paper from the stack and slid it across the table. The three of us crowded forward to read it.

ALiSTAIR FRITZ SCHREiBER

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds, will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be extinguished and banishing the cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. And so it is you few, you happy few, who shall be rewarded. Now that my soul has departed from my body, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.

“What’s with the weird capitalization?” I asked.

“The typewriter he used in the library is ancient,” Chase said. “The *I* key must be busted, and can only type lower-case.”

“Look,” Brody said. “There’s more here...”

Xander snatched the page away. “May I finish my job, now?”

“Sorry,” Brody mumbled.

“Rules and details pertaining to this game,” Xander read out loud, “are as follows. It begins from the moment the first clause is read out loud.”

Brody glanced at his watch. “Damn it.”

“Further clauses will be added at my discretion, and may give clues or advantages to the participants in the game.”

“I’m, uh, not sure he’ll be adding any more clauses now,” Chase said with a grimace. “Given his... situation.”

“Indeed.” Xander snorted, then lowered his eyes to the page again. “Participants must remain on the estate grounds continuously, without exception. Leaving the estate for any amount of time will result in the immediate forfeiture of any claim to the inheritance. The allowed perimeter is the fence bordering the property. Participants cannot be forcibly pushed off the property, nor is any other foul play allowed, as determined by the executor of this will. Such foul play will result in the immediate forfeiture of any claim to my inheritance.”

Xander flipped the page. “Intentionally damaging the property is also strictly forbidden.”

“Why would we damage the house?” I asked.

“Maybe he means the perimeter fence,” Chase suggested. “If someone wanted to move the fence to extend the playing field.”

“That seems crazy,” I said.

“This entire thing is crazy,” Brody muttered.

“Participants are allowed to bring living necessities to the property, within reason.”

“Who decides what is within reason?” Chase asked.

“That would be me,” Xander said. “The next section explains that I’m the arbiter of the game. If any of the rules come into question, it’s up to me to decide what is allowed and what isn’t.”

“Wait a minute,” Brody said. “What was the wording on the clause again? Just the beginning.”

Xander pursed his lips and flipped back to that page. “Clause one. Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will...”

“Ah hah!” Brody stuck out an accusatory finger. “You’re included in the game, then.”

Xander sighed in frustration. “Legally, it would be an enormous conflict of interest for me to be the arbiter of the game while also actively participating.”

“And our names were specifically listed earlier in the will,” Chase pointed out. “Broderick Schreiber. Chase Sutherland. And...”

“And me, Robyn Winters,” I quickly added.

“The only participants are the three listed,” Chase said. “The three of us.”

“There you go.” Xander nodded, then flipped to the next page. “Aside from a few more specific items, that appears to be the extent of the rules and clauses.”

“But there was only one clause,” I said. “And there’s a whole stack of papers you haven’t read.”

“The remainder of the will contains a detailed account of every one of Mr. Schreiber’s possessions, including all investments, stock portfolios, savings

bonds, artwork..." He flipped through them. "There's a lot here."

I stared at the stack of papers in front of Xander. If I created a list of all my possessions, it would take up only one page. Maybe even one paragraph. For Alistair to have so much...

And I might inherit all of it. Millions. Tens of millions. I could quit my job, retire at age twenty-eight...

Brody's chair scraped on the floor as he stood. "Okay, this has been a lot of fun. But we can stop playing around now." He waved his palm dismissively. "You two can leave."

Chase stood up a little straighter. "Why would we leave?"

"So that I can get the inheritance," Brody replied. "I'm his great-grandson. His only living blood. I have a better claim to his estate than you two."

"The person with the best claim to his estate," Xander pointed out, "is whoever stays on the property the longest without leaving, as explained in the first clause of the will."

"Yeah, whatever, I know what it says. But Papa Alistair was a joker. Always playing games and pulling pranks. He wants me to have the inheritance. So you two can go back to your lives or whatever you do outside of this big mansion."

Okay, I thought, he's a Golden Retriever with a mean streak.

Chase crossed his muscular arms over his chest. "I don't think I'm going to do that."

Strengthened by his resolve, I added, "Me neither."

Xander looked at each of us and nodded. I wondered if he was hoping we would leave, so that this wouldn't drag out.

"And I guess," Brody said, "you're going to stay here monitoring everything?"

"That appears to be my job for the foreseeable future," Xander replied.

"Let me see that." Brody reached for the will.

Xander snatched it out of his grasp. "If anything is unclear, I can read it out loud for you."

"Why won't you let me see it? You got something to hide?"

“If I give you the will, you might burn it. Then you would inherit everything.”

“Bro. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Don’t give it to him,” Chase said. “Keep it safe.”

Brody gave him a confused look. “Dude. Why don’t you trust me?”

“We don’t even know you,” he replied. “Aside from the fact that you’re trying to get us to leave so you can inherit everything.”

“I would be happy to make copies of the will for everyone. But the original copy is going into Alistair’s safe.” Xander tapped his cell phone on the table, then held the screen up for us to see. The voice recording app was open. The last ten minutes had been recorded. “And for posterity, I’m sending a copy of the reading of the will to my law firm.”

“Fuck all of this,” Brody muttered. “I’m not playing these bullshit games. I’ll contest this in court.”

“You’re welcome to try,” Xander said blandly.

Brody stormed out without another word. Since the study was windowless, Chase and I went into the foyer to watch out the window. Brody hopped into his Jeep and revved the engine like he was venting his frustrations. He backed up, then drove to the gate. The iron hinges screamed with rust as it opened inward. But once the gate was open, Brody didn’t drive through. He remained there, at the edge of the property, engine rumbling softly.

After a short pause, the gate slowly began closing again. Brody put the Jeep in reverse, then parked it diagonally next to mine again.

“He technically never left the property,” Xander said behind us. He sounded disappointed. “He’s not disqualified. Yet.”

Brody got out of the Jeep and angrily strode back inside. His letter from Alistair was clutched in his hand, open. “Dibs on Papa Alistair’s bedroom,” he said.

“You might want to clean the sheets,” I pointed out.

Brody jogged up the stairs, stomped down the lofted hallway that overlooked the foyer, and slammed the door to Alistair’s bedroom. The sound echoed through the house, and then everything was still.

“Weirdo,” Chase said. “The bed’s probably still warm.”

“He probably just wants the largest bedroom for himself,” I said. “It has a big private bathroom. All the other bedrooms have to share, and they’re smaller.”

Chase whirled toward me with an excited look on his face. “Want to share?”

I gave a start. “Share? I don’t know... there are plenty of bedrooms for each of us.” The thought of sleeping with Chase had occurred to me more than a few times, but to suggest it so bluntly...

Chase shook his head. “No, I mean share *the inheritance*. We can join forces. If one of us wins, we split the money, fifty-fifty. That will give us twice the chance of outlasting Brody McSurfer up there.”

“Oh!” I said. “That sounds—”

“Unfortunately,” Xander interrupted, “the rules specifically prohibit forming teams. Only one person may inherit the money, and it cannot be divided up among the other participants.” He leafed through the pages of the will, then held out the applicable rule. I read it, and sighed.

“What else is there?” I asked.

“Lots of small rules. Participants aren’t allowed to tell outside parties about the game. Outside parties are only permitted to enter the estate grounds for two minutes at a time. I’m assuming that’s to allow for food and grocery deliveries.”

“He thought of everything, didn’t he?” I wondered out loud.

Chase was frowning at the pages. “Hey, you’re a lawyer, right?”

“According to the State Bar of California. Although I’m beginning to regret it.”

“Is all of this legitimate?” Chase asked. “Like, legally? Is it enforceable?”

“I’m not really an expert in this kind of estate planning,” he admitted. “But from what I’ve read so far... yes. All of this should be legally enforceable.”

“Lucky us,” Chase said. “Glad I brought my laptop with me. I’m going to get it out of my car.”

“I’ve got stuff I should bring inside too,” I said.

“Wait,” Xander said as we began to leave. “You two knew him, right?”

“Yesterday, I would have said we were just acquaintances,” Chase

admitted. “But apparently we were two of the last friends he had.” He sounded sad, so I put a reassuring hand on his back.

“Help me understand something,” Xander said, face scrunched with thought. “I only met the man a handful of times, when he visited our law firm, and when I came here to assist with the finalization of his will and transporting it to the safety deposit box. All of that is to say: I didn’t know him very well. Why would he do this? Why would he make us—you three, I mean—jump through these hoops to inherit his fortune? Was he a cruel man?”

Chase and I looked at each other, then laughed.

“Alistair loved games,” I explained.

“Games, puzzles, riddles,” Chase added. “He was obsessed with them. He used to give us handwritten letters, with hidden messages and clues inside. One time he wrote me a poem. It seemed sweet... until he pointed out that the first letter of each line spelled out *scheisse*, the German word for *shit*.”

I smiled at the memory. “He gave me the same poem. I think it was the first letter of each *paragraph*, though.”

“He got frustrated if we didn’t figure out his puzzles,” Chase said. “He was just an old man with a big imagination and too much time on his hands. Turning his inheritance into a game is exactly the kind of thing Alistair would do.”

“I see.” Xander pinched the bridge of his nose. “I suppose I should have someone bring me some clothes. Since I’m enforcing the game, I’m stuck here as long as you three are.”

“We’ll keep watch and make sure Brody doesn’t leave,” Chase offered. “If you need to run out and get stuff for yourself.”

Xander stared at him blankly. “It is not necessarily Brody I am concerned about.” He pulled out his phone and dialed a number. “Porter. It’s Xander Carlisle. I’m at the Schreiber Estate, and things have become complicated. Is your schedule clear for the next two hours? I need you to go by my apartment and collect some things for me...”

As Chase and I walked outside to our cars, I said, “This is crazy, right?”

“It sure is. I didn’t think I would wake up this morning and possibly inherit a fortune.”

“Me neither. And there’s something else that’s bothering me.”

Chase gave me a questioning look.

“The library,” I said. “How did Alistair get down there?”

“Well, there are these things called stairs,” Chase explained with grave seriousness. “They’re made up of *steps*. A whole bunch of them, one after the other. And by stepping on each one individually...”

I rolled my eyes at him. “His arthritis was terrible all week. He could walk around on flat ground just fine, but he needed my help going up and down the stairs. The night he died, it took me *twenty minutes* to escort him up the steps. Yet somehow, after I left, he got back downstairs without my help?”

“Down is easier than up,” Chase offered.

“Not for Alistair. Even while gripping the banister, he needed me on the other side of him.” I shook my head. “How did he get down to the library? And why?”

“I’ve got it. He slid down on his butt like a toddler.” Chase abruptly laughed. “Can you imagine him doing that?”

“No! He was too stubborn for that.” My smile faded. “I can’t believe he’s gone.”

“Me neither.” Chase stopped next to his Civic without opening the trunk. “I guess we’ll have to postpone that date.”

I felt a twinge of regret. “I guess so. But when this is over...”

Chase chuckled and ran a hand through his mop of chestnut hair. “I’d like to. If you still want to by then, that is.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to?”

“Well...” He gave me a pained smile and popped the trunk of his car. “We’re kind of rivals, now. And since Brody probably won’t last more than a day or two, you’re actually my biggest competition.”

“You’ve got it backwards,” I teased. “You’re *my* biggest competition.”

“I don’t know about that.” Chase looked up at the four-storied mansion. “This place is probably haunted. I bet you crack after spending one night here.”

I gave him a playful shove. “I’m positive I can sleep here as long I need to. Besides, I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Chase grabbed his leather laptop bag, then closed the trunk. “That’s what everyone says... before they experience the supernatural.” He winked. “I’ll catch you later, Robyn.”

“Bye, Chase.”

I watched him walk away. Only when he was out of sight did I pop my trunk. The interior was filled with clothes on coat hangers and boxes of my other belongings. The back seat was also full of boxes, which I was glad Chase hadn’t seen.

My whole life is in this car. I couldn’t remember a time when that wasn’t true. About a year ago, I suppose.

I moved items around until I found a box with my toiletries. I carried that upstairs. The hallway at the top of the stairs extended the length of the house, with a plush red carpet on the floor and rows of artwork in sconces on the walls, illuminated by recessed lighting. The master bedroom, Alistair’s room, was at the far end of the hall. The door was open now, and Brody was pacing back and forth on his phone.

There were a dozen other bedrooms to choose from, but I immediately walked into a room in the middle of the hall. It was smaller than the others, with bright red wallpaper that was peeling at the edges, revealing baby blue paint underneath. There was a double bed with a gold metal frame, neatly made. Underneath the feet of the bed were several newspapers to keep it from scratching or moving on the floor. The room felt like a safe area for me.

I placed my box on the small writing desk across from the bed and went to the window. Latticework was attached to the exterior walls on either side of the window, with a network of vines and flowers tangled through the wood. I had a view of the open back yard, and the gardens to the left. The window must have faced east, because the sunrise was now brightening above the trees at the edge of the property.

I’ve never been in this room at this time of day, I realized. It’s beautiful.

I locked the clasp on the window, then sat on the edge of the bed. The front edge; the back edge creaked if you sat there, I knew.

I pulled out the letter Alistair had left me.

I missed him. He was my employer, but we had grown close in the past eleven months. He treated me like a friend, not a servant he could boss

around. I had never known my grandparents, let alone my great-grandparents. All of them had passed before I was born. Alistair Schreiber felt like the next best thing. The great-grandfather I'd never had.

And now he's gone.

Tears ran down my cheeks as I turned the letter over in my hand. My name, first name only, was scrawled across the front in his beautiful handwriting. I didn't know why he used that typewriter all the time when he had such skilled penmanship.

It was in that moment that I decided I couldn't do this. I couldn't stay in this house and play a stupid game. The money wasn't worth it. My memories of Alistair were still too fresh, too strong. Twenty-four hours ago, I was changing his bedsheets and laying out his clothes for the day. And now I was reading his words from beyond the grave.

"I'm sorry," I said out loud, wishing Alistair was there to hear me. "I'll open your letter, but then I'm leaving."

Finally, when I was done crying for now, I tore open the envelope. Inside was a single piece of yellowed paper, with a single sentence written in that same flowing handwriting:

I want you to win.

OceanofPDF.com



Chase

Sitting on the bed in one of the many guest bedrooms in the Schreiber Estate, I re-read the letter Alistair had given me. Then I read it a third time.

I couldn't believe it. *All* of it. The letter in my hands. The crazy will with rules and clauses to determine who would win the inheritance. The great-grandson bro who was walking past my bedroom with the gold and silver-plated chess board in his arms. He gave me a suspicious glance before disappearing out of sight.

Like he thinks one of us is going to steal the only thing Alistair left him in the will. Paranoid bastard.

And Robyn...

I still remembered the first time I had laid eyes on her. Alistair's arthritis had been making it difficult for him to do normal tasks around the house, so he finally hired a caretaker. I was on my hands and knees in the front garden, pulling weeds out by the roots. A red sedan drove up and parked next to my car, and *she* got out. She was dressed professionally at the time—a blue “Santa Cruz Assisted Living” polo shirt tucked into long khakis. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail. I wasn't the kind of person who believed in love at first sight, but I felt *something* the first time I saw Robyn. And it wasn't just because she had a heart-shaped face and a great body.

Since then, I had been crushing on her. *Hard*. I only worked at the estate for a few hours every morning before my other job, but that was enough time to see Robyn arrive. The first week, we smiled politely at each other. The next, we exchanged pleasant greetings. One morning, after months of working at the estate together, she brought me coffee while I toiled away in the greenhouse. Then she was bringing me coffee every morning and chatting while I drank it. Soon, her bright face and cheerful attitude was my favorite part of the day.

I never mustered the courage to ask her out, though. I was afraid that if I made a move and it went badly, it would make everything awkward here at the estate. And I didn't want to screw up the work friendship we had.

But now...

I had finally worked up the nerve to ask her out. Not just that, but we had kissed! The briefest kiss two people could share, but that was enough to create a tornado of emotions in my chest, confirming how I already felt about this girl.

And then all of *this* happened.

Now the inheritance was in the way. As much as I liked Robyn, I now had a legitimate chance of inheriting a *fortune*. I needed to think of her as my competition, not as a woman who I wanted to take out to dinner, and kiss, and take back to my place...

To get Robyn out of my head, I decided to go through my normal routine on the estate. I changed into a pair of gardening overalls and went around the house tending to all the plants. There were over two hundred individual plants inside the house alone, and all of them required a different amount of sunlight, water, and care. I spent the morning going through the house and caring for each one. Then I got started on the outdoor plants and bushes. The peonies had some small beetles nibbling at the stems, so I whipped up a natural pesticide from the greenhouse that would repel the beetles without killing them.

I thought about what Robyn said when she arrived this morning and saw me pruning a Golden Pothos vine in the library: *you don't need to do that anymore*. But I had worked hard cultivating the green life of the estate for Alistair. I walked through the greenhouse and thought about every single plant inside. The rare Indigo Lotus that Alistair had illegally smuggled from Thailand on his final trip outside the country. The Fire Lily, which took months to bloom under the best of conditions. Next to the Fire Lily was the simple Chinese Fan Palm, which was relatively straightforward to cultivate but required patience and nurturing.

The thought of them all slowly dying caused a twisting pain in my chest. It was an extension of my grief for Alistair himself.

Everyone dies, I told myself as I left the greenhouse. *He was lucky to live until the age of ninety-nine*.

A buddy of mine arrived that afternoon with a duffel bag of clothes. “You owe me,” he said while passing the bag through the iron gate at the edge of the property. “I had to touch your underwear.”

“I’ll give you ten grand when I get out of here.”

My friend gave me a funny look. “Yeah, sure you will.”

I remembered the rule Xander had told us about earlier. We couldn’t tell anyone else about the inheritance game.

“When I win the lottery,” I said. “Thanks again. I’ll call you if I need anything else.”

He gazed up at the big Victorian house. “How long you going to be here?”

“Hell if I know,” I admitted, staring up at the house with him. “Hopefully only a few days.”

I spent the afternoon on my laptop in the library. Fortunately, Alistair had Wi-Fi throughout the house, or I *really* would have been screwed. For awhile, I lost myself in the coding project that had been assigned to me.

Robyn poked her head into the library later that evening. “Knock knock.”

“You don’t actually have to say *knock knock*,” I told her with a smile. “You can just knock.”

“I still feel weird making noise around here,” she admitted as she came into the room. “Like I’ll disturb his ghost if I knock on the wall.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in ghosts?”

“I don’t,” she said, setting her jaw stubbornly. “But that doesn’t mean I want to try my luck.”

Chuckling, I said, “I wouldn’t worry about disturbing anything. Not yet. Ghosts typically don’t manifest for hauntings until the body is buried.”

Robyn laughed at that. “You’re funny. What if he’s cremated instead of buried?”

I shrugged. “Buried or cremated. Same rules. What have you been up to all day?”

“Napping,” she admitted, stifling a yawn with her fist. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Nightmares? Like the recently deceased was visiting your dreams?”

“Nothing like that. I slept poorly because...” Robyn trailed off. “It doesn’t matter. I came to tell you that I’m making dinner soon, if you wanted to join.”

I cocked my head. “Yeah? Dinner for the two of us?”

“And Xander,” she quickly added. Two bright red spots appeared on her cheeks. “And Brody, I guess.”

“You’re going to cook him dinner after the way he acted?”

“It would be rude not to. He can be an asshole all he wants, but I won’t stoop to his level.”

“Dinner sounds good to me.” I closed my laptop. “You don’t want to order pizza or something, though?”

“We can order pizza tomorrow night,” Robyn insisted. “Tonight, I’m making his favorite meal. Just like the will requested.”

I carried my laptop upstairs, took a quick shower, then went down to the kitchen. It was in the farmhouse style, with butcher block counters and baskets of fresh produce from the garden hanging underneath the cabinets. A beam of light streamed in through the window by the sink, illuminating Robyn’s long brown hair as she washed her hands. For a few seconds, I stood in the doorway and watched her.

She’s my competition, I told myself. Not somebody I should be fantasizing about kissing again.

“I want to watch you make it,” Brody was saying to her. He was sitting on the counter by the stove, feet dangling like a little kid. At some point he must have given up on the idea of surfing today, because he was wearing sweatpants.

“Why? In case I poison you?” Robyn asked.

Brody snapped a finger and pointed at her. “Exactly. See, you get it.”

“She’s not going to poison anyone,” I said. “Robyn wouldn’t do that.”

She gave me a grateful look over her shoulder. I felt a smile spread across my face.

“She won’t poison *you*, her boyfriend,” Brody said.

Robyn and I both flinched. “What? She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Chase isn’t my boyfriend,” Robyn said defensively.

Brody reached into the fridge and came out with a glass bottle of Budweiser. He popped the top off with a hiss, then turned back to us. “You two have been making fuck-me eyes at each other since I got here. It’s cool, I don’t care if you two are banging. Just don’t make any noise when I’m trying to sleep.”

I felt my cheeks turn hot. The thought of sleeping with Robyn had occurred to me. Okay, it was something I had given a *lot* of thought. But having it said out loud like that felt crass. I liked so many things about Robyn. I wanted to *date* her. Hell, we had only just kissed earlier this morning.

I glanced at Xander, who was seated at the kitchen table. His face was unreadable, but he said nothing. For that, I was grateful.

“Okay,” Robyn said to me. My heart fluttered, until she added, “Now I do want to poison him.”

“I knew it!” Brody shouted.

Xander cleared his throat. “Article six, subsection four of Mr. Schreiber’s will states that anyone who intentionally harms another participant is disqualified.”

“See?” Brody said. “*Intentionally* harms. What if she *accidentally* gives me food poisoning?”

“I doubt Mr. Schreiber intended the rule that way. Robyn, please make every effort not to poison Brody.”

“Okay, fine.” She opened the fridge. “It would be difficult to give you food poisoning from pancakes, anyway.”

Brody made a face. “I’m sorry. *What* are you making?”

“Eggs, pancakes, and turkey bacon,” she answered.

Brody dramatically turned his wrist over to look at his watch. “You know it’s dinner time, right?”

“Alistair loved breakfast foods,” I explained. “It was his favorite meal.”

“I made it for him every single night,” Robyn added. “Well, almost every night.”

“Alistair ranted about that to anyone who would listen.” I mimicked his very slight German accent. “Why should such food be reserved for breakfast only? What inherent properties does a pancake have that makes it unsuitable

for dinner consumption?”

Robyn giggled at my imitation. I flashed her a grin. *We've never spent this much time together. Usually we only chatted for a few minutes at a time.*

“I’m going to have to agree with Mr. Schreiber,” Xander said. “Eating certain foods at specific meals is a cultural construct.”

“Can you stop calling him Mr. Schreiber?” I asked. “He hated that. He preferred Alistair.”

“He was Mr. Schreiber to me,” Xander said. “But if it makes everyone feel better, I’ll call him Alistair.”

I grabbed my own Budweiser out of the fridge, popped the top, and tossed it in the trash. Before I could turn away, something caught my eye. In the flat recycling bin next to the trash can was the last thing I expected to see: the box for a Bachmann Electric Train set. I picked it up and turned it over in my hand. The box was empty.

Weird, I thought, tossing it back into the bin. *I guess that’s why the cops asked me about trains.*

“I think it’s dumb,” Brody stubbornly insisted. He scratched at the dirty-blond stubble on his face. “Breakfast is breakfast. Dinner is dinner. Eating breakfast for dinner is, like, trying to get cats and dogs to get along.”

“I grew up with a cat and dog,” I said. “They got along just fine.”

Brody rolled his eyes. “Can we at least eat *regular* bacon?”

“Alistair was watching his cholesterol,” I said.

“If you want something else, you’re welcome to cook your own dinner,” Robyn said in a tone that brooked no arguments. She slid a pan of turkey bacon into the oven and slammed the door shut. “But the will said that we should make his favorite meal and think of him fondly. So that’s what I’m doing. And anyone who has a problem with that can get out of my kitchen.” She turned and pointed her spatula at each of us menacingly.

“*Her* kitchen, she says,” Brody muttered. “Like she’s already inherited the place.” He glanced at me. “So, you’re the gardener.”

“That’s right,” I said carefully.

“Is that, like, a full-time job? Watering plants?”

“Don’t demean what Chase does,” Robyn said.

Brody held up both palms in surrender. "I'm asking because I don't know shit about plants. My roommate in college grew weed in our coat closet. That's all I've got to go by."

"Actually, no, I only work here for a few hours every morning," I explained. "I have a full-time job as a computer programmer."

Robyn gave a start. "Wait, really?"

"I guess they aren't boyfriend and girlfriend after all," Xander observed. "Despite any evidence to the contrary."

"Yeah, my hours are flexible. I'm usually working on coding projects. I do all my gardening in the morning, then code from noon until dinner time."

"I bet you need to go into the office for that," Brody said with a dose of fake sympathy. "You don't want to lose your job over this place."

I smiled at him. "Actually, I do almost all of my work remotely. The company I work for is headquartered in New York."

"Great," Brody muttered.

"What about you? Your card says you're a pharmaceutical salesman."

"The best in California," he said, pumping his fist.

"The kind that push newer, more addictive pills onto doctors and pharmacies?" I asked.

Brody made a face. "Nah, it's not like that."

Sure it isn't, I thought.

"I don't know a lot about pharmaceutical sales, but my assumption is that you need to visit doctors and pharmacies to sell your goods," Xander said.

"Oh, for sure," Brody admitted. "But I can coast for a few days until I win the game and inherit this place."

"A few days," I said with a snort. "We'll see."

Brody glared at me, then turned to Xander. "And you're some big-shot lawyer, right?"

"Not exactly."

"Okay, then tell us *exactly* what you do."

"I told you before the reading of the will. But I've been repeating myself a lot today, so I guess I'll tell you again. I'm an attorney with the firm

Hapsburg, Whitney, and Shaw. I currently specialize in estate planning.”

“Wait. You told me you weren’t really an expert on estate planning,” I pointed out.

“No,” Xander said patronizingly. “I told you I wasn’t an expert in *this kind* of estate planning. Most wills are straightforward and boring. This is the first time I’ve seen a deceased party make his potential inheritors jump through hoops.”

“Is estate planning what you want to do?” Robyn asked. “You said that’s what you *currently* do.”

He shrugged. “Right now, it doesn’t matter what I want.”

“Sorry you’re stuck babysitting us,” I said.

“Yeah, bro,” Brody added. “That sucks for you.”

“If you want to make it up to me, you can hurry up and decide a winner so I can get back to the office.”

“No way, homeslice,” Brody said. “I’m in it to win it. I’m going home with the gold. Ask these two squatters to leave.”

“We knew Alistair better than you ever did,” I said.

“No, you didn’t,” he replied.

“I’ve been working for Alistair for three years,” I said, “and never met you once.”

“*Worked*,” he pointed out. “Past tense. You don’t work for him anymore. Besides, I only came to visit him in the evenings, after my office visits.”

“I’ve been his caretaker for nearly a year,” Robyn said. “I’ve never seen you before today, and Alistair hasn’t mentioned you.”

“You guys can try to poke holes in my argument all you want, but I don’t care. I know that I was important to Papa Alistair. I’m his flesh and blood.”

I slid around Robyn in the kitchen, our arms briefly brushing together. Electricity seemed to jolt through my body at the connection. “Okay, then answer this for me. How did your great-grandpa accumulate all his wealth? Alistair was always really coy when I asked him.”

“I was also wondering this, but considering the professional relationship, I did not ask,” Xander chimed in.

Brody looked at each of us, then shrugged. “Hell if I know. He’s always been wealthy. He paid for all five years I spent at Penn State.”

Xander raised an eyebrow. “It would have been cheaper for him if you graduated in four.”

“I was on a five-year master’s program, dick,” Brody replied. “But no, Papa Alistair was secretive about his past. All I know is that he was born in Germany, and moved to America in the forties.”

Xander cleared his throat. “Early forties, or late forties?”

“Umm. I don’t remember exactly. 1946 rings a bell.”

Xander sucked in his breath. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Brody looked around the kitchen. “What do you mean, oh?”

“What are you insinuating?” I asked Xander.

The lawyer stood up, removed his suit jacket, and carefully folded it on the counter. “I’m not insinuating anything,” he said while rolling up his shirt sleeves.

Robyn suddenly whirled from the stove. “No. You don’t think he...”

“Uh huh,” Xander said. “I’m now wondering if Mr. Schrei—I mean, Alistair, accumulated his wealth by... immoral means.”

“What?” Brody asked. “Like, he didn’t pay his workers enough or something?”

I suddenly realized what Xander was implying. “That’s putting it mildly.”

Robyn was still wide-eyed as she grabbed the pancake box from the pantry. “You think Alistair was... a Nazi?”

“Your words,” Xander said, “not mine.”

“Spoken like a true lawyer,” I said.

Anger twisted Brody’s face. “Bro. You can’t assume my great-grandpa was a Nazi just because he was German!”

“And you can’t assume he’s *not*, especially given the timeline. If he moved here before the war ended, then an argument could be made that he was trying to escape Hitler’s regime...”

“No way,” Brody said emphatically. “He was one of the good Germans.”

“How can you be certain?” Xander asked.

“I just am. Fuck off.”

“My client rests his case, your honor,” Xander said.

I laughed, and then Brody laughed too, in spite of everything. “Okay, when I inherit this place, I’m donating a big chunk of it to the Jews. Just in case.”

“The Jews?” I asked. “I’m picturing one of those giant fake checks made out to *The Jews*.”

“You know what I mean. Like, their pope or whatever. Jews have a pope, right?”

“I’m sure there is a Jewish pope,” Xander said, glancing at me for a split second. I tried not to laugh.

“Let’s make a pact,” Brody said. “Whoever wins will donate, like, a million bucks to the Jews.”

“I think that’s a noble endeavor,” Xander said, a smile cracking through his stoic face.

“Deal,” I agreed. “Who knows? Maybe such a big donation will mean we get to meet their pope.”

Brody’s eyes widened. “You think so?”

I turned to Robyn to ask if she wanted to meet the Jewish pope. She was standing over the sink, staring into the box of pancake mix.

“You okay over there?” I asked. “Robyn?”

She unfroze and turned toward us. Her face was pale. “Guys?” She reached into the pancake box and pulled out a sealed envelope. Powdery pancake mix floated through the air. “I think I found another clause to Alistair’s will.”

6



Robyn

I was prepping dinner while the guys all laughed about Alistair's background. Even though three of us were rivals for the inheritance, and the fourth was the attorney who didn't want to be here, the mood in the room was lighthearted. Everyone was joking and teasing each other. If I ignored the context, I could almost pretend that we were all friends.

While the turkey bacon sizzled in the oven, I went to get the pancake mix out of the pantry. I had used up the last box two days ago, so I grabbed an unopened box and tore off the cardboard top. Then I used a pair of scissors to cut open the plastic interior container.

And there, nestled inside the previously-unopened plastic, was another faded yellow envelope. Identical to the personal ones he had given to each of us.

"Guys? I think I found another clause to Alistair's will." I held up the envelope so they could see the writing on the outside:

CLAUSE 5

"LET ME SEE!" Brody slid off the counter where he had been sitting, snatched the envelope out of my hand, and began tearing it open.

"How is that possible?" Xander picked up the piece of plastic I had cut off with scissors. "The package was sealed."

"Well?" Chase asked. "What's it say?"

Brody unfolded the envelope and quickly began reading it out loud like he was being timed. "Clause five: the first person to read this letter must immediately strip down to their underwear for the remainder of the day, or forfeit their claim to the inheritance. Dude, what the hell?"

“There’s no way that’s what it says,” Chase insisted.

Xander took the letter from Brody and scanned it with his dark eyes. “Unfortunately for our resident surfer, that is indeed what is written.”

Brody pointed at me. “She’s the one who found it! She should do it!”

“I bet you’d like that,” I said.

He gave me a boyish grin. “I mean, I wouldn’t hate it. You’re not exactly ugly.”

In spite of everything, the back-handed compliment raised my spirits for a moment. Then I remembered who it was coming from.

“Unfortunately for you,” Xander said, “the letter clearly states whoever *reads* the letter. Not who found it.”

“I was going to read it, but you snatched it out of my hand,” I said smugly. “I should be thanking you, Brody.”

He groaned. “Aw, man. Do I have to?”

“Yes,” Xander replied.

“Right now? How long do I have?”

“You have however long it takes me to decide what *immediately* means in the legal sense.”

Brody groaned some more. “Fine. But if I find out you planted that letter, I’m suing you.”

I started to laugh, but then stopped as Brody pulled off his tank top in one smooth motion. Ripples of sun-kissed muscle bulged out as he tossed the shirt aside. Then he bent over and removed the sweatpants, revealing skin-tight boxer-briefs that clung to thighs that were chiseled and smooth. He dropped the sweatpants, and something metallic in the pocket banged heavily on the floor. His cell phone, probably.

I knew I was staring, but I couldn’t help it. *He looks like someone carved him from marble.*

I gave myself a shake. Brody was an entitled asshole. And he was my competition for the inheritance. I couldn’t look at him the way a cartoon character looked at an over-sized steak.

It would be easier if he wasn’t so hot.

Chase was watching me, so I quickly turned back to the pancake mix. “Dinner will be ready in ten minutes. It would be easier if you got out of the way.”

“My bad,” Brody said as he went to the other side of the kitchen island. Despite his original protests, he seemed totally comfortable in his near-nudity. Maybe even pleased with himself. I turned to grab a mixing bowl, and locked eyes with him for a heartbeat. Long enough for him to smile like he knew what I was thinking.

He’s a good-looking guy. There’s no shame in glancing at him. It doesn’t mean I want to jump his bones.

“Why would Alistair make a request like this?” Xander wondered out loud. “The other stipulations of his will have all been straightforward and related to the inheritance itself.”

“Because,” Brody said, “he probably thought Robyn would find the letter.”

Chase chuckled. “Alistair was a perverted old man sometimes.”

“He never treated me with anything but respect,” I chimed in. “But yeah, he had a dirty streak. He was always so excited when the Sears catalog arrived...”

“The Sears catalog!” Chase said. “He bookmarked his favorite pages in the underwear section.”

Brody was almost doubled over with laughter. “I showed him how to get porn on his computer, but he wouldn’t give up those catalogs.”

“You knew about the catalogs?” Chase asked.

“I told you. Papa Alistair and I were close. Even if you never saw me visit, *gardener*.”

“We’re all missing an important part of this clause.” Xander picked up the letter from the counter and turned it over in his hands like he was looking for clues. “It says this is clause number five.”

I heard Chase groan. “That means there are three other clauses we haven’t found.”

“At *least* three,” Xander pointed out. “There could be more clauses after the fifth one.”

“I guess that’s what the will meant when it said *further clauses will be*

added at my discretion,” I said while stirring pancake batter.

“So they’re hidden around the house?” Brody walked next to me and opened a cabinet. It took all of my willpower not to glance over at his semi-nude body. “I guess we should start searching.”

“This house is ten thousand square feet. It will take *weeks* to tear everything apart,” Chase said.

Brody moved some boxes around and then closed the cabinet. “Good thing we have nothing better to do.”

“Uh, I have plenty better to do,” Chase said.

“Good for you. More inheritance for me when I find all these clauses.”

“Unless they have more goofy instructions related to stripping,” I said.

Brody leaned on the counter and grinned at me. “Even better.”

I felt myself blush again. *Jesus. He has almost no body fat. I can see the veins popping out of his arms.*

Xander cleared his throat. “You cannot tear the house apart. Intentionally damaging the property is strictly forbidden by the will.”

Brody let out an annoyed sound. “What’s the difference between damaging the property and carefully searching for more clues? Whose job is it to decide that?”

“Me,” Xander said bluntly. “It’s quite literally my job to make such determinations.”

Brody waved him off in annoyance.

“When did he hide all these clauses?” Chase wondered out loud. “Months ago? Did he know he was... nearing the end?”

“He was getting worse every day,” I confirmed. My throat tightened, but I pushed on. “His legs were still strong, and he insisted on going up and down the stairs rather than moving his bedroom to the first floor, but it was a slow process. It took twenty minutes to help him up the steps, and twice as long going down. The arthritis in his hands was worse than ever, too. And he was getting sentimental.”

“Sentimental how?” Brody asked.

I shrugged and began cracking eggs into a bowl. “He talked about his late wife, Annabelle, a lot. And about the good old days they had together.

Walking around this house, he would point out knick knacks and souvenirs and tell long stories about how he acquired them. Just the other day he..." I trailed off.

"He what?" Xander asked.

My mind was racing. *Could it be a clue? Or am I retroactively assigning importance to every little thing?*

"Robyn?" Chase said. "Hey. Robyn?"

I flinched as he touched my shoulder. "Sorry. It was something he said the other day." Realizing that I may have discovered a clue, and that keeping it to myself might be the best course of action, I added, "It's probably nothing."

"You know something." Brody took a step forward until he was looming over me, a strong, muscular force. But his words were soft, not demanding. "You can't hide it from everyone. You should share."

"Alistair's puzzles were always too difficult for me to figure out," Chase said. "It would be easier if we worked together, at least on the first few clues."

I didn't know if I could trust Brody. Heck, I didn't even know if I could trust Chase. *I hate keeping secrets*, I thought. *Lord knows I have too many of them already. Sharing a little bit of information will be easier than hiding it.*

I cracked another egg into the bowl and turned around. "It was two days ago. We were in the parlor upstairs, and he pointed to one of the pictures on the wall..."

Brody was a tan blur as he suddenly sprinted out of the room and pounded up the stairs. Xander followed calmly. Chase gave me an apologetic look, then jogged after them. Sighing, I threw away the egg shells and followed.

I can't believe this is happening.



Xander

I cannot believe this is happening.

I followed Brody up the stairs without running. Patience was a virtue, especially for someone practicing law. Rushing into things was rarely the best strategy. It was better to bide your time, collect evidence, and then make a move only when you had an airtight case.

That was what I had been doing since reading Alistair Schreiber's will.

I didn't believe Brody would last long in the inheritance game. He was like a dog chasing a tennis ball—it was all he could focus on right now, but eventually he would get bored. As a pharmaceutical salesman, he probably earned more than the rest of us combined. Inheriting the estate was something he wanted, not something he *needed*.

The other two would last longer. Especially Robyn. If Chase really was a computer programmer—and I had no reason to doubt him, not yet—then he made good money, too. Maybe more than Brody. Certainly enough to be comfortable.

Robyn, on the other hand, *needed* this money. Desperately. I recognized someone who had a challenging upbringing. The way she cracked eggs, scooping every tiny morsel of egg out with her finger before throwing away the shell. Her tennis shoes, worn all the way down to the sole and almost showing holes in them. And the biggest piece of evidence of all: her car. Not the make and model, but the boxes in the back seat. The clothes still on hangers neatly piled in the front passenger seat. All of it added up to a single conclusion:

She'll outlast everyone because she has nowhere else to go.

Maybe that was why I felt so drawn to her. I knew what it was like to grow up like that, scratching my way out of poverty. I shook my head. No, I was

drawn to her long before I saw the contents of her car. I was attracted to her from the moment I met her. There was no getting around it.

None of this matters, I told myself. I should be focusing on the inheritance. And even if I was interested in pursuing Robyn, she has two other male suitors she has been ogling since we arrived.

The parlor was at the top of the stairs on the third floor. It was a long room with high ceilings and tall windows that faced west, toward the setting sun. A pool table was positioned in the center of the room, with a rack of cues and chalk on the wall next to it. There was an antique record player with shelves of record sleeves on either side, and the far end of the room held a fully-stocked bar reminiscent of an English pub, with dark wood and low hanging lights. Brody was standing by the bar, looking around. There were at least eight oil paintings hanging throughout the parlor. Most of them appeared to be portraits of Alistair himself, professionally painted. To my eyes, it felt vain.

Chase, and then Robyn, came skidding into the room.

“Which picture was it?” Brody demanded.

“What happened to working together?” Robyn said angrily.

Brody shrugged. “Those were Chase’s words. All I said was you should share what you know.”

“I’ll ensure he doesn’t gain any sort of advantage from the information you provide,” I told her. “But if you know something, anything at all, it might speed things along.”

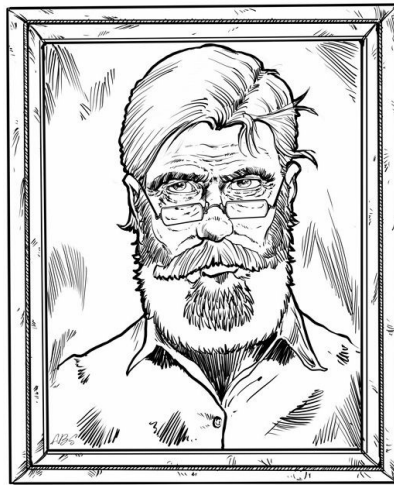
Robyn hesitated for a moment, and I wondered if she was going to refuse. Or lie. She didn’t seem like the lying type—and as an attorney, I knew them well—but something was going on behind those big brown eyes of hers. Then she sighed.

“Alistair was taking his afternoon tea in here,” she explained. “His arthritis was mild that day, so he took the opportunity to play a game of pool. He insisted I play a game. I had never played pool before, but he was in a really good mood, and I didn’t want to turn him down. As we were playing, he told me that there are hundreds of pieces of art in this house, some of which are worth six figures.”

Brody whistled between his teeth.

“But he said the piece of art most valuable to him,” she pointed to an interior wall, “was this one.”

All of us stepped closer to the framed artwork, which was roughly the size of a pillow standing up, and hung just out of reach, high on the wall. Unlike the other art throughout the house, it was set in a simple white frame that might have come from Walmart. It was a portrait sketch, drawn and shaded in pencil, all black and white and gray. The subject was unmistakable: it was Alistair himself.



“It’s beautiful,” Chase said. “There are a hundred portraits of Alistair in this house, but this one feels the most... real.”

I immediately saw what he meant. Glancing around the room, all the oil paintings showed Alistair standing tall, posing for the artist. They showed him as a younger man, with a thick head of blond hair. He even looked a little bit like Brody. But this illustration had captured Alistair as he was, not how he wanted to be portrayed. It was as real as a photograph, candid and vulnerable. I knew that with certainty, even having only met the man a scant few times.

“It’s the glasses,” Brody said softly. “He was self-conscious about them, so he always took them off for the other paintings. But he left them on for this one. Like he didn’t know he was being sketched.” He turned and looked at Robyn. “He really said this was the most valuable to him?”

Robyn nodded. “He said it was the most valuable to him, because value

wasn't only about money. He told me to remember that. He insisted it would be important later."

"And you think that's a clue?" Chase asked.

"I guess?" Robyn said. "At the time, I thought he was just giving me life advice. But now..."

I approached the picture and reached for it. My fingers came up two inches short of touching the frame. The whole thing was snug against the wall, so I couldn't tell if there was a letter hidden behind it.

"Is there a ladder on the grounds?" I asked.

"I have one in the greenhouse," Chase replied. "Do you think there's a clue hidden in the picture?"

"Or on the wall behind it," Robyn suggested.

"Maybe we shouldn't mess with it," Brody said slowly.

Robyn scoffed. "Oh, so now you're exercising caution?"

"I'm just saying there's a difference between fucking with a box of pancakes, and tearing down pictures of Papa Alistair."

Robyn tried not to make it obvious, but she was getting a good, long look at Brody. For some reason, that caused a tingle of jealousy in the pit of my stomach. She had given me a long, appraising look when we met earlier this morning. Admiring the way I looked in my suit, I assumed—it was tailored by the best in Santa Cruz. But since Brody had removed his shirt in the kitchen, she had been eyeing him every chance she got.

Stop it, I told myself again. She was kissing Chase in the library earlier. I wouldn't have a shot with her, even if I wanted to make a pass at her. Which I don't.

Yet as she glanced at me, and I quickly looked away, I knew I was only lying to myself.

Chase rounded on Brody. "Do you know something you're not telling us?"

"No."

He pointed up. "Something about this picture?"

"I said no. Get off my back."

Chase turned to me. "I'll get the ladder."

“Hey, do you smell that?” Brody raised his chin and sniffed the air.

“Nice try,” Chase muttered.

“No, seriously,” he said. “Something’s burning.”

Robyn gasped. “The turkey bacon!”

Growling a curse, Brody sprinted out of the parlor ahead of the rest of us. As we descended the stairs to the second floor, then the first, faint smoke drifted from the kitchen. By the time we got there, enough billowy black smoke was swirling around the ceiling that the smoke detectors should have been going off, but the only noise was the crackling of yellow fire inside the stove.

Brody ran past the flaming window of the stove, opened one of the cabinets he had searched earlier, and came out with a red fire extinguisher. I grabbed an oven mitt, waited for Brody to aim the extinguisher, then threw open the oven door. White foam immediately belched forth from the nozzle, coating the stove and instantly putting out the fire.

It was a ridiculous sight; Brody wielding a red and yellow fire extinguisher like a naked barbarian, while Robyn and Chase ran around the kitchen opening all the windows. After a few seconds, Brody lowered the extinguisher.

“This is why you shouldn’t eat bacon and eggs for dinner,” he said. “You’ve upset the breakfast gods!”

“I’m sorry! I don’t know how they burned so quickly. It was only a few minutes.” Robyn said while fanning a towel over the window. “I always broil the bacon at the end to make it extra crispy.” She slumped her shoulders. “Alistair liked them crispy.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Chase reassured her. “It’s just a little smoke. The oven will be fine once I clean it out.”

“Why didn’t the smoke detectors go off?” I asked.

“This house is full of old wiring, and the smoke detectors would randomly beep sometimes,” Chase said.

“He had us disconnect them all a few months ago,” Robyn continued for him. “Alistair refused to hire an electrician to fix them. He claimed he was handy with electronics and could rewire the house himself. But I guess he never did.” She pointed to the oven. “Look, the timer I set is still running.

How did they burn so fast?”

“Perhaps you set the timer for longer than you thought,” I suggested.

Robyn shot me an angry glance. “I know how long I set it. The bacon shouldn’t have burned.”

Brody set the extinguisher on the ground with the yellow part facing me. “Robyn’s totally disqualified, right?”

She gave a start. “What?”

“Why would she be disqualified?” Chase asked.

“Xander, the referee, said that nobody can damage the estate. Which she totally just did. Boom, she’s out.”

“I’m an attorney, not a referee,” I said absently. I was looking at the yellow thing on the fire extinguisher. What was that?

“But you’re basically a referee for the inheritance game thing,” Brody insisted. “And the rules clearly state that anyone who damages the estate loses!”

“Oh, *fuck off*, you surfer bro asshole,” Robyn said.

Brody pointed at her. “Now she’s damaging my feelings.”

“No rules against that,” she replied. “And you started it with the personal attacks. Earlier today you called us squatters.”

“You *are* squatters!”

“I’m not disqualifying Robyn, for two reasons,” I explained. “First of all, the will clearly states that the damage has to be *intentional*. The turkey bacon only burned because you ran off to the parlor to look for a clue.”

Brody made a sound like an exasperated teenager.

“What’s the other reason?” Chase asked.

“Secondly,” I said, reaching for the extinguisher, “this whole incident led to the discovery of another clue.” I tore off a yellow envelope, which was taped to the side of the cylinder. All three of them gathered around me as I carefully opened it.

CLAUSE 3: The letters you write and place in my safe shall be legally binding.

“Letters?” Chase asked. “What letters is he talking about?”

“I’m going to write a letter that says I automatically win,” Brody said. He opened a drawer and pulled out a notepad and pen. “It’s legally binding if I put it in the safe first!”

“Do you even know the location of Alistair’s safe?” I asked.

Brody slowly stopped writing. “Fuck.”

“I didn’t know he had a safe,” Chase said.

“A safe is mentioned in the items list of the will,” I replied. “The combination is given, but it doesn’t say *where* the safe is located.”

“His study?” Robyn suggested.

Chase shrugged. “We can check there.”

“Regardless, this is clearly related to a clause we have not yet discovered.” I picked up the fire extinguisher. Something about it triggered a memory.

“So we’ve discovered clauses one, three, and five,” Robyn said. “I guess clause two probably explains this one, then.”

“Why did he place the clues so that we would discover them all out of order?” Chase wondered.

“When you start a jigsaw puzzle,” Robyn said, “you don’t get the pieces in order. You get them all jumbled up, without a clue as to which piece to start with.”

Jigsaw puzzle. Clue. Suddenly it all came flooding to me. “The will.”

All of them turned to look at me. “Huh?”

I walked out of the kitchen and down the hall to the study. The will was still in the locked chest where I had left it. I unlocked the chest, found the relevant page, and slapped it down on the desk for everyone to see.

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

ALiSTAIR FRITZ SCHREiBER

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds,

will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be extinguished and banishing the cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. And so it is you few, you happy few, who shall be rewarded. Now that my soul has departed from my body, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.

“So what?” Chase asked.

“I thought the will was written strangely,” I explained. “At first, I assumed it was because Alistair was an eccentric man who was adding a flourish to the last words of his that anyone would ever read.”

“That sounds like Alistair,” Brody said.

I shook my head. “That may be so, but there’s more to it than that.” I pointed. “See this word? *Extinguished*. And the clause was taped to the fire extinguisher.”

Robyn gasped. “You think...”

“The will,” I said emphatically, “is *full of clues*.”



Robyn

I stared at the single page of the will that Xander had placed on the table. Like him, I had thought it was worded strangely, and chalked it up to Alistair being Alistair.

But now...

“Why didn’t we think of this before?” Chase said, bending down to get a good look at the page. “It was right in front of us the whole time. What other clues are hidden...”

“I think you guys are reaching,” Brody said skeptically. “There’s no way Alistair could have predicted you would burn the bacon, and need to use the extinguisher.”

“Exactly,” Xander replied. “Which is why he put a clue in the will to lead us to the extinguisher.”

Brody still shook his head. “I’m not buying it.”

I huddled close to Chase to read the will. As I scanned it, one part stuck out:

...you few who have fanned the flames...

“Fanned,” I said. “Why is that part jumping out to me?”

Chase suddenly whipped his head around to look at me. “The fan in the library!”

I gasped. “Of course!”

We hurried out of the room, past the big portrait of Alistair in the foyer and into the library. The switch on the wall was still covered with a strip of tape, just as we had seen it this morning.

“Good catch,” Xander said, coming up behind us.

“Didn’t you say the police taped over it?” Chase asked him. “To keep evidence from blowing around?”

“I was only speculating. I did not expect it to be part of an elaborate inheritance game.”

Slowly, I peeled away the tape. I took a deep breath, then flipped the switch to the *on* position. There was a brief moment where nothing happened, and then the fan slowly began turning. As it picked up speed, nothing unusual happened.

“See?” Brody said. “There probably aren’t any clues in the will...”

He trailed off as a yellow envelope slid off one of the fan blades and fluttered to the floor, landing directly in front of my feet.

Chase grabbed it first, then handed it to me to open. “You’re the one who found it. You should do the honors.”

“Hoping I’ll have to strip down to my panties like Brody?” I teased.

Chase grinned. “No. Okay, maybe.”

“Shut up and open it!” Brody insisted.

I carefully slid my fingernail under the flap to break the adhesive. The letter inside was folded into thirds, just like the others.

Now you are playing the game! Unfortunately, this is merely a red herring, and not an actual clause of my will. But you are beginning to look at things the proper way. Well done!

“Aw, damnit,” I said.

“But we’re thinking the right way,” Chase said reassuringly. “It was a hidden clue, even if it wasn’t one of the clauses. Good find, Robyn.”

“Ugh, get a room,” Brody muttered. “I’m the naked one, but you two are halfway to third base.”

Chase turned toward him angrily. “You know what...”

“What?” Brody shot back. “You got something to say, gardener?”

Xander loudly cleared his throat. “Perhaps the will holds other clues not

contained within the first clause.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well,” Xander said while striding past us into the room, “Alistair specifically left you a copy of his bible.” He gestured at the table next to the leather reading chair. “Have you looked inside it, yet?”

“Good idea!” I replied, joining him by the bible. “He said to turn to the bible when I reached a dead end in life.”

“And he said it contains the *key*,” Chase agreed. “Sounds like a clue to me.”

The tome in question was an over-sized copy of the King James Bible, bound in cracked brown leather, with gold edges on the pages. I lifted it reverently, then opened the cover. There wasn’t a letter in the first page. Nor the second. I quickly fanned through all the pages. If there was a clue inside, it wasn’t a letter.

“Okay, maybe not,” Xander said, frowning.

Chase cursed. “I was expecting a hollowed-out portion to be holding a big metal key.”

“Me too,” I said, closing the book.

“Told you,” Brody said. He looked relieved. And slightly puzzled. My eyes were drifting down to his waist, where his hip bones created grooves leading down to his crotch. He was *extremely* pleasant to look at. Why did he have to be such an ass?

I quickly put the bible back down and turned back to the others. “I’m not ready to give up so quickly. What about the sketch upstairs?”

“I’ll get my ladder,” Chase said.

We met him upstairs in the parlor. Brody still mumbled about how we were chasing our own tails, but we ignored him as Chase set up the step ladder and climbed up to the illustration. To distract myself from Brody’s pleasing shirtlessness, I admired the way Chase looked from this angle. Broad-shouldered and strong. He took hold of the frame with both hands, then carefully lifted it off the nail.

“I don’t see anything.” He climbed down the ladder and handed the picture to Xander.

“Simple frame. Nothing unusual hidden inside.” Xander ran his fingertip around the border, then turned the frame around. “It’s not matted, which means there’s nothing hidden behind it. This is the back of the illustration paper itself.”

I pointed to a corner on the front. “Are those initials?”

“ABS,” Xander read out. “Hmm. Those initials seem familiar...”

“His wife’s name was Annabelle,” I said sadly. “She probably sketched it. I guess that’s why he valued it so much.”

“Which means it’s probably not part of the inheritance game,” Chase said.

I gazed up at the wall where it was hanging. There was nothing there but smooth wallpaper. “I guess not.”

“There, you manhandled it enough,” Brody insisted. “Now that we know it’s not important, can we please put it back?”

“Why are you acting so weird all of a sudden?” I asked.

He shrugged his muscular shoulders. “I just don’t like disturbing Alistair’s things.”

“Says the guy sleeping in his bedroom,” Chase murmured.

“Whatever. I’m starving. For some *real* food.”

We returned to the kitchen. Xander and Chase cleaned up the mess from the fire extinguisher while I finished cooking eggs and pancakes for the three of us. Brody made himself two turkey sandwiches and wolfed them down while watching.

“I’m exhausted,” Xander said, “and based on the way the rest of you look, I’m not the only one.”

“That’s a shitty way to tell us we look bad,” Brody replied.

“My point is that we could all use some sleep,” Xander explained. “I’m going to lock the will in the chest again. We’ll all get a good night of sleep. And then in the morning, I’ll make copies of the will and we can all start picking it apart. Sound good?”

I nodded around a mouthful of pancakes. “I like that idea.”

“Me too,” Chase and Brody said at the same time.

“Please don’t any of you try to leave the estate while I’m sleeping,” Xander

said. “I will not be happy if I have to stay up all night monitoring the premises.”

Chase cleaned the dishes while I took stock of the fridge. “We’re going to need more groceries soon. Alistair was already low, and what’s left will run out fast now that four of us are here.”

“You don’t think we can survive off...” Chase leaned back so he could gaze into the fridge. “A twenty-four pack of Budweiser, three slices of American cheese, six eggs, and a stick of butter?”

“I’m a good cook, but I can’t perform miracles,” I said with a wink.

Chase chuckled. “I’ll talk to Xander about that tomorrow.”

“Want to check out the wine cellar?” I asked while finishing up. “I don’t know much about wine, but I’d share a glass or two, if you’re up for it.”

Chase’s normally-warm smile held a note of sadness. “I really don’t think I’m up for it tonight. I’m worn out from everything. Like, emotionally.”

“Yeah, no, totally,” I said. “I feel the same way.”

I climbed the steps to the second floor, and gave a start. Brody was in one of the spare bedrooms, staring up at the ceiling. After a few seconds, he turned off the lights, then walked across the hall.

Into my room.

“Hey!” I said, running to join him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Checking all the fans,” Brody replied while gazing up at the ceiling fan. It was slowly ramping up in speed. “In case there are more clues. Why do you care?”

“Because this is my room.”

He blinked and looked around. “Oh, shit. Sorry. Why’d you choose this room? It’s, like, the smallest one in the entire house. There are four bedrooms on the third floor with queen-sized beds.”

“I don’t need a lot of space,” I replied. “Unlike some people.”

Brody rolled his eyes. “Don’t be jealous just because I called dibs on the best room in the house.” He walked across the hall into the next room, flipped the switch on, and stared up at the ceiling fan. His back was taut with muscle, lines and contours that were impossible to ignore.

I quickly looked away as he flipped the switch off and went on to the next

room. When I turned back, Chase was standing in the doorway. *Did he see me admiring Brody?*

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi.”

There was an annoyed sound down the hall. “I’m trying to sleep,” Xander complained.

“It will just take a second,” Brody replied.

“Turn that fan off!”

“Just a little longer... okay. You’re good. Nighty night.”

“If you barge in here again, I’m disqualifying you from...” The door closed, muffling the rest of what he said.

Chase chuckled to himself. “Well. Hopefully we outlast *that* guy and get the inheritance.”

“Yeah. Hopefully.”

“Sorry for turning down your drink,” he said. “I just... I don’t know. Alistair’s death is starting to sink in. I guess I was more fond of him than I thought.”

“Me too,” I said. “I’m not afraid to admit I’ve shed a few tears today.”

“Hey, I wanted to say...” Chase ran a hand through his messy mop of hair. “No matter what happens with all of this. The inheritance, the estate, the clues. I hope we can still be friends.”

“I hope so too!” I said without hesitation.

“And I hope we can still go on that date,” he said. “After I win, I’ll take you somewhere nice.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s really nice of you. After *I* win, I’m keeping all of the money for myself and taking you to Burger King.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time. I grew up eating Whopper combo meals twice a week. Right now, Burger King sounds *great*.”

We both laughed, the sound echoing off the ugly red wallpaper in the room. Today had been such a somber day that it felt good to laugh. Especially with him.

Chase started to turn away, but then stepped deeper into the room and

wrapped me in a big bear hug. I melted into his arms and pressed my cheek against his shoulder. He felt warm and strong and sturdy, and the return of his lemon-and-soil scent filled me with comfort. All the insecurities in my life, all the stresses, seemed to melt away as I inhaled his scent. My problems weren't gone for good, I knew. Some were just beginning. But while I was in Chase's arms, it felt like they didn't matter.

I started to pull away, and he did the same... but he kept one arm hooked around me. Keeping me close. I gazed up into his hazel eyes, full of life and warmth. We had worked together for nearly a year, and he had never stared at me the way he was now.

Kiss me, I begged him with my eyes. *Kiss me like you did this morning in the library.*

Suddenly, there was a *thumping* sound above us. On the third floor. Both of us jumped apart in surprise.

"You hear that?"

"It sounded like something falling," I said.

Chase's eyes were wide. "What if it's a ghost? *Alistair's* ghost?"

I laughed and said, "It's probably Brody. He's checking every ceiling fan in the house for more clues."

Chase stepped out into the hall, then pointed. I followed his finger: at the end of the hall, Brody was pacing back and forth in Alistair's old room, talking on the phone. "It's just for a few days. Then I'll be back. I'll cover twice as many of your office rounds to make it up to you. Okay, three times as many. Thanks, bro."

We walked down the hall to Xander's bedroom. It was dark under the closed door. Suddenly there was another thump above us, more muffled this time.

Chase and I looked at each other. "It's totally a ghost."

"It's not a ghost!"

"Prove it," he said. "Come with me."

I wanted to protest, to tell him that I didn't care about this and just wanted to go to bed, but he took me by the hand and led me up the stairs to the third floor. His fingers were warm and comforting as we walked down the hall up there, listening quietly. The overhead lights hummed quietly as we checked

the rooms. There were three more bedrooms on this floor, along with a theater room with three rows of stadium seats. That felt out of place in the big Victorian house.

Another sound came from above us—not a thump this time, but a scraping noise. Like someone dragging something. “The attic,” Chase whispered.

“I am *not* going up in the attic,” I said.

He ignored me and led me by the hand to the end of the hall, where a narrow flight of stairs led straight up to the attic. The walls were faded and yellow here, like nobody had bothered to keep it maintained for a few decades. The stairs led up into darkness. The light switch at the bottom of the stairs was already in the up position, but Chase flipped it anyway. Nothing happened.

“I was already not going up to the attic,” I said quietly. “But now I’m *super duper* not going up there.”

Chase smiled at me. “Because you’re afraid of ghosts.”

“I am not!”

“Admit it. There’s a small part of you that thinks I might be right, and this house might be haunted. Which is why you refuse to check out the attic with me.”

“I’m sure there’s a perfectly logical explanation for the noises we heard.”

Chase flicked on the light on his cell phone. “Then let’s go see what it is.” When I still hesitated, he said, “If you come with me, I’ll make it up to you.”

I perked up. “Make it up to me how?”

He flashed a smile. “You’ll have to come with me to find out.” And he turned and went up the stairs.

I like the sound of that.

Not wanting to back down in front of my long-time crush, I followed him up the stairs. They didn’t creak; if anything, our footsteps sounded muffled. Like the darkness was absorbing the sound. There was a door at the top leading into the attic itself, but it was already open. Like a black maw leading into nothingness.

We stepped into the attic and discovered that it was one enormous room that spanned the full length of the house, with a few supporting pillars of

wood but no walls. But it was far from empty. Stacks of boxes were everywhere, along with piles of magazines and newspapers. To our right was a row of pedestals holding what looked like marble busts, connected by strands of cobwebs that almost glistened in the harsh light of the phone.

Chase pointed in the other direction, then put a finger to his lips. Silently, we stalked in that direction, weaving in and out of the maze of boxes. I heard the scraping noise again, much clearer this time. It was coming from somewhere up ahead. *It's just a rat*, I told myself. Even though I hated rats, it was preferable to what Chase thought was up here. *Please be just a rat*.

There was a strange flickering light up ahead. Like a cluster of fireflies winking in and out of existence. Chase kept his phone light aimed low as we approached, tip-toeing now to remain as quiet as possible. My heart pounded in my chest, the sound pulsing in my ears. I told myself I didn't believe in ghosts, but fear was beginning to creep into my mind. The shape ahead flickered again, and there was that scraping noise, much louder this time...

Suddenly, the light turned and shined directly at us, blindingly bright. I raised a hand to shield myself, and then the figure before us let out a loud cry of alarm.

"Xander?" Chase said, raising the phone light. "What the fuck, dude?"

Xander was perfectly visible now that he was standing up; before, he was crouched behind a row of canvas paintings. The flickering lights I had seen were his own cell phone light streaming through the gaps between paintings. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt and snug-fitting black sweatpants.

"You scared me half to death," he said.

"Ditto," I said. "What are you doing up here? I thought you were downstairs, asleep."

"I was, until Brody barged into my room," he muttered. "After that, I was wide awake. And I kept thinking about the sketch in the parlor. I hoped that I might find some more here in the attic, and it would shed some light on the one downstairs."

"So you were trying to find clues without us," I said.

"Of course," he replied simply. "If I do, it will speed all of this up for everyone."

"Funny that you did that *after* suggesting we lock the will away and

nobody look at it until tomorrow.”

“The will is still locked away,” Xander said dryly.

Chase put a reassuring hand on my arm. “I don’t think we need to be suspicious of him. He’s not part of the game.”

I felt the tension leave my shoulders. “Oh. Right. Did you find anything?”

“I’m afraid not.” Xander swept his cell phone light across the rows of paintings. “Everything is painted, not sketched. I checked them anyway. There’s nothing else from Annabelle Schreiber up here.”

“If he cared about the other sketch so much,” Chase said, “then he probably wouldn’t hide her other work up here. If there even is any other artwork.”

“True.” Xander sighed. “Besides, there must be a thousand items up here. It would take days to search through everything.”

“Fingers crossed we won’t have to,” I said. “Come on. Let’s go make sure Brody hasn’t gotten into any more trouble.”

“And don’t go skulking around again,” Chase said, with a surprising amount of heat in his voice.

“I didn’t realize it would upset you so much,” Xander replied calmly.

“He’s just mad you weren’t a ghost,” I explained.

“It’s not that,” he muttered.

The three of us returned downstairs. Brody was still on the phone, loudly explaining to the person on the other end that he *couldn’t* tell them why he was taking time off work on such short notice. Xander gave us a nod before ducking into his room.

“Sweet dreams,” Chase said to me before disappearing into his room across the hall. He closed the door before I even had a chance to respond.

“You too,” I whispered to myself.

I got ready for bed, then climbed under the covers in my room. I didn’t mind that it was the smallest bedroom in the house. I liked it just fine. It was cozy, and the bed was warm and familiar. It made me feel *safe*.

I fell asleep as soon as my eyes were closed.

And then I dreamed.

I was in a dimly-lit room that held a bed, but no other furniture. It was the

bedroom I had chosen in the Schreiber estate, except now it was much larger than it should be in that blurry, dreamlike manner. The bed was covered with pillows, too.

When I blinked, Chase was suddenly laying on the bed. He was totally nude, I saw with shock. How did that happen? My eyes drifted down to his crotch, then shot back up to his face.

Chase smiled like he knew what I was thinking. “Forget our dinner date at Burger King. Let’s jump straight to dessert.”

I giggled at the silly joke. His smile deepened, and mischief gleamed in his hazel eyes. He was being serious.

I tingled with anticipation.

When I blinked again, Brody was in bed with him. Not *with* him; they maintained a healthy gap between their nude bodies. Yes, Brody was buck-naked too, his round, tan ass facing me while he twisted to look over his shoulder.

“Breakfast for dinner is an abomination,” he said, patting the space between them. “Let’s make a Robyn sandwich instead.”

I gawked at both of them. “But you two can’t stand each other.” I gave a start. “I can’t stand you either, Brody.”

“Who cares?” he replied. “You don’t have to like me to sleep with me. It’s just sex. And I *know* you’ve been looking.” His eyes raked over my body. “I’ve been admiring you, too.”

“As have I,” whispered a voice behind me. I whirled to find Xander there, standing with his hands in his pockets. Unlike the other two, he was wearing a three-piece suit. He looked dashing and confident in a heightened way.

“Wait your turn,” Brody snapped at him. “We were here first, and we’re ready to go.”

“I can be ready to go soon,” Xander replied, and began untying his necktie. His motions were slow and deliberate, and *insanely* sexy. The way he unbuttoned every button on his vest, then allowed it to slide off his arms...

“Robyn,” Chase crooned, and I turned back to him. “Don’t you want to know what it’s like?”

“What?”

“Being with us,” Brody replied for him. “Both of us. Wedged between our bodies...”

“...feeling us grinding against you,” Chase continued. “Worshipping you.”

“There’s room for all of us,” Xander said, wrapping his arms around me from behind. I melted in his embrace, and his fingers slid down between my legs, dipping under the elastic. My sex was hot and swollen now, desperate for human touch. As his fingers pressed into my clit and then down into my waiting lips, I closed my eyes and let out a long moan...

I sat upright in bed, sweat beading on my face in the darkness. The aftershocks of the orgasm still trembled through my legs, and caused my toes to curl almost painfully. The little ripples of pleasure went on for several moments longer before finally fading away.

But even after they were gone, the images of the three men remained. The sight of Chase and Brody nude in bed, waiting to share me. Xander’s warm breath in my ear, and his fingers pushing up into my drenched pussy. I tried to shake my head and banish the thoughts, but they remained firmly in place. Like they had been written into my brain with a permanent marker.

And then, without warning, I heard a scraping noise in the wall next to my bed. I froze, listening to the sound as it moved across the wall. It crossed the length of the room, then disappeared.

I hopped out of bed and tip-toed into the hall. The room next to mine was the bathroom, and it was empty. I walked inside, pressed my ear against the wall, and listened. I heard the faintest remnants of the scratchy sound. It almost sounded like an electric hum.

I went back to bed, but it took me a long time to fall asleep—for more reasons than one.



Chase

I wasn't upset about the sound in the attic being Xander, rather than a ghost. I mean, I was a *little* disappointed about that. This house was totally haunted, and I was determined to prove it. Even if the others didn't believe me.

No, I was more upset that the noise had interrupted the moment Robyn and I were sharing. It had taken all of my courage to kiss her that morning in the library. Then I spent the rest of the day thinking about the kiss, and how good it was. I felt her body come alive while she was in my arms, lips connected tenderly.

It made me want to do so much more with her.

But right before I had a chance to make a move before bed, Xander the not-friendly not-ghost interrupted us with his spooky attic noises. Now I was laying in bed, staring at the ceiling, regretting the missed opportunity.

We're going to be in this house a little while, I told myself. I'll have plenty of chances with Robyn.

Everyone else was already in the kitchen by the time I woke up the next morning. "Morning, sleepy head," Robyn said from the kitchen table. She was holding a mug of coffee in both hands and smiling warmly. But there was a hint of awkwardness on her face, one that she seemed to be trying to hide.

"Everyone sleep well?" I asked while pouring some coffee. "Nobody abandoned the inheritance in the middle of the night?"

"It appears not," Xander said. "To both questions."

Robyn grimaced. "I was just telling them I slept horribly. There was a noise in the wall... Every time I started to drift off to sleep, I heard it again."

I perked up as if I'd had a shot of espresso. "What kind of noise?"

“Scraping,” she explained. “And no, it wasn’t in the attic. It wasn’t above me at all. It was inside the bedroom wall. Like, just on the other side of the plaster.”

“Spirits have been known to make extremely subtle noises while trying to communicate with the corporeal world.”

“Or it’s rats,” Xander said.

“We had rats in my old apartment,” Brody said. He was sitting over on the kitchen counter, a sweating glass of orange juice in one hand. And, I was glad to see, he was fully clothed. “Sounded like a shuffling, scraping noise in the walls.”

“I’ve never heard rats in this house before,” Robyn protested.

“You’ve never been here at night,” Xander pointed out.

Robyn started to open her mouth to say something, then stopped herself. *What was she going to say?*

“I’ve never seen any evidence of rats either, and I routinely check every room in this house while tending to the plants,” I said. “It’s more likely to be a ghost.”

Robyn narrowed her eyes and smiled. “I thought you said hauntings don’t begin until the deceased is buried or cremated?”

I shrugged. “Usually. Alistair was an unorthodox man.”

“We brought in an exterminator at my old place,” Brody said. “Wiped out all the rats in a few days. Let’s do that.”

“Unfortunately,” Xander said, “outside visitors are prohibited on the estate grounds, except in two-minute intervals.”

“An exterminator wouldn’t help anyways... unless it was a Ghostbuster.” I winked at Robyn, and she let out a playful little giggle.

“Pick a different bedroom to sleep in,” Brody told Robyn. “The rest of us didn’t hear any rats last night.”

“Wait, the funeral!” I said. “For Alistair. Do we know when it is?”

Xander put down his mug. “I received an email from my law firm. The service is tomorrow afternoon.”

“Shit. We’re going to miss it, aren’t we?” I said.

Robyn's eyes widened. "Oh, no!"

"I'm sorry to say that yes, anyone who leaves the estate will be disqualified from the inheritance. The will explicitly stated there would be *no* exceptions." For once, Xander looked genuinely sympathetic to us.

"Fuck that bullshit," Brody blurted out. "I have a solution."

"If you leave the grounds, you will lose your claim," Xander pointed out.

Brody hopped off the counter and pulled out his phone. "Yeah yeah, I know your stupid rules. Let me work on it. I'll fix this for all of us."

After he was gone, Xander collected a grocery list to be delivered to the house. His law firm was handling all expenses while we lived here, which would later be taken out of the overall inheritance as part of their fee.

I put on my gardening clothes and went out to the greenhouse. It was a sunny day, and I felt calmest when my fingers were digging into rich soil. For a while, I lost myself in the simple, repetitive tasks.

When I was satisfied that all the plants in the greenhouse were in good shape, I went outside and tended to the grounds themselves. I pruned the rose bushes by the back patio, then gazed up at the wall of the house itself. There were four different species of vines snaking through a network of wooden lattices that ran up the side of the house. I hadn't noticed until now, because vines didn't require much babysitting, but the ones on the lattice were in rough shape. It almost looked like they had been trampled.

I retrieved my ladder and slowly moved up the lattice, readjusting the vines and making sure they were still alive. I was halfway up the house when Robyn came outside with a mug of coffee.

"Caffeine delivery," she said cheerfully.

I climbed down and accepted the mug. "Thanks. I was feeling a caffeine headache coming on." I gave Robyn a quick admiring look while taking a sip. Her legs looked great in tight jeans, and she was wearing a T-shirt that showed a little bit of midriff.

"Whatchya doing?" she asked casually.

"Tending to the vines. They were damaged, so I trimmed a few ends and rearranged them so they grow better."

Robyn tilted her head. "Damaged?"

“Yeah, parts of the vine were crushed.” I pointed. “The lattice goes all the way up to the room you’re staying in. It almost looks like you snuck in a visitor last night.”

She gazed up at the wall and laughed at the joke, but it was a nervous sort of laugh. She probably didn’t like the idea of someone being able to climb up into her bedroom at night.

“Don’t worry, it was probably just some birds perching on the vines or something.”

“I’m not worried,” she replied.

“You can always switch bedrooms,” I said. “There are plenty to choose from.”

“I’m fine. I like that room.”

“I can remove the lattice then,” I suggested. “It probably can’t support the weight of anyone bigger than you, so you’d have a fair fight if you needed to tussle with an intruder. But just to be safe...”

“No!” she quickly said. “You don’t need to remove parts of the house for me. I feel safe.”

“Okay.”

“Besides, you might say that removing the lattice counts as intentionally damaging the property,” she added. “I know *he* would argue that.”

I turned to see who she was looking at. Brody was currently jogging up the perimeter of the wide backyard. He was shirtless, and a sheen of sweat covered his muscular chest.

Remembering how Robyn had looked at him yesterday, a small amount of jealousy flared up inside me. When he came near, I waved to him and called out, “You’re really running around the edge? The property isn’t that big.”

Brody jogged over to us. His GPS watch beeped as he paused it, and then he twisted his wrist to show us. “One loop around the house is a third of a mile. Three of those makes a mile, and nine adds up to my daily 5K run.”

“Congrats,” I said. “You can do math.”

Brody rolled his eyes dramatically. “I’m just answering your question. You don’t have to be a dick about it, bro.”

“You were a dick to us first,” Robyn piped up.

“What, yesterday? I had just found out my only living relative had died. I was dealing with some emotional shit. I’m *still* dealing with it. But you guys don’t have an excuse.”

He unpaused his watch and jogged off, shaking his head as he went. *I’m still dealing with it, too*, I thought stubbornly. *The difference is I’m not using it as an excuse.*

We ordered pizza that night. Xander charged it to his law firm. While we ate, he handed out printed copies of the will. Not everything; he skipped the preamble and the part where Alistair gave us his bible, chess set, and prize roses. He also left off the itemized list of accounts and possessions. But he included the additional clauses we had found.

After dinner, I found Robyn sitting in the library focusing intently on her phone. When she saw me, she waved me into the room.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Having some fun.” She showed me her phone screen, which displayed a text message she had recently sent.

Robyn: Brody Schreiber. This is your great-grandfather Alistair communicating to you beyond the grave. I don’t want you to win the inheritance. You should leave my house immediately and go surfing. I bet there are some totally sick waves tonight.

“How did you get his number?” I asked.

She pulled a business card out of her pocket. “He gave it to us when we first met. I decided to—look, he’s responding!”

Brody: Nice try, but Papa Alistair never learned how to text.

Robyn: Steve Jobs taught me. He and I became pals up here in the Great Beyond!

Brody: Reason number two I don’t believe you: Alistair wanted me to inherit the estate. Is this Robyn, or Chase?

Robyn: I do not want you to inherit my estate. I want it to go to someone who deserves it. Someone who was with me up until the end.

Brody: Fuck ALL the way off.

“I think you pissed him off,” I said with a laugh.

“Yeah, I guess it didn’t work. But it was still fun!” She grinned up at me. “What are you up to?”

I wanted to hang out with her, but my normal responsibilities were weighing heavily in my head. “I need to work. I’m starting to fall behind on my coding job.”

“Ah, okay,” she said. Did she sound disappointed? “Night, Chase.”

I went upstairs to my room to work. But I found myself unable to focus, and kept glancing over at my printed copy of the will instead.

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

ALiSTAIR FRITZ SCHREiBER

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds, will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be extinguished and banishing the cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. And so it is you few, you happy few who shall be rewarded. Now that my soul has departed from my body, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.

Clause 3: The letters you write and place in my safe shall be legally binding.

Clause 5: The first person to read this letter must immediately strip down to their underwear for the remainder of the day, or forfeit their claim to the inheritance.

There didn’t seem to be any hints in the third and fifth clauses, but the first seemed to be full of them. We already knew “extinguished” was a hint about

the fire extinguisher, and the “flames” part probably was, too. “Fanned” was a reference to the fan in the library. The word “Aristotelian” had stuck out to me on the first reading, but I searched everywhere in the library yesterday and couldn’t find anything written by Aristotle or his mentor, Plato.

“Cobwebs” was probably a reference to the attic, or the wine cellar underneath the kitchen. But like Xander had said, it would take days to find an envelope in there.

I gave up, put my headphones on, and returned to my actual coding work. Winning the inheritance was important, but I needed to keep my day job in case it didn’t work out.

And if I do win the inheritance... Well, I could think about that later. I would have the rest of my life to decide.

The next morning, before everyone else woke up, I went down into the wine cellar. The walls were made of old bricks, with archways connecting several different rooms. Each room held at least two hundred bottles of wine, coated in dust where they sat in their racks. I made a quick check of all the rooms, but nothing stuck out to me.

He also said to drink his favorite drink, I thought, scanning the end of the first clause. *Maybe a clue is hidden inside a wine bottle.* But it would take days to check every single one, and I didn’t want to waste all that good wine.

I was working in the greenhouse when Robyn brought me my morning coffee. “Knock knock—” she started to say, then stopped herself and gave the metal door an *actual* knock. “Coffee break?”

“I won’t say no to that.” I smiled while accepting the mug. “Hey, random question. Do you know what Alistair’s favorite wine was?”

Robyn frowned. “Um. I know he liked reds. He used to say that white wine was for middle-aged divorced women.” She chuckled at the memory. “Why?”

“No reason.”

She narrowed her dark eyes. “The last part of the will? Where he says to drink his favorite drink?”

“His favorite food held a clue, so why not the drink?” I said. “Also, the clue about cobwebs.”

“I assumed that meant the attic,” she admitted.

“Either place will take forever to search.”

“Probably.” She crossed her arms in a way that made her chest stick out. “Speaking of the attic, I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“You said if I followed you into the attic, you would make it up to me. But you never did.”

In truth, I had forgotten all about that in the excitement of the attic noise. But I recovered quickly and said, “I’m glad you remembered! I wanted to show you around the greenhouse.” I gestured dramatically.

“Really? You usually fuss with anyone who comes in here.”

“I don’t mind showing you now. As long as you don’t come snooping around in here when I’m not around. The maid Alistair used to hire, Eloise, once knocked over a rare *Kalanchoe Millotii* from Madagascar.”

“I don’t know what that is, but it sounds fancy.”

“It’s this guy right here.” I led her over to a corner of the greenhouse. “It’s a fuzzy succulent, and requires a lot of light, which is why I have it here on the southern side of the greenhouse.”

“It’s pretty.” She pointed. “Oh! What’s that?”

“The one with the bright red and yellow petals? That’s a *Clivia Miniata*. More commonly known as the Fire Lily.”

“I get it. Because the base is yellow, and the top is red. Just like a flame. It looks just like the gummy worms I used to eat at the movie theater.” She reached toward it.

“You won’t want to eat that guy,” I said, grabbing her wrist. “It’s *very* poisonous. It can cause vomiting, convulsions, and heart tremors. You’ll definitely lose the inheritance if we have to take you to the hospital. Also, you might die.”

“I like how you listed that second, after the inheritance,” she said with a smile. She glanced at my hand on her wrist, so I let go.

“I know what’s most important.” I looked around the greenhouse. “Alistair liked to collect rare plants from his travels around the world. Back when he was still traveling, I mean. A lot of them are sensitive. The slightest changes in temperature or moisture can kill them.”

“Really? A little extra *moisture* can kill a plant?”

“Plants that are used to living in very specific climates, sure.”

Robyn looked around the greenhouse with me. “I’m glad you’re keeping them alive. It really would be a shame for all of them to die.”

I dipped my head, grateful for the compliment.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” she said. “This wasn’t what I expected when you said you would make it up to me for going into the attic.”

I blinked. “What were you expecting?”

She shrugged casually, while admiring the massive leaves of a philodendron giganteum. Then I realized what she meant. *She thought it would be something more... intimate.*

I thought about the way she looked at Brody when he was shirtless, and how he had been jogging around the property. Showing off the way he looked. Robyn liked me, and I liked her. This was the opening I needed.

I won’t let Brody get all the attention.

I grabbed Robyn’s arm, spun her around, and then crushed my lips against hers. Unlike the kiss in the library, there was nothing hesitant about this. I churned against her, pushing my tongue into her mouth. She accepted it eagerly, with the softest little moan. Her own tongue writhed against mine hungrily, tasting faintly of vanilla creamer.

I’ve needed this, I thought faintly. I’ve needed her.

I pushed her back against the wall and deepened the kiss, all thoughts about the inheritance long forgotten.



Robyn

I didn't care about plants. I knew which ones looked pretty and which were ugly, but my concern for them ended there. I was visiting the greenhouse because I wanted to see Chase, not the weird little fuzzy succulents that Alistair had cared about.

It wasn't easy being up front with a guy. From a young age, women were told that it was the boy who should pursue the girl, and not the other way around. Things were different these days, but that romantic truth was still written on my brain in permanent ink.

So when I hinted to Chase that I had been expecting something else, I desperately hoped he would understand what I meant. Because I definitely didn't have the courage to spell it out for him.

But Chase picked up on the hint, spinning me around and kissing me with gusto. I was hungry for him, every bit of him, and he seemed to sense this as his tongue forced its way into my mouth, conquering and claiming me.

And then he threw me up against the wall and deepened the kiss. His body pressed against mine, strong and sturdy, covering me like a blanket of warm man.

It's finally happening, I thought faintly. Chase and I are hooking up.

He lifted me into his arms, twisting me sideways and pushing me onto a plant-covered table. One of the pots slid off and smashed noisily to the ground, sending soil and ceramic everywhere.

"Oh no!" I said. "What was that?"

"Something cheap." He kissed me again, and I forgot all about the broken planter. He pushed forward between my legs, the bulge in his gardening overalls grinding against me through my jeans. My hands explored his broad back, lacing up into his mop of chestnut hair, tightening as he moved forward

with his hips into me with lust-filled thrusts.

“More,” I begged as his tongue swirled against mine. He grabbed my thighs, fingers digging into the flesh, and then one hand was snapping open the button of my jeans and diving down into my panties. It wasn’t what I expected, but as his fingertips brushed against my clit, I realized it was *exactly* what I needed. I craned back my head and moaned loudly, the sounds echoing through the greenhouse.

With my neck exposed, Chase dove into me. He hadn’t shaved in a few days, and his five-o’clock shadow scratched sensually against my skin while he nuzzled me. That, paired with the fingers pressing against my clit and swirling in a circle, sent pulses of pleasure throughout my body, spreading in all directions like vines.

Eager to make him feel the way I did, I reached for his crotch. I could feel the thick cock beneath the layers of clothes—it leaped at my touch, pulsing with heat—and I blindly felt around for the zipper. But he was wearing gardening overalls, and there was no way inside without taking them all the way off, so for now I settled for gripping him through his clothes.

He rumbled a groan into my neck as I stroked him through the fabric, a sound that was music to my ears. He was kissing the spot where my neck and shoulders met, sensitive to his nibbling lips, but it drove me wild. I surged upward with need, pushing my hips into his fingers as he rubbed me.

And then Chase was pushing lower, deeper. His fingers plunged into my soaked pussy, while his thumb remained on my clit. The combination sent another jolt of ecstasy up my spine.

But it was more than just a jolt. The combination of finally hooking up with Chase, the spontaneous rendezvous in the greenhouse, and the perfect way he was rubbing me, soon had a sunrise of an orgasm appearing on my horizon. “Don’t stop,” I begged, tightening my grip on his hard length through his clothes. “Just like that. Yes. Yes.”

Within seconds, I was gasping and quivering. My inner muscles clamped down on Chase’s fingers, and then I threw back my head and let out a long cry of bliss. I knew I shouldn’t be making so much noise; Brody was jogging around the grounds and might hear us, which would *definitely* ruin what Chase and I were doing. But I couldn’t keep the moans from pouring out of my throat, especially as the orgasm grew stronger.

Sensing my dilemma, Chase pressed his lips against mine and drank my pleased cries. Unburdened, I surrendered to the ecstasy of his fingers, arching my back and letting it all out. All the while, Chase continued rubbing me, his other arm wrapped around my back to hold me as I shook and shuddered with release.

“Easy, there,” he whispered, breath hot in my ear. “Easy, now.”

“I’m good. I’m *very* good,” I replied.

A lock of hair fell across his face as he shook his head. “No, I mean, *easy*.” He grabbed my hand, which was squeezing his cock as tightly as I could.

“Crap! Sorry.”

He grinned. “Don’t be. Nothing damaged.”

“Except for that plant.” I glanced over at it and giggled. “Hopefully that’s all that’s damaged. I think I single-handedly raised the moisture level in here.”

Chase blinked in surprise, then erupted in laughter.

“I can’t believe I just made that joke,” I said as he rested his head against my shoulder and shook with laughs.

“It was hilarious. I love your sense of humor.” He cradled my cheek in his wide palm. “I love lots of things about you.”

I feel the same way, I thought as I stared into his deep brown eyes. I want to know everything about you. I want to do more than just this. I want...

An alarm went off in Chase’s pocket. He removed his phone and turned it off. “Shit. Brody told us to meet him in the parlor in ten minutes.”

“Forget about Brody,” I said. “I’d rather stay here and learn more about plants.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is *that* what you want to do?”

“No. But it’s an excuse to do other stuff.”

Excitement flickered in his eyes, and for a moment I thought he would dive into me again. But then he pulled away. “Brody was insistent about this thing. I kind of want to see what it is.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

“Besides, I don’t want to move too fast with you.” He ran a hand through

his messy hair. “I really like you.”

“I like you too!” I said.

“I was serious about taking you out to dinner,” Chase explained. “Somewhere nice.”

“It doesn’t have to be nice. I’d be happy going anywhere, as long as it’s with you. Seriously, that Burger King date I joked about sounds perfect right now.”

He seemed relieved to hear that, and leaned back in for a long, slow, sensual kiss. “Rain check, then?”

“Okay. Emphasis on rain. Like, moisture, I mean.”

Chase snorted. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” I winced. “I’m not really good at sexy innuendo talk.”

“I can tell. Lucky for you, I don’t mind.” He glanced at his phone. “I’m going to clean up this pot. I’ll meet you up there.”

I didn’t want to leave. His hard-on was creating a very obvious tent in his overalls, a situation that I believed should be remedied as quickly as possible. But he was already turning away from me to collect a broom and dustpan from the corner. I lingered for a moment, watching him, and then tore my eyes away and left.



Robyn

High on post-orgasm endorphins, I practically skipped through the Schreiber Estate. It had been so long since I'd done that with a guy. Or anything sexual, for that matter. Yet as good as it was, it felt like we had unfinished business. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was wasting an opportunity by going inside to see what Brody had in store for us.

As I passed the study on the way to the stairs, I found myself stopping. Part of the will mentioned *flames*. Was that a second reference to the fire extinguisher, or was it referring to the fireplace?

I spent a minute or two searching around the brick hearth. I checked under the candles on the mantle, and underneath the stack of firewood. I even opened the flue to the chimney, but the only thing that fell down was a curtain of soot.

There are two other fireplaces in the house, I thought. I'll check them later.

The parlor on the third floor was empty. "Over here," Brody called. He was across the hall in the theater room, crouched down by the DVD player.

"What did you invite us up here for?" I asked.

He rose, and I gave a start. He was wearing a black suit, with a white dress shirt and matching black tie. Rather than having his hair back in a man-bun, it was neatly combed. All in all, he looked incredibly handsome.

He cleans up nicely.

"Take a photo," he said with a grin. "It'll last longer."

I quickly recovered and said, "I wasn't expecting to see you in a suit."

"I'm surprised you didn't dress up," he said while examining me. "Is that soot on your hands?"

Not wanting to share the potential clue I had found, I asked, "Why would I

dress up?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I thought all of you would know by now. I guess you’re too busy prank-texting to figure it out.”

“Figure what out?” Chase asked as he walked into the room. He locked eyes with me for a split second, smiling gently.

Five minutes ago, he was fingering me. Now we’re up here and nobody knows. Having a secret with him sent a naughty shiver up my spine.

Brody groaned when he saw Chase. “You’re wearing overalls.”

Chase looked down at himself. “I was just gardening. What else would I be wearing?” There was no sign of the hard-on tent that had been very obvious just minutes before.

“We should all be dressed for this.” He glanced at his watch. “Fuck. There’s not enough time.”

“Not enough time for what?” Xander asked as he joined us.

Brody clapped his hands together. “I’m glad one of you dressed for the occasion. Although black would have been more appropriate than gray.”

“I didn’t dress for any occasion. I’ve been wearing a suit every day. Because unlike you three, I’m technically at work right now.”

“Whatever.” Brody glanced at his watch again. “Before we start, real quick, I think we should all make a pact to work together.”

“Oh, *now* he wants to work together,” Chase muttered.

“You can’t split the inheritance,” Xander explained blandly. “I’ve already told you this.”

“Forget that.” Brody waved a hand. “We’re all still fighting to see who can stay here the longest. But aside from that, if anyone finds a clue or clause somewhere in the house, we have to share it with everyone. No hiding anything new. Okay?”

“He’s saying this now because he hasn’t had any luck finding more clues,” Chase told me.

“Hey, man,” Brody said. “After you see why I called everyone up here, you’ll owe me.”

“Let’s just see what we’re doing up here first,” I said. “Because it’s not impressive if all we’re doing is watching Alistair’s favorite movie.”

“Goodfellas,” Chase immediately said. “Alistair loved Scorsese.”

“I did much better than putting on his favorite movie.” He bent back to the DVD player, which had a laptop resting on it with the video cord plugged into the back. “It’s 2023. There’s no excuse to miss Alistair’s funeral.”

“Huh,” Xander said. “Did you…”

The big projector screen came to life, showing the interior of a church. The camera was positioned in the back of the chapel, with the aisle directly ahead leading to the altar, with rows of pews on either side filled with people. In front of the altar was a long wooden casket with gold rails.

“I paid an intern to go to the funeral and stream it for us,” Brody announced. “You’re welcome.”

“Brody…” I said. “This is really sweet.”

“Don’t act so surprised. I wasn’t going to miss Papa Alistair’s funeral.” He sunk into one of the chairs in the front row. “Sit down. It’s about to start.”

We hurried to join him in the front row. On the screen, a priest was approaching the altar. He told everyone to rise and open their hymn books, and then he led everyone in song.

“I brought this for us,” Brody said, hefting a bottle of liquor and four glasses pinched in his fingers. “Because in the will, Alistair told us to drink his favorite drink.”

“His favorite drink was a French 75,” I replied. “I made it for him almost every night with dinner.”

Chase turned to me and frowned. “I thought it was mimosas. He tried to coax me into drinking one with him every morning when I got to work.”

“You’re both wrong,” Brody insisted while pouring brown liquid into the glasses. “His favorite drink was eighteen year old Yamazaki Whiskey. Neat.”

“I guess that’s neat,” I said.

“Neat means no ice,” Xander explained.

“Oh.”

“This is the finest whiskey Japan has to offer,” Brody explained while passing out glasses. “It costs four hundred bucks a bottle, and Alistair went through a bottle a week.”

“Fondness for Japanese things,” Xander muttered while swirling the

whiskey in his glass. “He’s not helping his case for being one of the *good* Germans.”

“Bro, it’s a dick move to call him a Nazi during his actual funeral.”

Xander dipped his head in apology.

“Expensive whiskey,” I said while inhaling the sharp scent from my glass. “Mimosas. French 75s. Cognac before bed. I’m starting to think Alistair was an alcoholic.”

“Or too old to give a shit anymore,” Chase suggested. “When you’re ninety-nine, is there any reason to drink moderately?”

“Shh, it’s starting,” Brody said.

The priest launched into the funeral service. He spoke at length about Alistair’s involvement in the community, the charities he was a part of, and the endless amount of time and money he donated to local causes. He invited members of the audience to come up and say a few words about Alistair, and a line quickly formed. One woman told a story about how Alistair and Annabelle took her in after her apartment burned down in a fire. Another man described how his son was born with a cleft mouth, and Alistair paid for the surgery to fix it—anonymously, until someone at the hospital billing department let slip that the donation came from him. “Alistair didn’t know me from Chase,” the man said, tears in his eyes. “He heard about Joshua’s cleft palate from a friend of a friend of a friend. And he rushed to help us pay for the surgery without hesitation. He was intensely embarrassed when we learned that the money came from him. He said that good deeds should be done without expecting any gratitude in return.”

The speeches went on and on, describing generous act after generous act. It seemed like everyone in Santa Cruz had been personally touched by Alistair in some way or another. A few tears ran down my cheeks, and I was grateful for the whiskey, which tasted smooth and left a pleasant warmth in my chest. Brody got up and refilled everyone’s glasses. I smiled at him gratefully.

“Listen to all these people,” Brody said. “A Nazi wouldn’t do so much good.”

“Unless he was trying to make up for what he did before moving here,” Xander muttered. Brody gave him a sharp look, and Xander added, “Sorry. It appears he was a truly good man.”

The service concluded, and everyone was invited to join them in the cemetery for the burial. As everyone got up and started to leave, Brody's intern carried the camera up the aisle to the dais. The coffin was open, and he approached and aimed the camera inside.

Icy fingers squeezed my heart. There was Alistair's gaunt face, eyes closed and a small smile touching his lips, like he thought the whole ceremony was funny. He looked good. Despite my initial reaction, seeing him one last time caused a pressure in my chest to lessen. Like I was getting closure.

"Wow," Chase said. "I guess he's really gone."

"You doubted?" Brody asked.

"I mean, based on all these games and puzzles, part of me wondered if he faked his own death."

In spite of everything, I laughed. "That would be just like Alistair."

Xander took a long sip of his whiskey. "I personally identified the body on behalf of our law firm the morning of his death. His dental records also confirmed his identity, though it was not necessary. I can assure you that Alistair Schreiber has passed."

As the screen went dark, I realized I was crying again. Chase reached over and squeezed my hand.

"Thank you for this," Chase told Brody. "This was really awesome of you."

"I didn't realize how much I needed to see that," I agreed. "I can't thank you enough, Brody."

The suited man got up and shrugged. "Yeah, sure. Whatever." He turned, and for a split second the ambient light from the projector showed his face. His eyes were red and puffy, and his cheeks were wet from tears. He picked up the bottle of whiskey and hurried out of the room before we could see him cry. I suddenly felt incredibly guilty for texting him yesterday.

I shared a look with Chase. *Maybe he was closer to Alistair than we thought.*



Robyn

We ordered Chinese takeout for dinner. Brody pulled out four bottles of Budweiser from the fridge and handed them out while we ate. After a few minutes of small talk, Chase announced that he needed to catch up on his coding work. He said goodnight, then carried his takeout box and beer upstairs.

I wasn't sure if he was hinting that he wanted me to join him, so I casually went upstairs after finishing my food. I knocked softly at his door, but there was no response. Faintly, I could hear the thumping of music. He must have had his headphones on while he coded. Even though I wanted to pick up where we had left off in the greenhouse, I decided to leave him alone.

Unsure of what else to do with myself, I began tidying up around the mansion. It was lame that the task fell on the only woman in the house, but I didn't really mind. It was part of my job when Alistair was alive, and cleaning up made me feel like everything was normal again. For a while, I could almost pretend that Alistair was sitting in his favorite chair in the library, reading a book.

But when I made my way into the library, it was Xander who was reclining in the plush leather chair. A stack of cards was in his lap, and he was holding a single one out in front of him, frowning in concentration. The warm lamp light accentuated his high cheekbones and sharp features. His coat and tie were gone, and he had the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He flipped the card over, winced, and looked up at me. "Learning all the United States Presidents. In order."

"Is that some important lawyer skill?"

A rare smile touched Xander's lips. "No. I'm studying. I'm kind of a trivia

buff.”

“Cool!” I said, moving deeper into the library. “You should try out for Jeopardy.”

“I’ve taken the online admissions test every year for a decade, since I turned eighteen. I’ve always done well, but I’ve never been invited to the second round.” He drew the next flash card, and immediately said, “Calvin Coolidge.” He flipped the card over and nodded.

“I used to do bar trivia with friends. We were pretty good, but then I had to quit when I started this job. The job working for Alistair, I mean.”

“I’m a member of three bar trivia teams presently,” Xander told me. “It’s only been a few days, but they’re struggling without me.”

“Sorry about that,” I said.

He crossed one leg over the other. “I don’t mind. Especially if... one of you wins quickly.”

“I’ll try my best to do that!” I replied. “Hey, do you want some help studying?”

“Thank you, but I’m fine.”

Xander was the same age as the rest of us, but he felt like the *adult* of the group. The one who was in charge. Everything about this inheritance game that Alistair had set up was crazy and chaotic, and Xander seemed like the lone pillar of stability in the whole thing. His presence was comforting, and I didn’t want to leave.

“I insist,” I said, sinking into the chair next to his. “I don’t have anything else to do, and it will go faster with two people.”

His dark eyes studied me for a moment, and then he said, “I would be glad for the help.”

I took the cards from him, then flipped the first one up to read. “Nineteenth president.”

“Hayes,” he replied without hesitation. “One term. His vice president was William Wheeler.”

I flipped the card over and nodded in confirmation. “Good. Next one... seventh president.”

“Andrew Jackson. Two terms. Two vice presidents: John Calhoun, then

Martin Van Buren.”

We slowly ran through all the flash cards. Xander got most of them right, and without much hesitation. Occasionally, he added a factoid or two—like how Van Buren was the first president born as an American citizen, but English was his second language. After completing the stack of cards, he had me call them out backwards instead.

“Clinton,” I said.

“Number forty-two,” he replied.

I began putting the card away, but the rest of the stack slipped from my hands. Both of us reached down to pick the cards up, and for a moment our hands touched. I looked up, and he met my gaze. His eyes held a quiet intensity to them.

While I quickly collected the cards, I broke the awkward silence by asking, “What other subjects do you need to brush up on?”

“I’m weak on pop culture. And the bible. Especially the old testament.”

“Well,” I replied, “if you need to study the *new* testament, I have a copy I can lend you.” I leaned over and patted Alistair’s copy of the King James Bible on the table.

Xander let out a soft laugh—the first time I had heard it from him. “I’m also weak on some of the lesser-known Shakespeare plays.”

“No way! I was a theater geek in high school. I was in our productions of *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. I can totally help you with those.”

His quiet intensity returned. He seemed hesitant to accept my help—or anyone’s help, for that matter.

“If we’re in the house that long,” he finally said, “then I would love the help.”

I’ll take that as a win.

I helped him study the rest of the stack, and then excused myself to bed. Upstairs, Chase’s door was closed, but the light still shone underneath. Part of me wanted to interrupt him, even if he *was* coding, but I couldn’t muster the courage. I kept hearing what he had said in the greenhouse earlier: *I don’t want to move too fast.*

He was right, I knew. We both liked each other, and rushing into things would be a mistake. But oh man, I didn't want to go slow with him. With everything that had happened in my life lately—even *before* Alistair had passed—I could use some sexy fun.

It's been a while. Too long.

Eventually, I tore my eyes away from his door and went into my room. But before I could settle into bed, my phone vibrated.

Brody: I hope you enjoyed teasing me, Robyn.

Me: This isn't Robyn. This is Alistair. Steve Jobs is now showing me how to use Find My Friends to track down Albert Einstein and Abraham Lincoln. They're eating dinner in the cafeteria right now. Heaven has an awesome dinner buffet.

Brody: I know why you really texted me.

Me: Why?

Brody: You liked what you saw when I was shirtless.

Me: Oh, get over yourself. Nobody cared that you were shirtless.

Brody: You can protest all you want, but I saw the way you were looking at me.

The mental image of Brody leaped into my head. The grooves in his hips leading down to his tight boxer-briefs. Columns of abs like puffy dinner rolls practically popping up from his stomach. The tan skin covering his broad shoulders and the muscles of his arms...

I shook it off and replied to him.

Me: I glanced at you for maybe a second. Your body isn't bad. But your personality ruins it.

Brody: Who cares about personality? You don't need to like someone to hook up with them.

Me: Hook up?

Brody: I'm down to pound whenever you want. No strings attached. Just

the mindless drive of our bodies together, until we're both sweaty and exhausted and satisfied.

I laughed at my phone. *Down to pound?* Did that kind of talk actually work on girls?

It probably does for him, a voice whispered in my head. *Because he looks like that*. I felt another tingle run up my body as I re-read his text. Mindless drive of our bodies...

Me: I'll hook up with you if you leave the estate and give up your claim to the inheritance.

Brody: I already told you I can't do that. Alistair wanted me to win it, so I'm here for the long haul. You'll have to work harder to get rid of me ;-)

I was still a little turned on, which confused and annoyed me. I didn't want a guy like Brody to turn me on! I should have been more in control of my feelings! I settled under the covers. The bed was comfortable, and familiar, and I was so exhausted that I fell into a deep sleep without any trouble.

Sunlight streamed through my window the next morning. I wiped the sleep from my eyes; I hadn't set an alarm, and it had felt so *wonderful* to allow myself to wake up naturally.

I stepped off the bed. Instead of touching the Persian rug on the floor, my foot hit something soft. I lost my balance and fell, but rather than hitting hard ground, I landed on that same soft feature.

I blinked and stared down. Underneath me was a man, sprawled out on his back. I was laying across his bare chest, warm and muscular.

Brody grunted and blinked rapidly. Then his eyes settled on me.

At the same time, both of us screamed.



Robyn

“What the fuck are you doing?” Brody shouted at me. “That hurt!”

I scrambled off him, reaching around blindly for something to defend myself. My fingers tightened around a letter opener on the desk, and I held it out like a weapon. “What are you doing!”

“Sleeping!” he said, like it was obvious. He jumped to his feet, and the blanket slid off him. He was wearing nothing but a pair of boxer-briefs, which fit him snugly. And showed the massive bulge of an erection.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because it’s night time!” He glanced at the window. “At least, it was.”

My eyes drifted down to his underwear again. *I felt his dick while I was on top of him.* “Can you cover yourself?” I demanded.

He looked down at himself, then yanked the blanket off the ground. “It’s morning wood. I can’t help it.”

“But you can help *being in my room.* Why were you sleeping on the floor? Did you think I was giving you the signal from my texts?”

Brody jabbed a finger at me. “Ah hah! I knew it was you who was texting me, not Alistair from heaven.”

Exasperated at this point, I hissed, “WHY ARE YOU SLEEPING IN MY ROOM?”

He ruffled his dirty-blond hair. “You said I could.”

I sputtered an incredulous laugh. “I most certainly did not!”

“I came in here last night,” he explained. “Like, around midnight. I asked if I could sleep on the floor, and you said okay.”

“I don’t remember that!”

“Huh.” Brody blinked. “Now that I think about it, you seemed kind of

groggy.”

“Yeah, because I was sleeping!”

“Sorry. I, uh...” He looked around. “Bye.”

And without another word, he opened the door and fled.

I walked out into the hall and watched him disappear into Alistair’s bedroom at the end. After the door slammed, Xander suddenly emerged from the hallway bathroom.

I gave a start when I saw him. He was wearing only a towel, and it was drooping *low* on his hips. He wasn’t as muscular as Chase or Brody, but he had a leanness to him that stirred something inside of me.

Okay, so he looks good even when he’s not wearing a suit. I remembered my dream, the sexy way he had embraced me from behind, holding me close and then sliding his fingers down between my legs...

“What was all the commotion?” he asked.

I shook off my thoughts and considered telling him what had happened. The only thing stopping me was that I felt embarrassed about the whole thing. Which was silly considering I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Nothing. I just had a surprise when I woke up.”

“Rats?”

“I wish.” I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it. I’m fine.”

Xander’s intense eyes studied me, and the bedroom behind me. “If you need anything, anything at all, please do not hesitate to ask.”

I watched him go down the hall and into his own bedroom. He seemed so protective for a few seconds there. In spite of everything, it did make me feel safer. And the corded muscles in his back gave me a mental image that stuck around long after he was gone.

While I took my morning shower in the hallway bathroom, I replayed everything in my head again. Brody’s muscular, hard body. In spite of everything, it felt *good* being on top of him for a few seconds. And the bulge in his underwear...

It’s a shame he’s such an asshole, I thought while toweling off. *The hot guys always are.*

Brody was alone in the kitchen when I went to get coffee. As soon as he

saw me, he immediately blushed and picked up his plate of toast. “I’ll go eat somewhere else.”

“Hold up a minute,” I said. “Why did you want to sleep in my bedroom? And don’t you dare say you wanted to hook up, because I made it very clear I did not want to do that.”

Brody gave me a skeptical look. “You can say that all you want, but I know the way you were looking at me when—”

“Answer my question!” I interrupted. “Why were you sleeping in there?”

He slowly put down the plate. “Because Chase or Xander would give me a lot of shit if I asked to sleep in their rooms.”

“Let’s back up a little further. Why aren’t you sleeping in Alistair’s big bedroom? You know, the one you *insisted* on taking the first day we were here.”

Brody looked down at his plate. His cheeks were still red. Was he actually *embarrassed*?

“Promise you won’t make fun of me?”

“I’m not promising anything,” I said with a laugh. “But if you *don’t* explain yourself, I’ll tell the others what happened, and then you’ll be three times as embarrassed.”

Sighing, Brody said, “Okay, fine. It sounds stupid, but I’m struggling to sleep. The house is too old. The wood creaks at night, and there are weird groaning noises. It really freaked me out last night.”

“You believe in ghosts too?” I asked in disbelief.

“No! But, like... I don’t know. It gives me the creeps. Especially now that Alistair is gone and it’s just us. I know it’s dumb, but sleeping in the same room with someone else last night really helped. Even if you didn’t realize I was sleeping there.”

I stared at Brody, the asshole who had been too preoccupied with surfing to care about his great-grandfather’s will. The guy who was a pharmaceutical salesman, pushing pills for some of the most corrupt companies in the country. He was being totally vulnerable with me now. Despite what had happened this morning, I found myself sympathizing with him.

“I won’t sleep there again,” he said. “I’ll figure something out. Like ordering some sleeping pills. But I won’t freak you out again.”

“Thanks,” I begrudgingly replied. “You know, you’re lucky I didn’t have my knife on me. When I was sleeping in my car, I kept a pocket knife in the console in case anyone harassed me.”

He started to chuckle, then frowned. “You were sleeping in your car?”

Shit. I didn’t mean to let that slip.

“I slept in my car after my apartment flooded,” I lied. “It was only for a few nights until the contractor came and repaired everything. That was a couple of years ago.”

Brody shoved a piece of toast in his mouth. “Well, thanks for not shanking me.”

I poured two mugs of coffee, then took one out to the greenhouse. Chase was bent over a table, facing away from me, pruning a small plant with a pair of gardening shears. I admired him for a few moments as he worked, then loudly cleared my throat.

He turned around, face splitting in a grin when he saw me. “I didn’t hear you there.”

“It’s a good thing I like you,” I said, “because I’ve already threatened to shank one person this morning. You easily could have been my second victim. Then the inheritance would be all mine.”

Chase accepted the mug and cocked his head. “It’s a little early in the morning for threats of violence.”

“You would think so.” I leaned forward and gave him a peck on the lips. “I have a confession to make. I didn’t come here to give you coffee. I just wanted an excuse to kiss you.”

Chase put the mug down on a nearby table and said, “Good, because I already drank three cups this morning.”

He swept me up in his arms, and we shared a long kiss. I explored him with my hands while he held me, running my fingertips over his shoulder blades, feeling the powerful muscles just beneath the fabric of his shirt.

But before we could do more, he let go of me. “I was serious about what I said. Yesterday was fun, but I don’t want to move too fast with you.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling disappointed. “I totally understand.”

“Especially if one of us wins the inheritance and our friendship becomes...

strained.”

“I won’t mind if you win it,” I said. “As long as you don’t screw me over in the process.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “We’ll see.”

An awkward silence grew as we stared at each other. I tried to think of a greenhouse moisture joke, but the coffee hadn’t kicked in yet, so I wasn’t sharp.

“Well, if you don’t need anything else...” I turned, and my arm brushed against a plant on the table. I instinctively jerked it away.

“Careful,” he said. “If you start damaging plants, I’ll reinstate my ban on greenhouse visitors.”

“Sorry. That’s not poisonous, is it?”

“Not even a little bit. That’s a *Livistona Chinensis*. A Chinese Fan Palm. Perfectly harmless.”

“Unlike the one next to it,” I said, remembering what Chase had told me the last time I was in here. “The Fire Lily.”

He smiled. “You were listening. And here I thought you were just trying to flirt with me.”

“A little of column A, a little of column B.” I started to make another joke, but the plants were tickling a memory in my mind. Something about their names...

“What?” he asked. “You have a look on your face like you bit into a lemon.”

“Do you have a copy of the will on you? Mine is back in my room.”

Chase patted the pockets of his overalls, then came out with some folded pieces of paper. I snatched it out of his hand, found the page I wanted, and flattened it on a nearby table.

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds, will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be extinguished and banishing the

cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. And so it is you few, you happy few who shall be rewarded. Now that my soul has departed from my body, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.

“This part here!” I said, pointing. “Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion...”

“The fan in the library,” he said. “And flames is probably another reference to the fire extinguisher.”

“I actually thought it might be referencing one of the fireplaces, but I checked all of them without any luck. But I don’t think that’s what it means.” I pointed to the two plants. “There’s a Chinese Fan right next to the Fire Lily.”

“Fan the flames,” he breathed.

We each lifted up a pot. There was nothing under mine, but taped to the bottom of the Fire Lily was another faded yellow envelope.

CLAUSE 6

“Ah hah!” I said excitedly.

Chase pulled the envelope off the bottom of the pot. “I’m actually kind of embarrassed you figured it out before me.” He began tearing it open.

“Wait! We should show Xander.” After a second, I added, “And Brody.”

“Why should we share the clue with him?”

“He did set up a way for us to watch the funeral,” I replied. “That meant a lot to me. I know it meant a lot to you, too.”

He let out a long sigh. “Okay. Fine.”

Brody was jogging around the house shirtless. When I waved the envelope at him from across the backyard, he immediately turned and sprinted in our direction. We found Xander in the study, examining a copy of the will.

“Guess who found the sixth clause,” Chase said.

“He did!” I quickly said. “Chase figured it out.”

“Nice job, bro,” Brody said as he skidded to a stop in the study. His tan skin was covered in a sheen of sweat. He held out his palm. “Up top.”

Chase hesitated, then high-fived him. We quickly explained the relevant clue that led us to the envelope.

“Plants,” Xander muttered. “Another one of my weak subjects.”

“We chose to gather everyone together before opening it,” I explained. “So, if any of you find a clue in the future, I hope you’ll do the same.”

“Yeah, totally, whatever,” Brody said. “Open it!”

I carefully tore off the edge of the envelope and removed the letter. I smoothed it flat and placed it on the desk so we could all read it at the same time.

Clause 6: Upon my death, I will attempt to make contact from the afterlife. Anyone who records concrete evidence of this will receive the full inheritance and the game will immediately end.

Three of us groaned. Chase’s eyes scanned the clause a second time, and then he slowly raised both arms into the air like he had scored a touchdown.

“LET’S GOOOOOO!”



Robyn

The next morning, I found Xander and Brody sitting at the kitchen table. Brody was pounding a Red Bull while Xander picked at a plate of hashbrowns.

“How’d everyone else sleep?” I asked, stifling a yawn with the back of my hand.

“Better than you, judging by your pandiculation,” Xander replied.

Brody turned his bloodshot eyes toward the lawyer. “Her *what?*”

“Yawning and stretching. It means yawning and stretching.”

“How are you able to pull up such big words after last night?” I asked.

He reached into his pocket and came out with a pair of earbuds. “Noise canceling. Never heard a thing.”

“Ghosts keep you up, too?” I asked Brody.

“No!” he quickly said. Then, glancing at Xander, he added, “It was the ghost *hunter* who kept me up.”

I poured coffee into a mug, gulped down half of it, then refilled it before joining them at the table. “He was really stomping around, wasn’t he?”

“Like a pair of elephants trying new sex positions,” Brody muttered. I laughed at the mental image.

“Where is our ghost buster?” I asked.

“He’s still sleeping,” Xander replied.

“He ought to be,” Brody said. “He was up until four in the morning, running from room to room every time he thought he heard a noise.”

“I’ll admit, perhaps there are things about this world we do not yet understand,” Xander said. “But to make the leap to assume a supernatural source...”

“My mom saw a ghost when she was in college,” I said. “But it was after a party, and she was probably drunk.”

“Not quite supernatural, is that?” Xander said.

“If he does it again, I’m going to break the rule about intentionally harming another member of the game,” Brody said. He downed the last bit of his Red Bull and peered into the mouth as if he wished there was more left. “I need my sleep.”

“Go easy on Chase,” I said. “He’s just excited. He’ll get bored after a day or two when he doesn’t find anything.”

Suddenly, a horn from a big truck honked twice. Then it honked two more times. The three of us got up and went to peer out the window in the foyer. A big white delivery truck was parked outside the gate.

“What in the...” Xander murmured.

A stampede of footsteps came clattering down the stairs. “It’s here! My equipment!” Chase shouted.

“Your *what?*” Brody asked.

Chase threw open the front door and ran outside to open the gate for the delivery guy. The rest of us watched from the porch as the delivery driver wheeled out three wooden crates on a dolly. Chase signed for them, then carried the top crate inside.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I found a shop in Pasadena with everything I needed,” he said excitedly. “They overnighted the equipment.”

“You’re way too cheerful for someone who went to bed four hours ago,” Brody said.

“What equipment?” I asked again.

Chase dropped off one crate inside the foyer and went to get the others. “Ghost hunting equipment. EMF readers, high-definition cameras with night vision, thermal sensors. Everything I need to find proof of Alistair reaching out from the great beyond.”

“You’re joking,” Brody said.

Chase looked serious for a moment. “I never joke about the supernatural.”

“I didn’t think you *actually* believed in ghosts,” Xander said.

“I believe in most supernatural beings. Cryptids too, of course. All the ones we have evidence for, at least.”

“Like the Loch Ness Monster? What evidence do we have to believe he’s real?”

Chase put down the second crate and gave him a smug look. “*He?* Nessy is a girl, Xander. Be serious.”

“Right. I’m the ridiculous one right now.”

“Let him have his fun,” I said as Chase went to get the last crate. “It’s harmless.”

But it wasn’t.

Chase set up all of the equipment in his room upstairs, but it didn’t stay contained there. He began carrying individual equipment items around the house while searching for ghosts. While Brody made a smoothie in the kitchen, Chase videotaped him with a camera. Xander was studying flash cards in the library peacefully, until Chase came in there with a handheld electronic device that made a high-pitched noise whenever he aimed it near an electrical device. Xander moved to the study, and when Chase wandered in there a few minutes later, their argumentative shouts carried throughout the house.

It didn’t bother me, though. I thought it was cute. At least, until he knocked on my door late that evening.

I opened the door. There Chase was, grinning like an idiot. “Hi!” He looked down at me. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“I got in bed a few minutes ago,” I admitted.

“Mind if I check something in your room? It’ll be real quick, I promise.”

Without waiting for an answer, he pushed into my room and turned the lights on. He opened his backpack and began pulling equipment out.

“This is about the time you experienced the noises the other night, right? That means it’s the perfect time to try to reproduce it.”

I stared at the equipment he was laying out on the floor. “What is all of that?”

He picked up the first object and pressed a button to turn it on. A small LCD screen showed a two-digit number. “Thermal sensor. I’m using it to

check for cold spots.”

“So... it’s a thermometer?”

“Well, yes, but... a *thermal sensor* is a version that is a lot more precise,” he explained.

“A lot more expensive, I bet.”

“Totally! This is all state-of-the-art equipment. Okay, I don’t see any cold spots.” He put the thermal sensor down and pointed to each object in turn. “This is an EMF reader. It detects abnormal electro-magnetic fields. That’s a Geiger counter, for radiation. That radio is a spirit box; it scans random frequencies to listen for paranormal sounds. This here is a regular video camera with night vision, which I’ve been using to search for ghost orbs.”

“Ghost orbs?”

“Small floating orbs that have been known to appear near apparitions.” Chase picked up the last item. “And this is an ultraviolet light.” He clicked it on, and a purple circle of light appeared on the wall.

“I don’t think you should shine that in Alistair’s bedroom. Especially next to the big stack of SEARS catalogs.”

“I already made that mistake,” he replied. “It’s like a Jackson Pollock in there.”

“Ugh! Gross!”

“Just kidding. I haven’t gotten to his bedroom yet. I’ve been checking every room methodically, starting on the first floor. Okay, time for the EMF.”

I watched as he held out the EMF reader to the walls, following around the perimeter of the room. It beeped loudly when he got near the writing desk, but Chase explained that it was just the electrical current running to the desk lamp. After that, he looked at the room through the screen of the handheld video camera.

“Last one, I promise. Spirit box.” He closed the door and turned off the light, bathing the room in darkness. Only a faint rectangle of light showed where the window was.

Suddenly there was a crackling of static, like someone turning a car radio onto a dead channel. It wavered up and down in sound and pitch.

“Are you here?” Chase asked with the solemnness of a judge speaking to a

defendant. “Can you hear me?” He paused, waiting for a response. “Were you born in Germany?”

“Were you a Nazi?” I asked.

“Stop joking around,” he hissed at me. His solemn tone returned. “What is your favorite drink? Is it mimosas? Or cognac?”

He turned off the device and flicked the lights on. “All right, no evidence that I can see. But if you hear noises tonight, come get me *immediately*.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “What do I get in return for helping you?”

I meant it in a sexy kind of way, with the hopes that it would lead to us making out, but Chase was totally oblivious. “You get to experience a legitimate paranormal event!” he said while packing up all his equipment. “Come get me *the minute* you hear anything.”

He opened the door and ran into the room across the hall like a kid with a new Christmas toy. *He’s adorable*, I thought as he closed the door, the sound of radio static drifting from the room.

That’s when I realized Brody was standing to my right, watching the whole thing. “It’s not what you think,” I said. “He closed the door to do spooky ghost shenanigans.”

I turned and went back into my room, but Brody followed. “I wanted to thank you for sharing the clue today. The one you and Chase found in the greenhouse.”

I shrugged. “I was afraid it was another underpants-related clause. Opening it with the whole group felt like a safe way to spread the damage around. Now that I’m saying it out loud, I bet that’s why he created that clause in the first place. To make us all share.”

Brody smirked. “He thought of everything.”

“Okay, that’s not why I shared,” I admitted. “I did it because of the funeral. It was really sweet of you to set up that live stream so we could watch. It meant a lot to me.”

“Yeah...” He scratched the back of his neck nervously. “I didn’t want to miss it, either. Like I said, I was close to him.”

If you were so close to him, why didn’t you visit in the last year?

“Hey, I have a favor to ask,” Brody said. He seemed nervous.

“Is it about the clues? Because I promise to share any others we find in the future, as long as you promise to do the same.”

“Nah, nothing like that,” he waved his hand. “I was hoping you’d... let me sleep in here again.”

“What!” I struggled not to laugh. “No way.”

“Aw, come on.”

“There’s nothing you can say that can convince me to let you sleep in here again.” But despite my words, a voice was whispering in my head: *He’s hot. It might be nice having him in the same room. Shirtless. With morning wood.*

He pursed his lips. “You say that you can’t be convinced, but...”

“But what?” I demanded. “What can you possibly say that would make me change my mind?”

Brody glanced over his shoulder, then said, “I know your big secret.”

I felt my body tense up. I had a lot of secrets. Which one did he know?

“I know you’ve been living out of your car.”

My shoulders relaxed. Thank God. That secret wasn’t bad, although it was embarrassing.

“And I know you’ve been living inside the house,” he added.

My heart sank.

“Without Alistair knowing.”

15



Robyn
Three Months Ago

“This has to be a mistake,” I argued outside my apartment. “Why am I just hearing about this now?”

My landlord crossed his arms. He always did that when he was done negotiating. “I gave you plenty of notice about the rent you owe.”

“I told you, I’m scraping it together…”

“You didn’t show up in court last week,” he added. “The judge ruled in my favor for the unlawful detainer lawsuit. And I still gave you plenty of time since then to pay your rent. I’ve been leaving notices in your mailbox every day.”

“You know the mailbox doesn’t lock,” I pleaded. “Someone has been stealing my mail. I haven’t gotten anything in months!”

“Not my problem,” he said with finality in his voice. “You’ve got until the end of the day to get out.”

I spent my drive to work trying to stave off a panic attack. I’d been juggling late rent and overdue bills for awhile, but I never thought I would actually get evicted. I thought I had more time.

I was wrong. I have no more time.

What was I going to do?

The gate to the Schreiber Estate creaked open and I drove inside. I was lucky to have this job, at least. The pay was good, though it was still tough chipping away at my mountain of credit card debt. And like a real mountain, I never thought I would reach the summit.

Who could I even stay with? I used to have a few close friends in Santa Cruz, but I hadn’t spoken to them in months. Not since starting this job,

which took up most of my free time. A hotel was a temporary solution, but I didn't have the money. The last thing I wanted to do was accrue more debt.

"Hey, Robyn."

Chase, the cute gardener, was working in the front bushes. I was so busy thinking about my problems that I hadn't noticed him while walking up to the front door. He was on his hands and knees with his fingers in the soil, pulling up weeds. His warm, open smile gave me a brief reprieve from my financial problems.

"Sorry. I didn't see you there."

"You okay? You seem frazzled."

"I'm fine," I replied a little more harshly than I meant. Chase shrugged and returned his attention to his weeds.

Way to go, Robyn. You just snapped at your crush.

I felt bad about that as I went inside. But then I was thrown another surprise. Chase and I were the only people who regularly visited the Schreiber Estate, so it was a massive shock to see someone new walking out of the study. He was a sharply-attractive man in a three-piece suit, carrying a briefcase. His dark, intense gaze studied me for a moment, then he nodded politely and walked on by. His dress shoes echoed on the foyer's marble floors as he exited out the front door.

I went into the study and asked, "Who was that?"

Alistair Schreiber was sitting behind his mahogany desk. He had thick hair that was mostly white now, though it was scattered with hints of its formerly yellow shade. He had piercing blue eyes that were somehow warm instead of icy. Alistair looked frail in the high-backed leather chair, but he got around the house just fine—when his arthritis wasn't acting up, that is. All things considered, he was in great shape for a man of ninety-nine.

"My new lawyer," he replied in his slight German accent. "Handsome young lad, isn't he?" He punctuated it with a wink.

"What do you need with a lawyer?" I asked. "Are you suing me for the bit of eggshell you found in your omelet last night?"

"I've chosen to forgive that grievous wound to my nutrition," he replied with a warm smile. "It's nothing important. Settling a few affairs. Now tell me, Robyn, what's wrong?"

“Why would something be wrong?”

Alistair gave me a knowing stare. “These eyes don’t see as well as they used to, but they rarely miss a young lady in distress.”

“I’m not in distress. I had a minor argument with my landlord this morning, that’s all.”

“Is there any way I can help?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you though.”

He held my gaze. “Are you certain I cannot assist?”

For a moment, I was tempted to ask him for help. Alistair was like a grandfather to me—or maybe a great-grandfather. But I dismissed the temptation as soon as it appeared.

“I think I’m okay.”

“If you ever need anything,” he said slowly, “and I mean *anything*, you need only ask.” He hopped up from the chair with the agility of a man half his age. It must have been a good arthritis day. “Now, how about a mimosa? I have an entire pitcher, and Chase already declined.”

“You know what? A mimosa sounds wonderful right now.”

We went into the kitchen to get the drinks. Alistair’s hand trembled while he poured from the pitcher. Maybe it wasn’t a good arthritis day after all.

“Cheers,” he said, clinking his glass to mine. After drinking deeply, he said, “Now, if you didn’t fancy that young lawyer who just left, what is your type?”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

He leaned closer. “I have a great-grandson who is a bachelor. He looks like a young me, only *more* handsome, if you can believe it!”

Laughing, I said, “I doubt that’s possible, you silver fox.”

“I’ll give you his number,” Alistair said. “His *digits*, as you kids say these days. Broderick has been too busy with work to come by for awhile, but I’m certain I could convince him if he knew there was a beautiful young woman here.”

“That’s kind of you, but I’m not really looking to date anyone right now.” *I need to get my own life together before I start thinking about a partner.*

The front door opened, and Chase walked down the hall. “The hydrangeas are starting to bloom, Alistair. You were right—they make the front of the house really *pop*.”

“Thank you, my boy—I’ll take a closer look at them during my afternoon walk.”

Chase gave me a small smile, then hurried on.

“Ah,” Alistair said. “I see.”

“See what?”

“Why you are not interested in my handsome great-grandson’s digits. I can tell when a young lady is smitten.”

“Who, Chase?” I laughed nervously. “I’ve barely talked to him.”

“One doesn’t need to talk to get an eyeful,” Alistair pointed out. “And your eyes have been larger than usual, if you do not mind me saying so. Oh, don’t blush! Chase is a stout young man, strong across the shoulders. Quite good looking. And he knows how to get his fingers dirty, if you catch my meaning.”

I gave him a playful glare. “You dirty old man.”

“Guilty as charged! Now, when are you going to flirt with him? The most you two have done is bat your eyelashes at each other for the past seven months.”

“We work together,” I argued. “It might be weird.”

“You work *adjacent* to each other. There is zero weirdness at risk.”

“I don’t have enough free time to date.”

“Then I can call the caretaker agency and have them send someone a few nights a week. That will give you plenty of time. And no, I won’t reduce your billable hours.”

“No!” I quickly said. “I mean, I don’t want you to make any changes to the schedule just for that. I’m happy with how things are going now.”

“If you insist,” he said, white eyebrows climbing up his forehead. “But take it from an old man. Life is short.”

After we finished our mimosas, Alistair poured himself another—while I got myself a mug of coffee instead. Yet I still felt bad about how I had snapped at Chase, so I filled a second mug, too.

“He takes it black,” Alistair said casually from the kitchen table. “Three sugars.”

“Mind your own business, old man,” I said with a laugh.

He held up a palm defensively. “Tell him I like the new vines on the back wall of the house. I opened the window and admired them yesterday afternoon.” He carried his mimosa back into the study.

I found Chase in the greenhouse. He was pruning a beautiful yellow-and-red flower with delicate, precise hands. Without looking up from his work, he said, “I usually don’t allow anyone in here. It’s like my own private country.”

“Even if they come bearing coffee?”

He glanced at me, then took off his gloves. “Temporary entry visas can be granted for coffee imports.” He accepted the mug and took a sip. “Mmm. This is good.”

“Alistair told me how you like it.” I looked down at the surface of my own mug. “I wanted to apologize for snapping at you earlier.”

“It’s okay.”

“I had a rough morning. I don’t really want to talk about it, but I shouldn’t have taken it out on you first thing in the morning.”

Chase smiled. “I shouldn’t have asked before you had your coffee.”

The two of us sort of stared at each other for a few seconds. This was the most we had ever spoken together. Now what? I was so badly out of practice when it came to flirting that I wasn’t sure what to do. The silence dragged on.

“Alistair said he likes the vines,” I blurted out. “The ones on the lattice on the back of the house. I really like them, too.”

“They’re great, right?” He walked out of the greenhouse and gazed up at the big Victorian mansion. “Virginia Wisteria. They can get quite heavy, so I had to order a strong lattice. It’s bolted through the exterior facade and directly into the load-bearing walls. I will still need to maintain the vines, though. They can quickly get out of control and overrun the entire house.”

“Wow,” I said. I was quickly losing my nerve. Chase was so warm, and open, and swoony, and I was thinking about what Alistair said about life being short...

“I need to get to work,” I said, hurrying off to the house.

The last thing I heard him say was, “Thanks for the coffee!”

I went about my daily tasks around the estate. Making Alistair’s bed, tidying up around the study and library. I prepared his lunch, and then dinner—including mixing him a French 75. And then I mixed one for myself.

I helped him take his medication that evening, poured him a glass of bedtime cognac, and then said goodnight for the evening.

“I meant what I said today,” he reiterated while giving me a goodbye hug. “If you need anything, simply ask.”

Still buzzing from the liquor, I considered it. This was a huge house. It had so many empty bedrooms. It wouldn’t be an imposition at all.

But I couldn’t bring myself to ask. I didn’t like handouts. And I didn’t want Alistair to look at me with pity. The lines between my personal and professional life were already blurred too much. Sleeping here would only make it worse.

Not to mention I can’t let him learn who I really am...

I drove back to my apartment and discovered something horrible. All of my belongings were out in the hallway, stacked in boxes or in little piles. My key wouldn’t work on the door; the locks had been changed.

“Fuck.”

It took ten trips to load my car up with everything. That wasn’t including the mattress, coffee table, and other small furniture items that wouldn’t fit in my car. I didn’t have the emotional bandwidth to worry about them right now.

I didn’t want to be there anymore, in the parking lot of an apartment that wasn’t mine, so I started driving. I didn’t know where to go. Hotels were expensive, and I couldn’t afford to rack up any more debt. I could park at the back of a Walmart lot and sleep in my car, but there were a lot of weirdos in that part of town. I didn’t feel safe with that option.

I could call Chase, I thought. He might give me a place to stay. But that was a ridiculous option. Even though I had been crushing on him for months, I could barely talk to him today. Getting his number, and then asking him if I could crash at his place, was like trying to jump all the way to the moon.

Without realizing it, I had driven back to the Schreiber Estate. The driveway was long and wound through a thick forest that surrounded the

property. I parked across from his driveway and decided to sleep in my car. There was nobody else around for miles, so the odds of me being bothered were low.

But the car was too full for me to tilt the seat back. And it was painfully uncomfortable, and warm, even with the windows down.

At eleven o'clock, I had a good cry about my situation.

Around midnight, I became desperate. I threw some clothes in my backpack and walked up the long driveway to Alistair's house. The fence was too high to safely climb, but I was able to open the gate wide enough to slip through without making the hinges creak.

First I tried the greenhouse. But a few minutes after curling up in the corner, four industrial fans turned on and began spraying mist all over the room. With a barely-stifled yelp, I grabbed my backpack and ran outside.

That's when I noticed the lattice on the side of the house. Chase said it was sturdy. Alistair mentioned looking out at it from the window. That window was closed right now, but if he had left it unlocked...

Climbing the lattice wasn't difficult. I used to go to the rock climbing gym, back when I could afford it. The lattice creaked softly as I climbed, but it bore my weight without threatening to break.

And when I reached the window, I found it unlocked. The pane swung inward without a problem.

Whew.

I fell into the room silently. It was a small room, with a double bed and a writing desk, both of which were covered in protective cloth. The wallpaper was a hideous red design, although it was peeling in two places, revealing baby blue paint underneath. I tip-toed over to the closed door and pressed my ear against the thick wood.

The house was silent.

Too exhausted to change into the sweatpants in my backpack, I pulled back the protective cloth and climbed right into bed. One end creaked loudly. I winced and sat very still, listening for any sign that I had disturbed Alistair. But there was nothing. The old man always claimed he could sleep through the end of the world. He must not have been joking.

It's just for tonight, I told myself. Until I figure out what to do.

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**Brody****Present Day**

“It was just supposed to be for one night,” Robyn said defensively. “Until I figured out what to do. But then one night turned into two, then a week, and a month...”

“And now it’s been a whole bunch of months,” I said. “With Alistair still in the dark about the whole thing.”

I wasn’t trying to be a dick about it. Nobody liked being called out on their bullshit like this. But I needed something from her, something she was refusing to give, so I had to bring out the big guns. I wasn’t *actually* going to rat her out. I just wanted to trade favors.

What was wrong with that?

“How did you find out?” she asked in a small voice.

“I’ve been jogging around the house every morning,” I explained. “There’s vines on every wall of this place. They’re growing like fucking *crazy*. But the ones outside this room? They’re damaged. And the paint on the lattice is wearing off. Like someone’s been climbing it. And I know it’s not Chase, because he always uses a ladder to work. That, paired with all the stuff I saw in your car...”

“Shh,” she said, running past me and closing the door. “Keep your voice down.”

“Why have you been doing it all this time?” I asked. “Look, I’m not judging. I’m just curious. Did you enjoy ripping off Alistair? Like how some people get a rush from shoplifting small things from the store?”

“Ripping off—what!” she sputtered. “Of course not! I just...” She sat on the bed and cradled her head in her hands. “Before this job, I was unemployed for a while. I got into a lot of credit card debt. I’ve been

chipping away at it while working and living here. Without paying for rent, it's shrinking much faster. I did the math, and I'm only four or five more months away from paying it all off completely. At least, I was before Alistair died."

That fucking sucks. I got into some serious debt back in college. My buddies were always going out to the bar, and I didn't want to stay home like a loser, so I was racking up huge bar tabs every night. I was lucky to have my parents bail me out, though. It must have sucked not to have that option.

"Why didn't you ask Alistair? He would have let you stay here."

"Because I didn't want any charity!" she said emphatically. "I don't like people looking at me the way you're looking at me right now, like I'm unable to take care of myself. I can do just fine on my own. I don't need someone offering me a bed to sleep on, like I'm homeless."

But you were homeless, I thought. *And you took this bed even though you didn't ask for it.*

"Look," I said. "I don't want to get you in trouble. I don't give a shit that you were staying here. This place is huge, and it's not like you were stealing anything from him." I paused. "You *weren't* stealing from—"

"Of course I wasn't!" she hissed at me.

"Okay, okay. Point is, I don't care. I know a secret of yours, and you know one of mine. That I'm creeped out in this big house and can't sleep. Let's make a trade. I'll keep your secret if you let me crash here on the floor. I won't bother you at all. You won't even know I'm here."

"And if I refuse? You'll tell everyone that I was crashing here?"

When I was a little kid, there was a stray dog that wandered around our neighborhood. I called her Ginger, because she had a rust-colored coat, and because I used to watch Gilligan's Island reruns when I stayed home sick from school. I didn't have any siblings, so Ginger was one of the only friends I had back then. I couldn't bring her in the house because my mom was allergic, and she threatened to call animal control if she ever saw the dog in our yard, so I had to keep Ginger a secret. I made a little bed for her underneath the back deck. I saved up my allowance and bought cans of dog food from the convenience store down the street. Ginger liked the chicken flavor the best, so that's what I always got. Soon, she was coming by my house every day after school, waiting for her meal. She would eat, and then

we would snuggle underneath the deck. And when mom came home, and I said goodbye to Ginger for the day, she would look at me with these big brown eyes.

Eventually, Dad renovated the back deck and Ginger lost her hiding place. I never saw her again after that. It took me a long time to get over her.

Robyn reminded me of Ginger. Was it shitty to compare a grown-ass woman to a dog? Probably. I didn't give a fuck. The way Robyn was staring at me with those big brown eyes tugged at a part of my soul that was reserved for Ginger. Just another stray dog looking for a home.

"I'll do whatever I have to," I lied.

Fortunately, she didn't call my bluff. After a long moment, she sighed and said, "Don't sleep right next to the bed again. I don't want to fall on you if I get up to pee in the middle of the night. And don't be a creep! If I wake up to find you standing over my bed with your dick in your hand, I *will* get that pocket knife out of my car and shank you."

"Message received."

"And I don't want the other guys knowing you're sleeping in here. They might get the wrong idea."

I snorted. "Fuck, do you think I want them knowing about it? That's the whole reason I'm asking to stay with you instead of one of them!"

"Fine," Robyn said.

"Good," I replied.

"Okay, then," she said.

She stood there stubbornly for ten long seconds, then crawled into bed. I opened the closet and removed the pile of blankets and pillows I had stashed there. Robyn grunted, but said nothing.

After finding a comfortable position on the floor, I opened my chess app and started a 15 minute timed match. A few minutes later, I was up a rook on my opponent and tightening the noose around them.

"Learning how to play after inheriting Alistair's chess board?" Robyn asked, disrupting the silence.

"I've been playing since I was five," I replied. "It's kind of a nightly ritual for me. Helps me relax before falling asleep."

It was too dark to see her expression, but I could hear the disbelief in her voice. “Really? You play chess?”

I lowered my phone. “Why? Because you think I’m just some surfer bro pharma asshole?”

“Your words, not mine.”

“Actually, they’re your words. You called me a *surfer bro asshole* the first day we got here,” I pointed out. “What if the roles were reversed? It would be real shitty of me to assume, like, you’re a bad driver or something just because you’re a woman.”

Robyn chuckled and said, “Actually, I am kind of a bad driver.”

“Still,” I said, returning to my chess game. “Not cool.”

“I’m sorry.” Another silence stretched. “Are you any good?”

“My ELO ranking is 2,250.”

“Is that good?”

“Yes. FIDE candidate master, technically.”

“What’s FIDE?”

“I dunno,” I said. “Something French.”

Her face suddenly lit up from the phone screen. She was tapping away with her fingers. “Holy shit! There are only a thousand people in the world with that ranking.”

“Yeah, I’ve got some work to do before moving up to FIDE master.”

“You played with Alistair?”

“He taught me how to play,” I explained. “On that same chess set in the library, the one he left me in the will. Someday, I’ll teach my son to play on it. Or daughter. You ever see that Queen’s Gambit show? That actress is super hot.”

Robyn snorted. “Yeah, sure.”

Shit. Sometimes I spoke without thinking. I didn’t really have a filter. I couldn’t help it. I honestly wasn’t trying to be a dick.

Without warning, there was a loud thumping up the hallway. Footsteps went running past our room, along with the faint sound of clicking.

“Based on the clicking, that’s Chase,” Robyn said, laughing. “He must’ve

heard something that he thinks is supernatural.”

“He’s a funny guy,” I said while moving my King back a space. “Chasing ghosts around the house. Are you and him, like, a thing?”

“What? Chase and I? No, not a thing. Just acquaintances. Or friends. But we hardly know each other. Maybe we’ll go on a date when all of this is over, but until then...”

“Until then,” I finished for her, “you’re rivals for the inheritance.”

“Right.”

“Like me,” I added.

“Like you.”

I didn’t like the way she said *you*, as if I were a bad guy. So I made two more chess moves and then put my phone down again.

“Listen. I’m sorry if I treated you guys like the *help* when I first got here. This has been a lot for me to process. I don’t have any siblings or cousins. My parents are gone. Alistair was my last living relative. Now that he’s dead, I feel a lot more alone than I expected to.”

I sucked in my breath after, like the admission had taken a lot out of me. Shit, it *had* taken a lot out of me. I wasn’t good at being vulnerable around people. I picked up my phone and pretended to focus on the game again.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “What happened to your parents?”

“Died in a car crash,” I replied. “Six years ago, last week. It was right after I graduated college.”

“I’m really sorry. That sucks, Brody.”

“Yeah, it does suck,” I exhaled. “But every year, it sucks a little bit less. I’m all right, now. What about your parents? Why didn’t you decide to go stay with them instead of squatting here?”

“Well, first of all, we’re originally from Denver,” Robyn explained. “I would have had to give up this job and move back home, which I didn’t want to do.”

“I get that.”

“And second... they died when I was eighteen.”

I was so surprised that I dropped my phone. “Oh, fuck.”

“Dad always wanted to see penguins, so he saved up and took my mom on an Antarctic cruise. It took two days of flying just to get to the bottom tip of Chile, and then they got on a boat. The Drake Passage was rougher than normal when they went, for whatever reason. That’s the waterway between South America and Antarctica. Some of the most dangerous waters in the world. They made it there and spent three days seeing the wildlife, but on the way back, their boat capsized and they drowned. It was a long time ago, a few years longer than your parents have been gone, but it still feels... It feels like I just found out. Like the police officer was just at my door.”

Her voice was quavering by the end, and I could sense her trying not to cry. The darkness held a thickness to it as I listened to her breathe.

Finally, I got to my feet. “Get up.”

“I’m fine,” she protested.

“Just do it, okay?”

I heard the rustling of sheets as she got out of bed. The starlight through the window gave me enough light to see the outline of her body in front of me. Slowly, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into a comforting hug.

Robyn was a sexy little thing. I’d have to be blind not to realize it. And her perfect breasts were smashed against my chest while we embraced. But I didn’t notice that right now. Okay, I totally noticed, but I wasn’t thinking about it. I was just trying to be comforting. Because unlike anyone else in this house, I knew exactly how she felt.

“Sorry about your family,” I said. “At least your dad got to see penguins first, right?”

She sputtered a half-laugh, half-cry. “That’s the silver lining I’ve been telling myself for years. He got to see penguins. At least he died after fulfilling one of his dreams.”

“I’m sorry you’re kind of homeless.”

“Thanks.”

“And also that you’re stuck in this house trying to outlast us assholes for the inheritance.”

“You’re not an asshole,” she murmured into my chest.

“Sometimes I am. I’m working on it.”

“That’s good.”

I breathed deeply, and her scent invaded my nostrils. “And if you ever want to forget about everything, we can get drunk and fool around.”

She pushed me away, wiping tears from her eyes. Then she laughed. “Okay, maybe you’re a little bit of an asshole.”

I grinned, even though she probably couldn’t see it. “Like I said. I’m trying to work on that.”

She got back in bed, and I curled up on my little pile of blankets. I hadn’t been paying attention to my chess game, and I had run out of time and lost. But I didn’t really care. There would be other games.

I put away my phone and allowed the sound of Robyn’s breathing to slowly put me to sleep.



Robyn

I thought about Brody as I fell asleep. How he didn't seem like a total douchebag compared to when we met him. He definitely had a softer side to him, one that he tried to hide from most people. But there was nothing soft about his body, hard with muscle and the perfect size to hold me in his arms. For the few seconds we were hugging, I felt like everything was going to be okay.

Stop it, I told myself. I like Chase. I want to be wrapped up in his arms, not Brody's.

But that didn't keep Brody from running through my dreams all night.

My body woke up naturally before my alarm, before the sun was up. A byproduct of sleeping in this room without Alistair knowing: I was always getting up before dawn so I could scurry down the wooden lattice and out to my car before Alistair woke at six. After debating whether or not to go back to sleep, I slowly crawled out of bed. Brody was sprawled out on his back, with one arm tucked behind his head. The position made his bicep flex. His blanket was kicked down around his waist, showing off his bare chest, perfectly sculpted with muscle.

I instinctively looked away, then turned my gaze back to him. Might as well get an eyeful now, while he was asleep. Then it would be out of my system.

But all it made me want to do was tug down the blanket and see if he was wearing those tight boxer-briefs again. I still remembered the way he looked yesterday morning when I accidentally discovered him sleeping in my room, his hard-on creating an unambiguous bulge in the fabric...

I carefully stepped over him and left the room, taking care to close the door behind me so nobody would see him in there. After a quick trip to the bathroom and a shower, I pawed my way downstairs on bare feet.

Xander was awake at the kitchen table, sipping coffee while studying what appeared to be a copy of the will. “Morning,” he said without looking up.

“Good morning to you, too. Trying to decipher more clues?”

“Trying is the key word,” Xander muttered. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I think *cobwebs* is referring to the attic, but I didn’t see anything up there when I was... looking at paintings.”

“Chase and I decided it might also mean the wine cellar,” I replied. “I glanced around the other day, but nothing jumped out. If a clue is hidden inside a wine bottle, then it will take a *long* time to find.”

“Same with the attic. There’s enough junk up there for Alistair to be featured on an episode of *Hoarders*.”

I took a seat next to him with my coffee. “Should we start going through everything up there until we find it?”

“I’d hate to brute-force one of his clues,” Xander said reluctantly. “That’s not in the spirit of the game. Especially if there’s a more specific clue that helps us figure out what we’re looking for.”

“Well, if you *do* figure one out, how about you tell me before the others?” I suggested. “It seems only fair since I’ve been helping you study for Jeopardy.”

He gave me an even look. “That would not be fair.”

“Aw, come on.” He continued staring at me, so finally I gave up and said, “You’re no fun.”

“I’m lots of fun,” he replied. “But I would be a bad arbiter of the inheritance game if I played favorites.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “I wasn’t serious, anyway.”

Xander flipped to the next page of the will. “Sure you weren’t.”

“Seriously. I actually hate charity. I don’t want anyone giving me an unfair advantage. I’m going to win his inheritance without any help.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Chase woke up next and poured himself a bowl of cereal, but he didn’t sit down to eat it. He carried it around the kitchen with his EMF reader, scanning the walls in between spoonfuls of breakfast. I tried not to giggle while watching him juggle the bowl, spoon, and ghost-hunting equipment in

his hands.

“Morning everyone,” Brody said when he came down next. “How did everyone sleep? I slept *great*. Papa Alistair’s bed is really comfortable. Like, better than memory foam. I’m definitely going to sleep there every night rather than switch rooms.” He glanced at me, then quickly looked away.

“Nobody suggested you switch rooms,” Xander said.

“Yeah, nobody cares,” Chase added over his shoulder while investigating one of the GFCI outlets.

I gave Brody a look: *play it cool*. But he didn’t seem to notice.

After breakfast, I tidied up a little bit. Then I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. Without Alistair here, my list of responsibilities was a lot shorter than I was used to.

I went back up to my room, and my gaze was pulled toward the window. Brody was running around the house, and I had a great view from my bedroom window. I watched him make one lap around the house, and then I was swept up by a burst of motivation. I ran out to my car, found one of the cardboard boxes of clothes that I needed, and went back inside to change.

I caught Brody on his third lap around the house. He grinned widely when he saw me, then stopped his watch and planted his hands on his hips. “Look who decided to get some exercise.”

“I haven’t gone for a jog in years,” I admitted. “Is it weird if I run with you?”

“It’d be weird if we were both running around the house separately.” He grinned widely. “It would probably look like I’m chasing you like a fucking stalker.”

Brody claimed that he didn’t change his pace, but I could tell he was slowing down so I could keep up. Even still, I struggled to maintain an easy jog for very long. Within a few minutes, sweat was pouring down my back and I was out of breath. The only thing that kept me going was that I didn’t want to fail in front of Brody.

Why do I care what he thinks now? I wondered. Yesterday, I didn’t give a crap about him.

Was that all it took for my feelings to do a complete 180 on a guy? Learning that his parents were dead? That felt weirdly shallow, but I couldn’t

help that I was more comfortable around Brody than I was when he first arrived at the house.

“It’s been too long... since... I’ve exercised,” I said in between gasps as we rounded the side of the house. “Feels good... to get... my blood... flowing.”

“You’re doing all right,” Brody said. Despite glistening with sweat, he looked like he was barely breathing. “Better than I would’ve expected from someone out of practice.”

The compliment gave me an injection of energy for the next lap.

“If you ever want to get sweaty in *other* ways,” he said casually, “I can help you with that, too.”

I groaned. “There. You ruined it with a stupid joke.”

“Who’s joking?” He turned around and ran backwards in front of me. “We’re stuck in this house together. We’re both attracted to each other—and don’t try to pretend you’re not. Why shouldn’t we kill some time between the sheets?”

“Because I don’t want to,” I replied, even though the sight of him running shirtless in front of me was turning me on more than I expected. “You can sleep on the floor in my room, but that’s it.”

“Is it because Chase is your boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I replied.

“I don’t even mind,” Brody said. “We can have a threesome. I’m down with that.”

That *totally* caught me off guard. Against my will, the mental image slithered into my brain, which in turn reminded me of the dream I had the first night I was here: myself wedged between the two of them. Chase on one side, and Brody’s sweaty, shirtless body on the other...

I shook off the image. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“You sound awfully defensive.”

“We’re friends. We worked together for a while. That’s it.”

Brody smirked at me like he could read my mind. “Sure you are. But if you change your mind, the Brody Bodega is open for business twenty-four seven.” He gestured down at himself, then turned around and continued

jogging normally.

To his credit, he did drop it. We jogged along for two more laps in peaceful silence. He even started shouting words of encouragement over his shoulder at me, telling me to push hard for two more laps.

As we came around the front of the house, we saw a big box truck at the gate. “Great,” I said. “Chase probably ordered more equipment.”

But it was Brody who paused his watch. “Nah, this one’s for me. About time.”

I was grateful for the excuse to take a break. Brody went to the gate and greeted the movers, who opened the back of the truck and began unloading workout equipment. There was a big squat rack, two types of barbells, and then piles of iron plates.

“What’s all this?” Chase asked as he joined us. Xander was coming out of the house at the same time.

“My weights. Gotta keep fit if we’re going to be here a while.”

Chase removed his gardening gloves and tucked them into a pocket. “Are you going to allow this, Xander?”

“Hmm.” The lawyer crossed his arms thoughtfully.

“Why the hell wouldn’t you?” Brody demanded. “You brought three crates of spooky ghost bullshit into the house.”

“Which is directly related to the inheritance, based on the most recent clause from Alistair,” he pointed out. “None of this serves any purpose.”

“It serves the purpose of making me happy.” Brody turned to Xander. “I’ll put it up in Alistair’s old room. It won’t bother anyone.”

“It’s a big house,” I added in his defense. “We could bring in *ten* truckloads of equipment and barely fill any of the rooms.”

Chase rounded on me in surprise. “You’re taking his side?”

“I just don’t think it’s a big deal. And it doesn’t affect us.”

“It will be loud!”

Brody sputtered a laugh. “Won’t be as loud as you running around the house searching for Casper, I’ll guarantee that.”

“I’m going to allow it,” Xander said. “With the caveat that if it becomes a

disruption, you'll take it back.”

Brody pumped his fist. Chase sighed, gave me an unhappy look, and returned to the backyard.

Xander and I helped move all the equipment upstairs into Alistair's room. The bed was neatly made and looked like it hadn't been used in a few nights, but Xander didn't seem to notice. By the time we were done, I was exhausted. Moving the equipment was more of a workout than using it.

I took a nap, then went to see if Chase wanted to play a board game or something. But he declined, insisting that he was close to discovering paranormal evidence on the third floor. Even when I gave him a healthy pout and batted my eyelashes like a cartoon character, he was too preoccupied with the data from his equipment.

I don't want you to play ghosts, I thought unhappily. I want you to play with me.

I came up with a solution that night.

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Robyn

That evening, I cooked one of my favorite dishes: chicken carbonara. I marinated the chicken breasts for two hours before broiling them in the oven, then cooked the pasta, and finally mixed it all together with egg yolks and spices. Then I picked a bottle of wine at random from the cellar and carried it all upstairs. Chase was nowhere to be found on the third floor, but a few noises led me to discover him in the attic. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to a bright camping lamp. The harsh light created a hundred different shadows from all the junk in the attic.

“Brody replaced the light bulb up here,” I told him. “You don’t need to use a lantern.”

“I want to be able to turn it off quickly if I sense anything,” he replied. “Oh! What’s that?”

“A little ghost-hunting meal.” I put the pot on the ground, then began removing plates and silverware from my backpack. “It would be unfortunate if you passed out from lack of nutrition and missed any evidence.”

“You didn’t have to do this.” His stomach chose that moment to rumble. “But I appreciate it.”

“Maybe this is the bottle of wine with another clue in it.” I popped the cork and peered inside. “Maybe not.”

“I guess we’ll just have to drink it instead,” he said with fake disappointment.

I filled two glasses, then doled out pasta onto each of our plates. Chase clinked his wine glass to mine, and then we dove in.

“Wow, this is good,” he said.

“This was a staple of mine for awhile,” I explained. “It’s cheap and easy to make. And it reheats well. Although I splurged and used chicken breasts

instead of chicken thighs.”

Chase was wolfing his down. “Thanks for this. Since my equipment arrived, I’ve been too busy to think about eating.”

“I noticed.” Before I could say more, my phone vibrated with a text message. “Hold on, let me reply to this,” I said.

Brody: How’s it hanging, hot stuff?

Me: I don’t think you know how flirting is supposed to work.

Brody: You should come teach me. I’m up in the parlor shooting some pool. I’d love to bend you over the pool table and give you some lessons.

Brody: And when we’re done, we can play pool.

Me: Okay, that joke actually made me laugh. But I’m still not going to hook up with you.

Brody: That’s fine. But maybe let the idea roll around in your head ;-)

The idea *was* rolling around in my head. A girl could only get propositioned by a guy as hot as Brody so many times before wearing down.

But it wasn’t Brody I was having dinner with right now.

“You probably need a good meal, too,” Chase said, recapturing my attention. “I saw you go for a run with Brody this morning.”

“Yeah! I haven’t done that in at least a year. Probably more like two. I was thinking that while I’m here, I should take advantage of the free time.”

“I’m surprised you can stand being around Brody that long. Did he spend the whole time flirting with you?”

“He’s not that bad,” I replied. “He was a total douchebag when we all first got here, but he’s getting better. He actually plays chess, and he’s ranked highly. And remember the funeral? That was really nice of him.”

Chase took a bite of food. “You sound like you like him.”

I put down my fork and glared at Chase. “Are you jealous?”

“No!” he replied instantly. “Not jealous. Just surprised. Especially how you defended all the junk he had delivered today...”

“You had stuff delivered first,” I pointed out. “I don’t care if he brings his

workout equipment into the house. Look at it this way: the more time he spends pumping iron, the less time he'll spend annoying us."

"You make a very good point."

I studied him in the semi-darkness. "You're totally jealous, aren't you?"

"Not really. I just noticed you two hanging out a little bit."

"I'd be hanging out with you instead," I said, "but you've been too busy running around the house looking for ghosts."

He glanced up at me. "Have I really been that annoying?"

I hesitated.

"Aw, come on. I haven't been running around the house too much!"

"You've definitely been running," I said with a laugh. "I haven't minded, but you've reminded me of a kid on Christmas morning, eager to play with his new toys."

"All right, sorry. I've always believed in the supernatural, but I've never had a chance to search for actual ghosts! Knowing Alistair is trying to make contact from the great beyond makes this a once in a lifetime opportunity."

"Have you found any signs yet?"

"No," he said glumly. "Maybe Alistair isn't trying hard enough."

"Or maybe," I said gently, "there's no such thing as ghosts?"

He shrugged his shoulders and focused on his wine and food.

"Aw, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to shoot you down."

"I know," he said. "I'm beginning to doubt if there are any ghosts here, too. I just don't want to admit it yet. I can understand why you guys are annoyed with my search."

"I'm not annoyed," I replied. "I just... I was hoping you and I would spend some more time together."

"You want to help me?" he asked hopefully.

"That's not what I meant. I was thinking more along the lines of what we did in the greenhouse the other day. Your ghost shenanigans has gotten in the way of us..."

"What?" he asked, eyes wide and intense in the lantern light. "Gotten in the way of us *what*?"

I remembered the way Chase had been so assertive in the greenhouse, how much it had turned me on. It was my turn to repay the favor.

Pushing aside the empty plates, I crawled into Chase's lap. I cradled his head in my hands, fingers lacing into his messy brown hair. The kiss was gentle, unhurried. A thing of care rather than passion.

"I know you said you don't want to rush into things," I explained. "But we finally had dinner together. That definitely counts as a date."

"You make a very compelling point," he replied.

"Want to come downstairs?" I whispered while planting another kiss on his cheek. "I'm sure the ghosts can wait."

His smile was wolfish. "I don't want to go downstairs."

I started to feel disappointed, but then he pushed forward until I was falling onto my back. His lips connected to mine with magnetic attraction as he smothered me with his body.

"What if they hear us?" I breathed. "We heard Xander up here the other day..."

Chase cupped my chin in a strong hand. "Then you'd better be silent."

He kissed me harder than I had kissed him. Like he was proving something to me. All of my doubt and self-consciousness disappeared under his touch with the way his lips slid against mine, warm and wet and hungry. I parted my lips and he slid his tongue inside my mouth, dancing and twirling against my own tongue. A moan escaped my lips and into his, and his hard chest rumbled with silent laughter.

"What?" I demanded.

"I just never thought I would actually be doing this." He paused. "Robyn. This isn't a mistake, is it? If you don't want to do this..."

"Yes," I gasped, kissing him again. "More than anything I want this. *This.*"

I clawed at his shirt and pulled it over his head. I knew he was strong, but his clothes always concealed just how much muscle he had. And let me just say: he had *plenty* of muscle. Layers of it. The harsh light of the lantern showed every nook and cranny of his upper body as his shirt fell to the floor.

Maybe we shouldn't do this, a voice whispered in my head. I couldn't tell if it was cautioning me, or egging me on. *The two of us shouldn't be doing this.*

Not until the inheritance game is over.

But that's what made it so delicious.

I could feel the desire in his fingertips as he pulled off my jeans, then my panties. Our lips remained locked together as he scrambled to remove his own pants, revealing bare skin underneath. Chase went commando. That was a fun new factoid to learn.

"I don't have a condom," he suddenly said.

"I'm on the pill," I replied eagerly.

"What about—"

"I'm clean," I breathed, pulling him into me.

"Me too."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Chase crushed his lips against mine, then began repositioning himself.

"Shh," I said as his elbow knocked the wood floor. "They'll hear us."

"I know how to fix that."

Before I could catch a glimpse of his cock, he lifted me off the ground and into his arms. I wrapped my legs tightly around him, causing his cock to brush against the underside of my ass. I shivered at the touch even though his hard length practically radiated heat. I wanted it inside me, spreading my lower lips and plunging deep into my pussy...

And then it did.

He guided it in, and there was zero resistance. I was too wet for that. The full girth of his cock slid into my pussy like it belonged there. I tightened my legs around his waist and pulled myself against him, clutching his strong body like I was terrified of letting go. We moaned together, the kiss pausing so the sound of our mutual ecstasy could echo through the attic. The expression in his eyes was pure bliss, and I knew mine looked the same.

"I've been thinking about you since the greenhouse," he said.

"I've thought about you every day since I started working here," I revealed.

"I've fantasized about making love to you in the greenhouse," he said, beginning to move his hips.

"I had a dream you took me from behind in the library."

He grinned. “Really?”

I craned my neck back, then nodded. “Bent over the leather chair.”

The admissions felt like we were sharing notes from our personal diaries. All this time we had been fantasizing about the same thing without knowing it.

He gripped my thighs tightly and began thrusting up into me. Lifting me off his hard length, then lowering me back down. Impaling me on his thick cock. After so long without sex, it felt better than I ever remembered. Like the nerve endings in my inner walls were bright and new, and he was caressing every one in just the right way. He kissed me again so hard that a lock of brown hair fell across his face. It slid across his eyes and tickled my face, and he had to toss his head to gaze into my eyes again.

I draped my arms around his neck as he backed me up against a stack of old boxes, and then began pounding me against them. With my legs still wrapped around his waist I was able to move my thighs, throwing my sex down against him with each thrust. Fucking him as much as he fucked me. He moved one hand from the underside of my thigh to the back of my head, taking a handful of hair and giving it a gentle, possessive squeeze. Letting me know that even if it was just for now, here in the attic, I was his.

I can't believe this is happening. Chase and I are finally having sex.

Neither of us lasted long. The situation was too perfect for us, too similar to the fantasies that had been swirling in our heads. The angle of his cock pushed hard against my forward walls, bringing on a sudden, intense climax. I clenched my eyes shut as my body was electrocuted with pleasure, intensified by his increased strokes slamming up inside of me and the way he gripped my hair tighter. He wasn't far behind me, fingers digging into the skin of my thigh as he fucked me as hard and fast as he could, a bead of sweat running down the side of his sexy face.

My body surged upward with need, back arching, and then Chase's eyes widened. The muscles in his neck and shoulders strained, veiny under the effort, and his mouth fell open in a silent cry of bliss.

I kissed him as his cock trembled and spasmed, shooting his load deep inside me. I clenched my lower lips around his shaft as tight as I could until he finally grew still, and then I collapsed into his arms, happy and safe.

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Chase

I had never come so hard in my life. I know people said that sometimes after sex, but it was one hundred percent the truth as I clung to Robyn in the attic. She looked so beautiful in the light from the lantern, round eyes and full lips and warm flesh gripped tightly in my palm. I had come so hard that my cock *literally* ached. In a good way.

It's a good thing she came, too, I thought. *Because I didn't last very long.*

I started to put her down, but she grunted unhappily and kissed me again. We kissed for awhile against the stack of boxes until I went soft inside of her. Only then did I put her down.

"You're not going to judge me, right?" she asked. "For demanding we have sex without protection..."

"Absolutely not," I said, cupping her cheek. "I was thinking it, but didn't want to be presumptuous."

"I've only had sex with two guys before you," she admitted. Her face took on a vulnerable look. "We always used protection. That was the first time I've ever..."

"Me too," I revealed. "Three women, never without protection. None of them were on the pill."

She molded her semi-nude body against mine in a hug. "I have to admit: I like it better without anything between us."

I snorted. "Are you kidding? That felt amazing for me. I'm never going back again." I suddenly regretted the comment, and quickly added, "I mean, I totally will. I don't want to be one of those assholes who refuses to wear a rubber just because—"

"Shh," she said, pressing a finger to my lips. "I know what you mean."

We both got dressed. Once my pants were back on, I rolled my arm in the

shoulder and stretched it.

“You okay?”

“I’m a little sore from holding you up,” I admitted. “Not because of your weight, that is! Because I’ve never done that standing...”

“Shh,” she said, pressing her finger to my lips exactly like she had done a few seconds ago. “I know what you mean.”

“Brody’s equipment isn’t necessary,” I said. “We can keep doing *that* and get a good workout.”

Robyn giggled. It was a high-pitched, carefree sound. She hadn’t giggled much since Alistair died. It was nice to hear it again.

“Want to hang out and listen for ghosts with me?” I asked. “Since Alistair was an old pervert, maybe he’ll respond to a woman’s presence.”

“I should probably get back downstairs and share the food with Xander and Brody,” Robyn said sadly. “Otherwise they’ll wonder why I only made dinner for you.”

“Good point,” I said, hiding my disappointment.

“On that note,” she added, “I don’t want them to know about... us. Because of the inheritance stuff. It would make it seem like it was you and I against Brody. So let’s keep *this* a secret.” She pointed back and forth between us.

“Agreed,” I said. “Although, what is *this*?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. Then she smiled brightly. “I guess we’ll figure that out when we eventually get out of here. And maybe have some fun in the meantime.”

“No obligations or expectations,” I said. “Something casual.”

“I agree to these terms.” She shook my hand. “Especially since you’re going to be really unhappy when I win the inheritance.”

I barked a laugh. “I’m glad you’re making jokes. Because when *I* win the inheritance and buy a private island, you’re probably not invited.”

Robyn gasped. “Even if I make you dinner and let you fuck me?”

“*Maybe* I can allow a temporary visitor’s pass to my island.”

“A sex visa!” she said.

The two of us laughed together, then hugged. We shared another kiss, and

then Robyn collected the plates and glasses.

I hope these are just jokes, I thought while watching her leave the attic. I hope the inheritance doesn't actually get between us.

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Robyn

I was in a giggly mood for the rest of the evening. Xander commented on it at dinner. Brody mentioned it while curling up to go to sleep on the floor of my bedroom. Both times I shrugged it off and made an excuse about how I was finally getting used to living here.

I can't believe Chase and I slept together.

It had been a while. Too long, most women would agree. That probably skewed how hot the whole thing was. Like finally sinking your teeth into a cheeseburger after a two-week juice cleanse.

But oh baby, it was hot. The way he held me in the air and pounded me against the boxes. Squeezing my hair in his fist as he exploded inside me, shivering with release. Kissing me like he was dying. Just thinking about it as I fell asleep made me want to do it again.

I knew that there was a giant elephant in the room, though. The inheritance. We made jokes about it, some light teasing, but what would happen when one of us *actually* won it? Would he be upset if I beat him? What about if the reverse was true? I thought I could handle the emotional blow of losing out on millions of dollars... but I wasn't positive. And that was ignoring that even if one of us *was* okay with losing, there would be a huge relationship imbalance. Chase would have tens of millions of dollars...

And I will still be homeless.

Brody was already awake and gone when I woke up the next morning. I shoved all his blankets and pillows into the closet and took a shower. I was sore; both sexually *and* physically. The minimal amount of jogging I had done yesterday was apparently too much for my out-of-practice body.

Xander and I ordered more groceries for the house, and then I vegged for awhile watching *Real Housewives of Atlanta* upstairs in the theater room. I

knew it was garbage television, but it was mindless and helped me relax. Since working for Alistair, I hadn't had a lot of time to myself. It was nice to be able to sit down and do nothing.

Well, I didn't do *nothing*. I pulled out my copy of the will and searched for more clues. *Drink my favorite drink* kept popping out at me, so when I finished the episode I was on, I started looking around. I checked every liquor bottle in the parlor on the third floor without any luck. I also took a long look at the sketch on the wall, but nothing came to me.

Chase thought he liked mimosas, while I was certain Alistair's favorite drink was a French 75. Both contained champagne, so I retrieved the bright LED lantern from the attic and went down to the wine cellar. The section devoted to sparkling wines was in the back corner, less dusty than the other areas. There were exactly eighty-two bottles of champagne and sparkling white wine, on racks and in boxes. I knew that because I checked every single one, inspecting the labels for clues before holding the bottles up to the bright lantern to ensure nothing was floating inside.

So much for that idea.

While carrying the lantern back to the attic, I heard the sound of exertion coming from Alistair's bedroom. "Chase?" Brody called out. "Or Xander?"

"They're both outside. It's just me."

"You'll do. Come here a sec?"

"I'm not hooking up with you, Brody."

"It's not that," he replied. "I promise. Just come here?"

What does he need me for? I wondered. I walked into the bedroom, glancing at the oil painting of Alistair above the bed. Its eyes were closed, something that always weirded me out. Accidentally closing your eyes during a photograph made sense, but while posing for an oil painting?

Brody was laying on the workout bench, gripping a barbell heavy with plates. The barbell was still racked.

"Come spot me?" he asked.

"Me?" I asked while approaching. The room held the faint scent of sweat and manly musk. Something tingled inside me. "I'm not strong enough to spot you."

"Sure you are. If I say the word, grab the bar and help put it back on the

rack. Ready?”

I was *not* ready as Brody unracked the barbell. All the corded muscles in his arms went taut with the effort of merely holding the weight in the air. He let out his breath, sucked in another one, and then lowered the weight to his chest. He did four reps, bench pressing the weight with noticeable effort, then began a fifth one. Halfway through the push, his arms began trembling and the bar stopped moving. Brody clenched his teeth and his face went red from the effort.

“Okay,” he squeaked out. “Help.”

I grabbed the bar and pulled it vertically. Despite the numerous plates attached to the bar, I was able to lift it easily the rest of the way and move it back onto the rack. I stared at my hands afterward.

“How...”

“I don’t need much help,” Brody said, sitting up and sucking on a water bottle. “When I stalled out, I was *right* on the edge of completing the rep. All I needed was a tiny amount of extra force to get over the hump.”

“I felt like the Hulk!” I said. “And not the wimpy Edward Norton one. The original one, with Lou Ferrigno.”

“Sick reference,” Brody said with a grin. “I’m more of a Mark Ruffalo guy myself. Mind spotting me for two more? You get to admire all of this goodness,” he gestured at himself, “and I promise not to hit on you.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

I helped him on his second set, then the third. Each time, he failed on the fifth rep. “Sorry you couldn’t do it,” I said when he was done.

Brody got up and wiped his face with a towel. “Sorry? I’m not. If you’re not failing, you’re not challenging yourself enough.” He took a long gulp from his water bottle and then pointed at me. “Come running with me again tomorrow?”

Laughing, I replied, “I’m not sure you can call what I did *running*.”

“Okay, how about this. I’ll go for a run, and you can painfully limp next to me while moaning in pain.” He grinned a salesman’s grin. “I promise it’ll be easier than it was yesterday.”

“Yeah,” I found myself saying. “You’re on.”

“Oh, one more thing,” he said, rising from the bench and looming over me.

“Yes?” He smelled like sweat and musk and iron, an intoxicating combination to go with the beautiful tapestry of muscle and strength that encapsulated his entire essence.

“Want me to pin you to the wall,” he said in a deep whisper, “and do terrible, wonderful things to your body?”

The offer made my legs weak. A voice inside my mind was screaming, *YES, GOD YES, LET HIM DO THAT RIGHT NOW PLEASE*. It was tempting.

I just barely managed to collect myself enough to respond, “I thought you promised not to hit on me.”

“That was during the workout,” he replied. “That’s over. This can be our cool-down, although I can promise it won’t be cool. It will be *very* hot.”

It took every ounce of my willpower to roll my eyes at him and leave the room. I heard him chuckling behind me.

As I walked out of the bedroom, Chase was coming up the stairs at the end of the hall. He slowed down when he saw me. “What’re you up to?” he asked, glancing at Alistair’s room.

“Brody needed a spotter,” I quickly explained.

“Ah.” Chase still looked skeptical. Or maybe jealous. “He’s probably better off asking me or Xander.”

“You would think so, but I helped him just fine.” I flexed one arm playfully. “Besides, would you have said yes if he asked you?”

“Good point.” He finally smiled. “I was beginning to give up on searching the house for paranormal evidence. I checked every room without any luck. But then I realized: I didn’t look outside! So now I’m taking everything into the greenhouse.”

“If Alistair did want to prove to you that he could reach out from beyond the grave, he would do it in the place you spend most of your time,” I said.

“Exactly! Why didn’t I think of that before?” He jerked his head. “Help me with some of this?”

I followed him into his room, and then he did something unexpected: he grabbed me with both hands, pinned me up against the wall, and kissed me

harder than he had last night. All thoughts of Brody disappeared from my mind while I was trapped between Chase's hard body and the wall, kissing him passionately.

"I didn't actually need any help," he breathed, nose brushing against mine as our faces remained close. Intimate. "I just wanted to do that."

"I'm glad you did."

He cupped my cheek and gave me a softer kiss than before, eyes softening with a smile. Then he pulled away and began gathering his equipment.

As I left his room and went downstairs, I thought about the expression on his face when he saw me coming out of Alistair's room. And the way he threw me up against the wall like he absolutely had to have me that moment without delay. He was definitely jealous.

Maybe a little jealousy is a good thing.

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Robyn

The next two days, I fell into a nice rhythm. I woke up and went jogging with Brody while he shouted encouragement at me. I tidied up around the house and vegged during the days, then watched Jeopardy with Xander in the evenings. They were beginning to feel like my friends. Or maybe it was more accurate to call them *dorm-mates*, the way we all had our own bedrooms but shared common areas. I had never been to college, so I was going off of how college dorms were portrayed on TV and in movies.

But while the rest of us were struggling to find ways to fill our time, Chase had too much to do. Between maintaining the lush greenery on the estate, working on his coding job, and searching for evidence of the paranormal, he didn't have much free time at all. We hadn't hooked up again, or even so much as kissed. I tried not to take it personally, but I couldn't help but wonder if he regretted sleeping with me.

It's not that, I told myself. He's just busy.

Meanwhile, Brody was continuing to tease me with text messages throughout the day.

Brody: Five minutes with me and you won't care about the inheritance at all.

Me: Five minutes? I wouldn't brag about your inability to last very long.

Brody: Five minutes is just for the first two orgasms. The other three come in the next five minutes.

Me: LOL, there's no way anyone can have five orgasms in ten minutes.

Brody: That's weird. Every woman I've ever been with has come at least that much. Sometimes more.

Me: I'm sure the girls you sleep with are very good at faking it.

Brody: If you say so. If you ever want to put it to the test, you know where I am. And I have a LOT of free time on my hands to spend on your body ;-)

It didn't feel pushy or inappropriate. It was fun and playful now, especially since we were sharing a room at night. As much as he poked and prodded via text message, he never made me feel uncomfortable in my bedroom at night. And for that, I was appreciative.

Although a small part of me wanted him to be more assertive at night. That same part of me desperately wanted to say yes.

Xander and I watched Jeopardy together on his laptop in the library that evening while eating Thai takeout. He had a special notebook which he used for keeping track of what he called his *Coryat Score*, which apparently was a way of gauging an individual's performance while playing along at home.

"I don't know how you can store so much information about *rocks* in your head," I said after Xander got every question right in that category.

"There are several hints in every single answer," he explained. "By itself, I don't know what the most common type of rock in Indonesia is, but the clue referenced volcanoes, which led me to *igneous* rocks."

"Ahh, I see." I shoveled another spoonful of chicken korma into my mouth. "I miss Alex Trebek. These two new hosts aren't the same."

"Ken is much better than Mayim," Xander immediately replied. "He understands the flow and beats of the game. Mayim pauses too much to wait for the answers." He glanced at me. "But you're right. They're not the same as Alex."

"Oh!" I said, pointing at the screen as the Double Jeopardy round began. "There's a category about presidents! Every time you get one wrong, I'm going to throw a piece of chicken at you."

Xander gave me an even look. "You wouldn't dare get chicken sauce all over my suit."

I scooped up a piece in my spoon and aimed it like a catapult. "Try me. No pressure."

Despite my threat, Xander ran the category on presidents. In fact, he got most of the questions in Double Jeopardy right. I pretended to be disappointed when I didn't get to throw food at him, but deep down I felt

satisfied. I had helped him study, after all.

During the next commercial, Xander finished his food and put his plate aside. “I keep thinking about that night. When Alistair died.”

I felt my body tense up. “Oh?”

“Why did he come down to the library?” Xander wondered out loud.

“I’ve been wondering the same.”

“Did he ever eat late at night? Midnight food cravings?”

“Definitely not,” I replied. “Alcohol obviously didn’t bother him, but he couldn’t eat anything two hours before bed. It would give him awful heartburn.”

Xander crossed one leg over the other and tapped his fingers on his knee. “Then I’m really confused. There was a bag of potato chips in here. When they found him, I mean.”

My throat was tightening up. *It’s all my fault.* “I don’t know. Who found him, anyway?”

“He had a fancy life alert watch,” Xander explained. “It monitored his vitals around the clock. When it stopped detecting a pulse, it automatically notified first responders.”

“Oh.”

“I still wonder about the chips. Is there some sort of disease that gives you an intense food craving? Like an aneurysm or something? I guess we’ll know whenever the autopsy comes back...”

I felt tears welling in my eyes as I thought about that night. I turned away and blinked rapidly, trying to banish them before Xander noticed.

“Robyn? Are you okay?”

Damnit. Too late.

“There’s something in my eye.”

“But Final Jeopardy is about to start...”

I quickly got up and left the library. When I reached the bathroom on the first floor, I stopped holding back and allowed the tears to flow. I timed myself on my phone: five minutes. I would give myself five minutes to grieve and feel guilty about the whole thing, and then I would go back to

acting normal.

But when I came out of the bathroom, Xander was standing there. “Meet you in the kitchen? I think I found another clue.”

I went in there and grabbed a bottle of Budweiser from the pack in the fridge. I had already drank half of it by the time Brody and Chase arrived, with Xander close on their heels.

“Another clue?” Brody asked while grabbing a beer of his own. “Spill it.”

Chase glanced at his watch. “I hope it won’t take long. I’m behind on my coding project and might have to pull an all-nighter.”

“It may be a clue,” Xander said, glancing briefly at me. “I am not sure yet. But since the day we all arrived, one of us has been acting strangely.”

“No kidding,” Chase said, purposefully not looking at Brody.

“Strange how?” Brody asked.

“Picking Alistair’s bedroom to sleep in,” Chase said. “Moving in a bunch of workout equipment. Acting like Alistair didn’t matter to you, then turning around and claiming to the rest of us that you were close with him.”

“Brody is grieving in his own way!” I said. “I don’t think we should judge him solely on that.”

“Indeed, we should not.” Xander placed both palms on the kitchen island and gazed at me intensely. “Besides, it was not Brody to whom I was referring.”

Brody frowned at me. Chase did the same. “You don’t mean...”

“Since the day we all arrived, Robyn has been more emotional about Alistair’s death,” Xander explained.

“What? Me?”

“Grief is normal, and everyone processes it differently,” he went on. “So I didn’t think anything of it. But then I realized it wasn’t grief for Alistair specifically. Or at least, not *just* that. You are especially triggered whenever the night of Alistair’s death is mentioned.”

“I am not!” I protested.

Xander aimed a finger at me. “It has happened four times. I’ve taken note of each incident.”

“What are you accusing her of?” Chase demanded.

“Robyn was here the night Alistair died.”

“Of course she was,” Chase said. “She was working. Like any other night.”

“I don’t mean during the regular hours,” Xander clarified. “Robyn left at her usual time, and then, for some reason, she returned. She climbed the vines on the back wall and entered the house through the small bedroom window. And this was not the first time she had done that. She was living in the house for an extended period of time.”

I turned to Brody and said, “You promised not to tell anyone!”

He held up his palms. “I didn’t say shit.”

“Robyn,” Chase said. “Is this true?”

I couldn’t bear his betrayed eyes, so I focused on Xander instead. “How did you know?”

“I saw the belongings in your car. And the way you immediately selected that room, the smallest in the house. Which also happened to be the one with a trail of crushed vines leading to it. It was quite obvious.”

“Aw, man,” Brody said. “I thought I was smart for figuring it out.”

“That’s why the vines were damaged?” Chase asked. “Robyn…”

“I don’t care if you were squatting here while Alistair was alive,” Xander said, like a lawyer finishing his closing statement. “But I know you were here the night Alistair died. And I think something happened that you aren’t telling us.”

My eyes were shimmering. Somehow, I kept from outright bawling. Probably because of the five minutes I had allowed myself. I finished the rest of my beer in two long pulls. Brody retrieved another from the fridge and tossed it to me.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll explain what happened.”

“Robyn, you don’t have to do this,” Chase said.

“I want to. I need to.”

Despite what I said, it took me several seconds to collect myself. And half of the second beer. It wasn’t easy with three sets of eyes all focused on me like I was a murderer.

“The day Alistair died, he ordered something special for dinner. Expensive steak filets from some Mediterranean island.”

“Wait a minute,” Brody said. “Are you talking about Malta Beef?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

He gasped. “Malta beef is the most expensive meat in the world. It’s a thousand dollars an ounce. It makes Kobe beef look like two-day-old McDonald’s.”

“How do you know this?” Chase asked.

“I’m in pharma sales,” he replied. “I’m used to wining and dining doctors. I can’t believe you got to cook Malta Beef! Did it smell amazing? Describe it to me in explicit detail.”

“I got to eat it, too,” I said. “Alistair ordered two filets. It was okay, I guess.”

Brody almost choked on his beer. “Okay? The finest steak in the world was *just okay?*”

“Please continue,” Xander told me.

“He ordered this fancy steak for dinner. I cooked it with roasted potatoes and asparagus. Alistair wanted his cooked medium rare. But I usually cook my steak well done. I was distracted, and forgot to take his steak off early.”

Now Brody did begin coughing on his beer. “YOU COOKED MALTA BEEF WELL DONE?”

“Settle down,” Chase said.

“I can’t be in the same room as you,” he said, and began pacing around. “She gets a chance to cook the Lamborghini of steaks and she cooks it well done. That’s like using the Mona Lisa as toilet paper...”

“When Alistair cut into the steak,” I continued, “it was gray all the way through. That’s when I realized I had screwed up.”

“Did he get mad?” Xander asked carefully.

“No! That’s the worst part. He smiled and said it was perfect, but I could tell he was disappointed. He picked at his food. I later found most of the steak in the trash.” My eyes began shimmering again. “It was a special dinner, and I ruined it. If I had known it would be his last meal... I would have put more care...”

Chase came around the island and put a hand on my back. “Are you happy now? She’s crying.”

“It technically was not his last meal,” Xander said. “He went down to the library and ate a big bag of potato chips later that night.”

“Yeah,” I said while wiping my eyes. “He was starving because I screwed up his dinner.”

“All right, that’s enough,” Brody said. “We don’t need to keep interrogating her.”

“Actually, I have several more questions,” Xander said.

“Give it a rest!” Chase snapped. “This isn’t a murder trial.”

Murder. The word hung in the air. Was that what Xander thought? That I had murdered Alistair?

“How often did Alistair have steak for dinner?” Xander asked.

“Robyn, you don’t have to—” Chase said.

Xander cut him off with a hand. “This is important. Please answer the question.”

“Never,” I said. “That’s the only time since I started working here.”

“Right. Because you always made him breakfast for dinner.”

“Exactly.” I let out a pathetic snuffle. “And because I ruined it, he ate a whole bag of potato chips. Which usually gave him heartburn. I’m probably the one who killed him.”

Brody gave a start. “Wait a minute.”

Xander was nodding. “Eleven months you worked here, making nearly all of his meals. And he ate breakfast foods every single night. Except *that* night.”

Chase’s jaw hung open. “You don’t think...”

“Alistair requested the most expensive steak in the world that night,” Xander said dramatically, “because it was a special night to him. Because he *knew he was going to die.*”



Chase

There was a lot of information flying around. Stuff about Robyn, and Alistair, and the night that he died. But it was the final conclusion Xander came to that really shook me to my core.

“Alistair knew he was going to die?” I said in disbelief.

“No...” Robyn said, shaking her head. “He couldn’t have...”

“And you were sleeping here,” I said. “In the house with him.”

“What does this mean?” Brody asked. “Did Papa Alistair... end his own life?”

“I don’t know,” Xander admitted. “But as I said earlier: Robyn was in the house when he died.”

“But I wasn’t!” she said, wiping away tears from her eyes.

“Why not?”

“I tried to get back inside. I said goodnight to Alistair, then left the house and locked the front door. Then I drove my car to the end of his driveway, parked in the woods, and came back. Like I did every night. But when I climbed the vine lattice up to the bedroom, the window was locked. I don’t know *why* he suddenly decided to lock that window, after I had been leaving it unlocked for three months, but it was. And when I returned to the ground, I realized the light was on in the library. I peered through the window and saw him sitting in the chair, drinking his cognac while typing at the typewriter. I don’t even know how he got down there; his arthritis was so bad the last three days that I had to help him up and down the stairs. It took *twenty minutes* to get him up to bed the night he died, and somehow he’s back down in the library? Regardless, I knew I couldn’t sneak back in the front door without him seeing or hearing me, so I went back to where my car was parked and slept there.”

“I remember now,” I said. “The morning we came here for the reading of the will. You looked like you had slept rough. I think I commented on it.”

She shrugged. “That’s the reason why. When I learned his body was found in the library, I felt even *more* guilty. How did he get down there? Did he need my help? What if I had slept in the house like I normally did? Maybe I would have heard him call out for help. Or something...”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Brody said, giving her a pat on the back. “He was ninety-nine. I doubt there was anything you could do.”

The sight of him comforting her made me tense. “I can’t believe it,” I said.

“I know. If we had only known...” she said.

“No, I mean I can’t believe you were hiding all these secrets,” I said. “You saw him the night he died, in the room where his body was found. You kept this from us. Did you keep it from the police, too?”

“I didn’t feel the need to mention it. Me seeing him didn’t affect anything...”

“Is there anything else about that night you haven’t told us?” Xander asked. “Any other detail you have left out?”

Robyn shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

Xander narrowed his eyes like he didn’t believe her, but he said nothing.

“How did he know?” I wondered. “That it was going to be his last day.”

“Maybe it’s like cats. Don’t they, like, wander off when they know they’re about to...?”

“Perhaps,” Xander said. “Or perhaps he accelerated things himself. We will not know for certain until we receive the results of the autopsy.”

I was feeling overwhelmed, so I excused myself and returned to the greenhouse. All of my ghost hunting equipment was still in there, so I spent fifteen minutes checking the readings and repositioning them. The battery in the EMF reader was low, so I replaced that, too.

I ran through everything we had learned tonight. Robyn was homeless, and had been squatting in the mansion for three months. She was here the night Alistair died, and even saw him in the library. And based on his final meal, he probably knew he was going to die.

It was a lot of new information to process. I had no idea what to make of

Alistair requesting a special meal. I respected his decision to end things on his terms, if that was in fact what happened. But everything regarding Robyn...

“Knock knock.” Robyn was suddenly in the greenhouse doorway. “I know I don’t have to say that, I can just knock instead. But old habits die hard.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“Dessert break?” She hefted a bag of Oreos and a bottle of wine.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“Oh. Okay.” She sat cross-legged on the floor of the greenhouse and tore open the bag. “Do you need any help searching for ghosts tonight?”

“Probably not. It’s not really a two-person job.”

“I’ll stick around anyway. That way, if you find evidence, I can corroborate your findings.”

“Are we working together, now?” I asked.

She frowned mid-chew. “Uh, yeah? We’ve been working together this whole time. Sharing clues...”

“It seems like I’ve been sharing everything with you, while you kept your secrets,” I said. “How could you not tell me?”

“I didn’t tell anyone about the night Alistair died...”

“And the fact that you were homeless?”

“I didn’t tell Xander. He figured it out on his own.”

“But not Brody. Apparently you found the time to tell him, but you didn’t think that I should know about it, too.”

“You wanted me to tell you my deepest, darkest secret?” She scoffed. “I barely wanted to acknowledge it myself. Let alone tell you, the guy I...”

“The guy you what?”

“The guy I was crushing on,” she finished. “I didn’t want to show you how pathetic I was. I just wanted you to like me for who I was.”

I put down the EMF reader I had been fiddling with. “I’m sorry, Robyn, but I don’t like people who keep secrets. We’ve been here over a week. You had plenty of opportunities to let me in, but you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her eyes were big and brown and remorseful. “I

won't keep anything like that from you again."

"I know you won't." I felt numb as I said the words. "Listen. We're all stuck in this mansion, and I know it's a big place, but I've been feeling a little claustrophobic lately. I think I need some space."

"Space," she repeated quietly. "Yeah. Okay."

Robyn got up and collected the wine and cookies. She lingered a few seconds, and I wondered if she was going to tell me something else. But then she turned and left the greenhouse.

Was I too harsh with her? I wondered as I settled into my chair and listened to the clicking of my equipment. *Or was I not harsh enough?*

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Robyn

I understood why Chase was upset with me. I'd been holding a lot of secrets, and he definitely deserved to know some of them. Even if it was embarrassing to me at the time. But as I now knew, it was much more embarrassing having the truth come out on its own.

And I still haven't told them everything. I shuddered at what they might think if they learned my biggest secret of all.

I managed to keep it together that night. Even the next day, while Chase gave me the cold shoulder. But then that night, while trying to fall asleep, it suddenly all came bubbling to the surface.

Alistair was dead.

I had ruined his final meal.

Chase, my crush who I had slept with a few days ago, felt betrayed.

It left me feeling alone, so alone, that I finally started crying. And once I started, it was difficult to stop.

When the door opened and Brody slipped into the room, I tried to muffle my sobs. But eventually the pressure became too great, and I started weeping all over again.

I could hear Brody tense. He had been tapping on his screen, probably playing a chess game, but now he was silent while I wept.

Eventually, he cleared his throat. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Sorry for disrupting you."

"No apology needed."

Another silence stretched, except for the sound of me shaking with sobs.

"Stand up," he said. He probably wanted to give me a hug, like that first night he stayed here.

“I’m okay.” I knew I needed a hug, any sort of physical touch that would make me feel less alone, but I felt too pathetic already.

“No, you’re not okay. Stand up and give me a hug.”

“Just leave me alone.”

I thought he was going to give up. But then he knelt on the edge of the bed and gently stroked my back.

“You can cry. I don’t mind. Better to get it out than try holding it in.”

His permission was like a bomb destroying a dam. I finally let out all of my emotions, tears streaming down my cheeks while I cried. Brody rubbed my back for a while. Then he crawled under the covers and held me in his arms, spooning me while I trembled. I was completely vulnerable, and the moment was incredibly intimate. He could have taken advantage of the situation, but he didn’t.

“Shh,” he said softly. “It’s okay. Let it out.”

I wasn’t sure how much time passed. Five minutes. Maybe ten. But eventually, somehow, I got it all out. And when no more tears would fall, I felt a lot better.

I didn’t remember falling asleep. One moment I was trying to think of the best way to tell Brody that he could go back to the floor, and the next moment twilight was illuminating the room.

And Brody was still laying in bed, spooning me.

It was comforting having his body curled around me, like a muscular suit of armor. I felt safe and warm and not alone. Since Chase and I had sex in the attic, I had been craving the touch of a man. Brody was scratching that itch perfectly.

He shifted in his sleep, and then I felt something pressed up against my ass. There was no mistaking the hard length of his dick gently grinding into me. He threw an arm over me, crossing my chest and grabbing my shoulder, and he squeezed me tighter to him.

He’s still asleep.

I opened my mouth to tell him to wake up, then stopped myself. I didn’t want this feeling to end. My body was coming alive at his touch, and his cock seemed to pulse with heat. Maybe just a few more minutes.

Yet the more we snuggled, the more I started thinking about how *good* he felt. Brody, the guy I hated when I first met him, had given me exactly what I needed last night. He could have made a move on me, but he didn't—he was a perfect gentleman. That fact made me think of him in a new light.

Slowly, I pushed my hips back, grinding against him. He let out a soft, satisfied noise—a manly rumble in my ear.

It's Brody, I thought. He's the asshole surfer bro who we all hated just a few days ago. This can't possibly be a good idea.

But my heart was slowly overriding my brain, bringing up all the things I now knew about him. He played chess, and did care about Alistair, and he knew the same pain of losing his parents just like I did...

His lips suddenly found my bare shoulder, kissing gently. The tiniest little smack. And *definitely* intentional. He kissed me again, and I let out a sigh.

"You're awake?" I asked.

"I am now," he whispered. "Tell me if I should stop."

I opened my mouth to say yes, we probably shouldn't do this, but the words died on my tongue as he squeezed me against him tighter. *I want this. Desperately.* His free hand brushed aside my hair, revealing the back of my neck. I tingled with anticipation for three long seconds, waiting for him to do it. When he finally pressed his lips against my neck, I couldn't help but moan.

"That feels good."

"I know." I felt him smile against my skin before he resumed kissing me. I continued grinding my ass against him, pushing until his cock was wedged between my ass cheeks, separated by the cloth from our underwear. The arm that was across my chest moved lower, pawing at my breast, finding the nipple and giving it a tight little squeeze between his fingers.

My body was on fire now. I writhed against him, savoring every sensation where our skin touched. His scent filled my nostrils, masculine and enticing. He pushed up into my ass and let out a long, pained groan.

Should I be doing this? I wondered briefly. *Do I want to be the kind of woman who sleeps with two different guys only a few days apart?*

But it was Chase who insisted we keep things casual while we were vying for the inheritance, and it was Chase who had been giving me the cold

shoulder since he learned I was homeless. Meanwhile, Brody had been surprisingly supportive. After blackmailing me for a place to sleep, that is.

Brody's fingers slid down my chest, tickling across my navel before plunging into my panties. I squirmed as his fingers separated in a V shape, surrounding my pussy without actually touching it. Teasing me.

Making me want him more.

When he finally touched my soaked pussy, my body was practically humming with desire. I moaned loudly and ground my ass against him harder as he began rubbing me in a circle, hitting every sensitive nerve.

"Tell me to stop," he rumbled into my ear, "and I'll stop."

"No," I replied. "Don't stop."

"Are you sure?"

I replied by reaching under the covers and yanking down my pajama bottoms and panties. I reached back, fingers clawing at the fabric of his boxers, before finding the elastic waistband. I tugged it down hard, then shoved my ass back against him. Now there was nothing between us, and his smoldering cock was pressed firmly against the bare skin of my ass cheek.

"Mmm," Brody sighed, breath hot on my ear. "You have no idea how long I've wanted you, Robyn."

"Then what," I demanded, "are you waiting for?"

Without further hesitation, he moved his hips until his cock was pushing up between my legs from behind. I felt his crown pushing against my dripping wet lips, briefly touching his rubbing fingers from the other side. And then he drove into me. I gasped as the head slid inside with ease, then part of his shaft, then more and more...

When every inch of his hard length was inside of me, both of us exhaled like we had been holding a breath. I removed my shirt and then leaned back, savoring the way his broad chest pressed warmly against me. All the while he continued rubbing my clit, building the pressure of ecstasy inside of me.

And then he started driving into me. He went slowly, but I urged him faster with my moans until he was fucking me more steadily. Every thrust sent lightning bolts of pleasure up my spine, exploding out of my mouth in deeper cries of bliss.

Our motions became urgent. Hurried, like we were running out of time.

Brody nibbled at my ear while fucking me harder, the skin of my ass cheeks slapping against his navel with every desperate thrust. I could sense how hungry he was for me as he moved forward, pushing me onto my belly. He smothered me with his body, slamming his cock into me while I remained prone, one hand still curled up underneath my hip to touch my clit while he pounded me.

The bed was creaking now, but neither of us cared. This angle was intense, almost more than I could handle, and my brain held no room for anything except the *amazing* way he felt at that moment. His breath grew labored in my ear, his own pleasure building like a tidal wave, and it drove my own ecstasy up and over the edge. I arched my back and clamped my pussy around his cock as I began to come. I began to cry out from the intensity of it, and he put a strong hand on the back of my head and pushed me down into the pillow. Now muffled, I took a deep breath and screamed as the orgasm rocked my body, wave after wave in time with the way his cock was crashing into me.

Brody drove forward as deep as he could, giving me every inch he had, then shook and shivered with release. His moan was a symphony in my ears, and I let out a final anguished cry as he exploded inside me.



Brody

Hell. Fucking. Yes.

I swear I wasn't trying to make a move on Robyn last night. I was just being comforting. A good guy. She refused to stand up for a hug, so I brought the hug to her. Based on how she reacted, it was exactly what she needed. A good, long cry. All of us needed one of those, lately.

But when I was done holding her, and tried to slip out of bed, she made an unhappy noise and clung to my arm. So I stayed in bed with her and eventually fell asleep.

Next thing I know, it's morning and she's grinding her ass against my morning wood. And after a few minutes, I realized she wasn't asleep. She was doing it on purpose.

A lot of people would consider me a man-slut. I'd slept with my fair share of women. I was good-looking and generally easy to be around, which was like ninety percent of the work.

But the way Robyn felt as I filled her from behind? *Goddamn*. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The two of us writhed together in a horizontal dance, losing ourselves to the mindless motion of our bodies. Even after I came, my cock continued spasming for a while. Like it didn't want to stop.

I remained on top of her, kissing the back of her neck and the bare skin of her shoulder blades. I had been checking her out during our morning runs, imagining what she looked like underneath her sports bra. But my imagination didn't compare to the real thing. Now that she was here, underneath me, I wanted to kiss every inch of her.

"Okay," she finally said. "I can't breathe."

"Fuck. Sorry." I pushed off of her and laid on my side. She rolled over to

face me. Her eyes were big and brown.

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “It was exactly what I wanted.” She glanced down, and then blinked. “Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t realize you put a condom on.”

“I had one in my backpack next to the bed. You didn’t seem to notice when I reached for it.”

She closed her eyes and chuckled. “I guess I was busy focusing on how good your fingers felt.”

“That’s not weird, is it?” I asked. “Having a condom ready?”

“I guess not.”

“Like, it wasn’t for you,” I quickly explained. “I always have a few in my backpack. Just in case.”

“Totally fine,” she said. “I’m not offended that you keep condoms around.”

“I’ve been imagining this since I first met you,” I admitted. It felt like a lot to tell a girl right after having sex for the first time, but it just came spilling out.

Robyn gave a start. “Really?”

“Since before I met you, actually,” I said.

Her face twisted in confusion. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It was months ago,” I explained. “Alistair was trying to figure out how to play chess on his iPad, so I called him to walk him through the process. He mentioned he had a new caretaker who was young and beautiful. He told me to come have dinner with him so I could meet you. I thought about it, and imagined what you looked like. But in the end, I declined. Funny to think about now, huh?”

She stared at me for a long moment. “You were close to Alistair.”

“As close as a guy can be with his great-grandfather.”

“Why didn’t you come visit in the last year?” she asked. “Why did you stay away?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Normally, I wouldn’t want to talk about this with anyone. But in the vulnerable moments after sex, I found

myself wanting to open up more than usual. Especially to Robyn.

“About a year ago, I started a new job. I was busy for a while, traveling a lot for business. I did come visit him two or three times. You weren’t here. I took him out to dinner downtown. I don’t know where you were.”

“Was it on a Sunday night? Sunday is the one day of the week where I take a half-day. Sometimes.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding slowly. “It was always a Sunday night, because I usually traveled Monday morning. I feel guilty about it now. I wish I had spent more time with him. After he figured out how to use his iPad, we played chess together almost every day. But I stopped visiting in person. I told myself it was because I should focus on my new job, putting in a lot of hours to establish my place at the company. There are a lot of metrics for judging sales, and I wanted to be near the top.”

“I get that. Everyone prioritizes their career.”

I shook my head. “That was just the excuse I was giving myself. Now, in retrospect, I think I was staying away from him on purpose.”

“What? Why?”

I sighed. “I knew his health was starting to deteriorate. His arthritis was getting worse. He was hiring a full-time caretaker. Mentally, he was usually fine, but he started making mistakes at chess. Little blunders that he never would have made a year ago. I think I subconsciously noticed these signs and was afraid of watching him die. I wanted to remember him as healthy as possible. Keeping him perfect in my mind. I didn’t want his frail self to overwrite all the good memories I had.”

“He wasn’t *that* frail,” Robyn said gently. “He had good days and bad. The only thing he really struggled to do was go up and down the stairs.”

“I know,” I admitted. It felt like someone was squeezing my heart in my chest. “But I was terrified of ever seeing him go downhill. So I think I started distancing myself before that.”

Robyn stroked my cheek. “It’s completely natural to feel that way. Everyone handles grief differently.”

“I was his only family,” I argued. “And I basically abandoned him the final year of his life.”

“No you didn’t,” she insisted. “You still played chess with him every day. I

didn't realize what he was doing at the time, but he would sit in bed on his iPad every night when I poured his glass of cognac. He always seemed so happy. I just assumed he was working on a new puzzle or riddle or something. But now that I know he was playing chess with you? It's obvious: that was the happiest part of his day."

Her words felt like a soothing icepack on a wound. I still felt like shit for the way I had kept my distance the past year, but I wasn't as guilty as I was before.

"Tell me about the last time you saw him," Robyn said. "Do you remember?"

I smiled. "It was two or three months ago. I came over and played chess with him. He won two out of three. Then he insisted we go upstairs and watch a movie. I had an early flight the next morning, but he was so emphatic about it that I couldn't refuse. It was that mafia movie. The one Martin Scorsese directed."

"Goodfellas?"

"No, not that one," I replied. "The newer one. With Leo in it."

"The Departed."

I snapped my fingers. "That's the one. He loved that movie, and could quote every line..." I trailed off.

"Jack Nicholson is really good in it," Robyn said.

Departed. Why did that sound so familiar? I had seen the movie before that night, but thinking back on it, the whole thing felt like it had an extra significance...

"Wait a minute," I said.

I rolled out of bed and began fumbling in my backpack.

"I don't want to emasculate you," Robyn said while leaning on her elbow, "but you look hilarious doing that while there's a condom still attached to your dick."

I found what I was looking for: my copy of the will. I smoothed it on the bed so Robyn could see.

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

ALiSTAIR FRITZ SCHREiBER

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds, will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be extinguished and banishing the cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. And so it is you few, you happy few who shall be rewarded. Now that my soul has departed from my body, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.

“See this part?” I said. “Now that my soul has *departed* from my body.”

Robyn suddenly sat upright in bed. “You think it’s a reference to the movie?”

I was momentarily distracted by her bare chest. “You, uh...” Unable to find the words, I pointed.

She looked down at herself, then hastily pulled the blanket up to cover herself. “You think there’s a clue in the movie?”

“Probably not,” I admitted. “But I haven’t found any other clues. So we might as well check it out.”

We got dressed, which involved me putting sweatpants over my condom-covered dick so I could get to the bathroom to clean up. But before I could leave, Robyn touched me on the arm.

“I don’t want to tell the others about this,” she said.

The comment stung. Like she was embarrassed about sleeping with me. But I steeled myself and said, “Understood. Is it because you and Chase are kind of a thing?”

“I don’t even know,” she said, slumping her shoulders. “I had a crush on him while we were both working here, and we kissed, and kind of did more... but he insisted we keep things casual until the inheritance is won. And then he got really upset when he learned I had kept information from him. Is that okay? Keeping it a secret?”

“Totally okay,” I said. “Not a problem.”

Robyn left the bedroom first. When she texted me that the coast was clear, I scurried down the hall to the bathroom.

I found Robyn in the kitchen pouring coffee. “Any sign of them?”

“Chase isn’t outside,” she replied. “And I haven’t seen Xander.”

We went back upstairs to check their bedrooms, then heard a shout up on the third floor. When we went up there, we found the other two members of the household playing pool in the parlor.

“This man is a shark,” Chase said, tapping on his cell phone. He spun the screen around to show that he had just Venmo’d him some money. “I’ve lost two hundred bucks already.”

Xander grinned while leaning on his pool cue. “I hustled to earn extra cash in law school.”

“I’m glad you’re both up here, because Brody thinks he discovered another clue.”

“Good.” Xander put the cue stick on the table. “Because I’ve been slamming my head against the wall trying to search for more.”

We led them over to the movie room. There was a bookcase on the wall filled with hundreds of DVDs and old VHS tapes. While we searched, I explained what I thought was a clue. Both Xander and Chase laughed.

“Alistair Schreiber was a brilliant man with layers upon layers to his clues,” Xander said. “Surely he would have used a bit more subterfuge than simply listing the name of a movie in his will.”

“Schindler’s List,” Robyn said while fingering through the movies. “Inglourious Basterds. Patton. Downfall...”

“There are a lot of World War Two movies here,” Xander said, eyeing me sideways. “Curious.”

“Alistair wasn’t a Nazi!” I insisted. “He was one of the good Germans!”

Chase pulled a VHS tape off the shelf and held it up. “A good German who has a copy of *Valkyrie* signed by Tom Cruise.”

“That’s a movie about *assassinating* Hitler! All of those movies involve killing Nazis, not sympathizing with them!”

“Here we go.” Robyn snatched a DVD case from the shelf. “The Departed.

Want to do the honors?”

I took the case from her, wedged my thumbs into the opening on the side, and pried the case open.

Inside was the DVD for the movie. And nothing else.

“Aw, man,” I said, turning the case over. “There’s nothing in here.”

“Told you,” Chase muttered.

“Let’s at least pop it in,” Robyn said, taking it from me and sliding it into the DVD player.

The projector in the ceiling hummed to life. The Warner Brothers logo flashed on the screen as the movie began to play.

“You’re wasting your time,” Chase said. “I’m going to do something more productive with my day.”

“I’m inclined to agree with Chase,” Xander nodded.

But before they could leave, the movie logo disappeared and the screen went white. It flickered with static, then switched to a view of the library downstairs.

And sitting in the leather chair was Alistair.



Xander

I had pored over every sentence in the will at least a hundred times. There were some parts that were obviously clues, like the mention of an Aristotelian mind—although I hadn’t figured out *what* that was referencing, since there were no books by Aristotle in the library. Other clues were more subtle, like the part about fanning flames. That required specific gardening knowledge, or at the very least an understanding of what plants were in the greenhouse.

After spending so much time devoted to deciphering the will, I was certain about one thing: there was no way in hell “departed” was a reference to the movie. Alistair wouldn’t have included something so obvious.

And then, as Alistair appeared on the screen, I was proven wrong.

Robyn gasped. “That’s Alistair!”

“In the flesh,” Chase muttered. “Wow.”

“How the hell did Papa Alistair figure out how to overwrite a DVD?” Brody said.

Suddenly, the Alistair on the screen began to speak. “You are probably wondering how I figured out how to record over a DVD.”

“Woah,” Brody said.

Chase looked back and forth between Brody and the screen. “I just got goosebumps.”

“Shh,” I said, pointing.

“Ever since Broderick taught me how to use this wonderful device, I’ve spent a lot of time on the internet.” Alistair lifted an iPad in his frail hand, then put it back down. “Did you know you can learn how to do anything on the YouTube? Why, there’s even a video about how to perform cunnilingus on a woman. Oh, how I wish we had this when I was a teenager!”

Robyn winced. “Wish I hadn’t heard him say that.”

“Once an old pervert, always an old pervert,” Brody said lovingly.

“This is a recording of Clause Number Two,” Alistair continued.

“Oh! Here we go!” Chase said.

“Quiet,” I hissed.

“Each of you participating in my grand inheritance game must type out what you intend to do with my estate and fortune,” he explained formally. “These letters, typed with my antique Underwood Golden typewriter in the library, will then be sealed in my personal safe for a period of seven days.” He raised a gnarled finger. “These letters must be *specific*. You cannot give a vague assurance about donating some portion to charity. You are required to specifically list what percentages you will spend on certain things. After seven days, the letters will be collected from the safe and read aloud. Keep your *eyes* open, all of you. Good luck.”

Alistair favored the camera with a final smile, and then the view of the library disappeared. The introductory credits to *The Departed* began playing instead.

Robyn paused the movie. “Wow. So those are the letters referenced in the third clause.”

“Clause three,” Brody read out loud from his copy of the will. “The letters you write and place in my safe shall be legally binding.”

“It’s a shame we discovered the clauses out of order,” I said. “It would have been amusing for you all to write your letters without knowing they would be legally binding.”

“My answer would have been the same either way,” Brody said proudly.

“That you’re keeping everything for yourself?” Chase asked.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Brody replied.

Chase snorted. “Yeah, sure you wouldn’t.”

“Boys. Can we focus on the clause we just got?” Robyn asked. “Specifically the part about how the letters have to go into his personal safe. Which we still don’t know the location of.”

“Are we sure it’s not in the study?” Chase asked.

“I searched every inch of that room,” I replied. “I can assure you, no safe is

in that room.”

“So we’re stuck again,” Brody said as he sank into one of the theater seats. “Damn it. I thought the Departed clue would bust this wide open.”

Bust. The word stuck out to me.

“It’s got to be in one of these other clues,” Chase said, taking the copy of the will from Brody. “Banishing cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. Have we checked every painting in this house? What if one of them is of Aristotle?”

Aristotelian mind. Bust. Cobwebs.

And in a flash of insight, I knew where the next clue was.

“The attic,” I said. “That’s what cobwebs is referring to.”

“No shit,” Brody said. “We’ve known that since we started searching the will for clues.”

“That could be a reference to the wine cellar,” Chase pointed out.

“Fuck.” Brody stared off. “I didn’t think about that.”

“It’s not,” I insisted. “It’s the attic. I know where the next clue is.”

Without waiting for them to follow, I left the room and took the stairs up to the attic. The light worked now, so I flicked it on and immediately weaved through the piles of junk until I reached one corner. There were three pedestals shaped like Greek columns, with a bust on each one. I twisted them around until the name plates were visible, then read each one.

Socrates.

Plato.

Aristotle.

The others caught up to me then. Chase groaned when he saw the bust. Robyn started laughing.

“You totally knew about this already!” Brody said. “That’s why you were up in the attic that one night.”

“I swear to you, I did not put this together until just now. I’m actually extremely embarrassed that I didn’t realize it sooner.”

“Better late than never!” Robyn said.

As had been happening all week, butterflies fluttered in my stomach when

Robyn smiled at me. There was something about her that tugged on me, like hundreds of tiny threads were pulling me in her direction. Toward her heart-shaped face and those big, innocent eyes. The harsh light in the attic cast her shadow against one wall, exaggerating her hourglass figure. A figure I had been thinking about a lot lately, and *dreaming* about when I closed my eyes at night...

I don't have time for this, I thought stubbornly. And even if I did, there's no way she would be interested in me. Especially after she learns the truth I've been hiding...

I carefully examined the bust, starting at the base of the pedestal. There wasn't a letter underneath it. I worked my way up, feeling the grooves in the column, searching for anything out of place. Then I took hold of the bust with both hands and pulled. It wasn't attached to the pedestal, and came away with ease.

But there was nothing underneath it except a small circle where the dust hadn't collected. I lowered the bust to my side and sighed.

"So much for that idea." Disappointment filled me. It was such an elegant clue...

"Not so fast." Brody took the Aristotle bust out of my hand and held it upside-down. "Look."

Inside the base of the bust was a narrow rectangular compartment. Something dark was inside. Brody turned the bust right-side up and shook it. The object inside slid out and into his waiting palm.

"A cassette tape?" Robyn asked.

Brody handed the cassette to me. "You found it. You get to do the honors."

"I saw a tape player up here somewhere." Chase went running off to a far corner of the attic, and we heard him rummaging around. "Ah hah! Found it!"

He returned with the tape player. We sat cross-legged on the floor and inserted the tape. All of us held our breath as I pressed play.

The tape crackled with static. Only static. Ten seconds worth of frustrating static. And just when I was about to give up, the sound of music filled the room.

"What is that?" Chase asked. "I recognize that song..."

Robyn groaned. "You've got to be kidding me."

“What?” Brody asked.

I recognized the song just as the voice cut in. *“We’re no strangers to love...”*

“Oh my God,” Robyn said.

“You know the rules, and so do I.”

“That’s Rick Astley!” Brody said.

“Are we... are we getting rickrolled?” Chase asked.

“Never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna run around and desert you. Never gonna make you cry, never gonna say goodbye, never gonna tell a lie and hurt you.”

“We didn’t just get rickrolled,” I said. “We got rickrolled from beyond the grave.”

Brody was doubled-over with laughter. “Goddamn, Papa Alistair. That’s savage.”

The song abruptly ended, and then Alistair’s crisp German voice filled the attic. “While exploring the YouTube, I learned that this is a very common prank among people your age. I must admit I do not understand it, but I hope it made you laugh.”

“Legendary,” Brody said. “This is the most legendary thing anyone has ever done.”

“If my game is working as designed, then you will probably get stuck at some point,” Alistair explained.

“Understatement of the year,” Robyn muttered.

“Fortunately, I am not a cruel man. This hint should assist you in progressing in the game. Clause Number Eight: if you find yourself stuck, the key to advancing is to use four eyes instead of two. Good luck!”

His voice disappeared, and then there was only static.

“Four eyes,” I said, frowning.

“It sounds like he’s telling us to work together,” Chase said. “Like, two people are needed instead of just one.”

“Why would he want us to work together?” Robyn asked. “One of the rules in the will states that alliances cannot be formed. Only one person can win

the inheritance.”

Brody glanced at me, but said nothing. I got the distinct impression he was hiding something. *Does he know what the clue is referencing?*

“I don’t think that is what the clause means,” I said carefully. “I think we need to take another look at the sketch in the parlor.”

“Four eyes!” Robyn exclaimed. “As in, someone with glasses.”

“The illustration is the only one where Alistair is wearing glasses,” Chase remembered.

“I don’t know,” Brody said as we filed out of the attic. “We already checked the illustration.”

“Then let’s check again,” I replied.

“Are we sure there aren’t any paintings where he has glasses on?” Chase asked.

“I searched all the paintings in the attic,” I said. “And took an inventory of every one that is mounted in this mansion. That sketch is the only one where Alistair is wearing his spectacles.”

We went to the parlor on the third floor, marching in a line like kids on a field trip. Chase grabbed the ladder from where he had left it in the corner.

“Okay, fine!” Brody suddenly blurted out. “The clause is referencing that sketch.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I just do. Give me that.” He took the ladder from Chase and leaned it against the wall. I tensed as he climbed up to the portrait. Why had he hidden this from us? Was there something he didn’t want us to know?

I was missing something important here. It was right on the edge of my brain, driving me crazy.

He removed the picture and handed it to Robyn. Behind it on the wall was only smooth wallpaper. Brody placed his fingertip on the wall and dragged it around. Searching for something.

Brody’s finger abruptly sank into a depression, pushing the wallpaper inward. He tore at it with his finger, revealing a vertical line in the wall. The line made a right-turn at a corner, continued horizontally for several inches, then made another turn. When he was done, he had carved out a perfect

square in the wall. He tore away the paper on the interior of the box.

“That’s it?” Chase asked. “It looks like there’s only wood behind it.”

But Brody wasn’t done. He tapped at the wood in several places: once, twice, three times. On the sixth tap, the wood gave in, allowing him to grip one of the edges.

He removed the wood, revealing the steel surface of a safe, with a combination dial on the front.

“There,” Brody grumbled. “The safe you’ve been looking for.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you mention this sooner?” Chase demanded.

“I am also curious about your silence,” I said.

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to start tearing up his walls, that’s all. And it didn’t matter until we found the clause about the letters.”

Robyn lightly touched my arm. “You know the combination?”

“It was specifically listed in the will.” I peered up at Brody and raised an eyebrow. “If you will allow me to do the honors...?”

Brody came down, and I climbed the ladder to the safe. I spun the dial and entered the combination one at a time. On the third number, the safe clicked open.

Sitting inside were four identical objects.



Robyn

“What is it?” I asked, craning my neck to see. “What’s in the safe?”

“I’ll let you look for yourself.” He stepped down, and I hastily climbed the ladder. The interior of the safe was small, with barely enough room for a few paperback books. It was empty now, except for four tiny objects.

“Butterscotch candy?” I asked, scooping them up. There were four pieces.

“Butterscotch,” Chase said slowly. “Is it a clue?”

“Probably not,” I said. “There are four in here. One for each of us, plus Xander.”

“Sometimes a piece of candy is just a piece of candy,” Brody said.

“Nice of him to include me,” Xander said, taking a piece from my outstretched palm and plopping it into his mouth.

I felt around the walls of the safe to make sure there weren’t any hidden compartments. “Okay, that’s it. Now what?”

“Now you type out your letters,” Xander replied simply.

The four of us went downstairs to the typewriter in the library. Xander retrieved yellow pieces of stationary like the ones Alistair had used to write his various clauses, and matching envelopes. Then he showed us how to thread it into the antique typewriter.

“How much time do we have?” Chase asked. “I need to think about it.”

“Let’s say...” Xander glanced at his watch. “We’ll meet in the parlor after dinner tonight. That’s when we’ll place the letters in the safe.”

“No problem,” Brody said.

But as I sat down to write the rough draft of my letter, I realized there was a problem. I didn’t know what to do with the money. Daydreaming about winning the lottery was all in good fun, but having to specifically list what I

would do was *much* harder.

I intended to keep at least half the fortune for myself, but wasn't sure what to do with the rest. There were dozens of worthy charities who would love a donation. The ACLU, Doctor's Without Borders, the Santa Cruz Homeless Shelter, which I was fortunate to have never needed since getting kicked out of my apartment. Knowing the letters were legally binding put extra pressure on me to get it right. If I made a mistake, I was stuck with it.

Then I began second-guessing the amounts. Was keeping half of the fortune too greedy? Xander had estimated that the Schreiber Estate was worth close to fifty million dollars. Half of that, twenty-five million, felt like more money than I could spend in a lifetime.

Maybe I should only keep ten million, I thought. Or just five.

I wished I knew what the other guys were writing in their letters. Since we would be reading these out loud in a week, I didn't want to come off as selfish.

After much deliberating, I finally wrote out my plans if I inherited the estate. Once the draft was completed, I used the typewriter to commit it to the official paper. The mechanical keys made a punchy sound with every keystroke that instantly made me feel like I was in a movie from the 1950s. When I was done, I signed my name at the bottom and folded it inside the envelope.

I went upstairs to the parlor after dinner. Xander was already there, pacing by the pool table while speaking on the phone.

"...I'm doing what the will instructs. I know, it's taking longer than expected, but what else am I supposed to do? Yes, I understand. No, I don't. With all due respect, sir, I already emailed a copy of the will to the office. If you don't believe me, you're welcome to come down here and read the original copy yourself." There was a long pause as he listened to the person on the other line. "I don't know how much longer it will take. I'll keep you updated on the progress."

He hung up and slumped his shoulders. Then he noticed me. "Oh. Hello."

"Who was that?" I asked.

"One of the partners at my law firm. They're unhappy I've been gone this long. I've had to spread my workload around to my coworkers."

“Why are they unhappy? You’re doing your job.”

“A job they expected to take no longer than a day. Somehow, they think it’s my fault. Like I could have predicted what Alistair would do.” He laughed bitterly.

“I’m really sorry. That sucks.”

He shrugged. “I probably won’t get fired over it. Probably.”

“Fired for what?” Brody asked as he strode into the parlor. “Giving preferential treatment to Robyn over me and Chase?”

“I wish,” I said. “His firm is unhappy he’s been gone so long.”

“Sucks to be you.” Brody glanced at his sealed envelope. “Want me to add in here that I’ll give you ten grand if I win?”

Xander smiled politely. “That’s quite all right.”

“That was harder than I thought,” Chase said as he joined us. He handed Xander the letter. “I must have written and rewritten it a dozen times. Get it out of my sight.”

Xander took the envelopes and climbed the ladder to the safe. The stack in his hands looked thicker than it should have been. Like the envelopes were bulging with future potential.

He placed the envelopes in the safe, closed the door, and gave the dial a spin. I handed him the Alistair sketch, which he hung back in its place, covering the safe’s location.

“We will open these next Thursday at precisely…” Xander looked at his watch. “Eight o’clock at night.”

I was wiped out from spending all day stressing about the letter, so I brushed my teeth and went to bed. Brody snuck into my room not long after that.

“Hey,” I asked him as he arranged his sleeping bag and blankets on the floor. “How did you know the safe was there? Did you figure out a clue before the rest of us?”

In the semi-darkness, I could barely see him shaking his head. “It’s a long story. Alistair mentioned it to me once.”

I got the impression he was hiding something. Why wouldn’t he tell us the truth? I didn’t have the energy to interrogate him, though, so I dropped it and

closed my eyes.

“Hey,” he whispered.

I opened my eyes. He was sitting cross-legged on his blankets. “Hey.”

“Want to have a rerun of this morning?” he asked, grinning in the darkness. “You know. Blow off some steam.”

I laughed. “As tempting as that is, I don’t think I’m in the mood tonight.”

I was worried how he would feel about being turned down, but he only shrugged and said, “No worries. I’ll crush some noobs at speed chess.” The glow of his phone screen illuminated his face as he began to do just that.

I rolled over and smiled. I kind of liked having him in my room. It made me feel less alone. When he wasn’t being a dick, he was really easy to be around. Like the first impression I had of him when I met him, that he was a Golden Retriever.

Despite not being in the mood when I went to bed, my dreams were decidedly adult-themed. I was in the greenhouse with Chase, sitting on the edge of a table next to the Chinese fan palm while he crouched on his knees, devouring me with his tongue. Then I was jogging around the house with Brody, keeping pace with him easily, until he grabbed my hand and led me into the trees that surrounded the property. He smashed his lips against mine in a hungry kiss, then tore down my shorts and bent me over a fallen tree.

And then, to my surprise, I was in the library with Xander. Every time he got a Jeopardy question wrong, he removed an article of clothing. He untied his necktie, tossing it at me, then slowly unbuttoned his shirt. By the time he got down to his boxers, I was on fire with desire. And based on the look in his eyes, so was he.

I woke with a start. The dream had been so vivid that it took me several breaths to realize I was in my bed, not in the library with Xander. It was only a dream.

A really hot, sexy dream.

I rolled over. Brody was sprawled out on the floor, one arm tucked behind his head. I laid there watching him for a while. Wondering if he would wake up. It was still dark outside the window, but I could tell twilight was coming.

Yeah, I definitely liked having Brody in my room. Especially now that I knew he wasn’t as much of an asshole as we previously thought. It was like

having a slumber party every night.

Now that I'd had time to process things, I didn't feel guilty about sleeping with him yesterday. Yes, I liked Chase, but nothing could *really* happen between us until the game was over. And once the game did end, things might not be the same between us.

Plus, he had insisted things stay casual. His words, not mine. So who cared if I slept with Brody in the meantime?

I did wonder what Xander would think about everything. What would he say if he learned I had slept with both Chase *and* Brody, my two competitors for the inheritance? He might think it was a shrewd way to gain a psychological edge over them. But I could also picture him being judgmental.

I care about what he thinks, I realized. I don't want him to judge me.

My thoughts wandered back to the sexy dreams I'd just woken from. I was feeling frisky, especially while thinking about all three guys in the house. The only problem was that Brody wasn't awake yet.

I can fix that.

Silently, I pulled back the covers and got out of bed. Brody was fast asleep, wheezing slightly. I carefully moved his blanket to the side, revealing his bare chest and lower half. The imprint of his cock was obvious in his boxer-briefs, long and hard.

He groaned without waking as I slipped my fingers into his underwear and began stroking his hard length. I took pleasure in the sight of him arching his back as I gently jacked him off. Brody's hips tightened as he drove upward, tiny little thrusts as he continued dreaming.

Not content with just this, I tugged his underwear lower and then bent my head to his stiff cock. He was completely smooth, which made him look even bigger. I extended my tongue and licked him from the edge of his balls all the way up the underside of his shaft, before swirling around his crown. His moans grew louder, but his eyes were still closed.

Perfect, I thought.

I tilted his cock upright and wrapped my lips around him, sucking on his tip while stroking him faster. His chest heaved as I worked, and he squirmed on top of the sleeping bag.

While giving him a blowjob, I reached down and touched myself. I was on

fire with desire, and with the delicious naughty act I was giving Brody. I was incredibly turned on by this, our quiet sex act while the rest of the house was silent and still. Soon I was rubbing myself rapidly, and matching my strokes on his dick too.

“Fuck yes,” he moaned, fingers lacing into my hair. He guided me up and down, eyes open now. “Don’t stop.”

“Mmm hmm,” I replied while rubbing my clit faster.

“Just like that.” He began gasping. “Oh yes. Fuck. Robyn...”

I could sense him about to explode, but I kept my mouth wrapped tightly around his cock. He sucked in a ragged breath and stifled a moan as he came into my mouth, cock pulsing violently with every salty load. His fingers tightened in my hair as I drank in the sight of him, nude and muscular, arching his back with pleasure while unloading down my throat.

“Holy. Shit,” he said when I finally stopped. “Fuck Wheaties. *That* is the breakfast of champions.”

I giggled at the silly joke. “I was afraid you were going to cry out and wake the whole house.”

He sat up. “It took all of my willpower not to.” Fingers still laced in my hair, he pulled me into a rough kiss, tongue flicking into my mouth. “Now for you...”

Brody reached for me, and I deftly got to my feet. “Another time. I’ve got a morning jog to prepare for.”

I left him sitting on the bedroom floor as I went about my day.



Brody

I'd never been woken up with a blowjob before. It was, for lack of a better phrase, *totally fucking awesome*. It started as a sexy dream. I couldn't remember the details, except that a hot girl was handling my *downstairs business*. I slowly woke from the dream, but rather than being disappointed by having a sex dream interrupted, I was greeted with the beautiful sight of Robyn's brown hair bobbing up and down on my cock, sucking me off like it was her favorite thing to do.

And before I could return the favor like the gentleman I was, she gave me a wink and left.

This wasn't how I expected to spend my time in the house after Alistair died. Not even close.

I changed into my running gear and went downstairs. Robyn was already dressed and ready to go. Xander was seated at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of coffee.

"I thought you were going to sleep all day," Robyn said to me with a knowing smile.

"I was having a fantastic dream and didn't want to get out of bed," I replied.

The two of us went outside and jogged for half an hour. Robyn still struggled, but she was getting better. And she was good company while I kept pace next to her. Running with her was a lot more fun than listening to music.

I thought about Robyn a lot while we jogged. I wasn't the kind of guy who was interested in settling down and starting a family. I liked to stay casual. Keep my options open. Play the field without anyone tying me down.

But Robyn? Man, Robyn made me wonder if I was changing.

If I wanted something *more*.

After lunch, I went into Alistair's room to lift weights. I was on my third set of squats when Chase knocked on the door frame. He was the last person I expected to see.

"I was hoping I could join you," he said. "If you don't mind."

I shook off my surprise and said, "I could use a spotter. I'm about to switch to bench press."

I adjusted the weight and Chase stood over the bar like a good spotter. But before grabbing the bar, I said, "You're not going to choke me with the weights, are you?"

"Who, me?" Chase smiled evilly. "You'll never know."

"I'm going to choose to take that as a joke," I said, grabbing the bar and beginning my workout.

For a while, we didn't say anything. I did a set of bench presses, and then Chase used my kettlebells to do a few exercises of his own. But I couldn't relax, because I suspected he was here for another reason.

I was finishing up my last set of bench presses when my phone chimed with a text message. Before Chase could look at the screen, I grabbed it off the floor.

Robyn: Got any plans tonight? Want to, how did you phrase it? Enjoy the mindless drive of our bodies?

Me: Why wait until tonight?

Robyn: Because tonight I want to get nice and tipsy. Maybe even drunk. And then you can do whatever you want to me.

Me: Hold the phone. WHATEVER I want to you? Like, anything?

Robyn: You heard me.

Suddenly, Chase said, "You and Robyn seem to be getting along."

Fuck. Here we go.

"Robyn is cool," I said carefully while putting my phone away. "Getting stuck in a house with a bunch of strangers could have been bad, but she's all

right.”

“Yeah. She is.”

There was a long pause as he put the kettlebell back on the rack. “Robyn is something special. Mind if I do bench next?”

“Be my guest,” I said. “What weight do you want to start at?”

He laid flat on the bench where I had just been. “This is fine.”

“Uh, are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t want you to hurt...”

I trailed off as he unracked the weight and competently did a bench press, then a second one. He was on the upper end of his strength, I could tell, but he still did all five reps without failing.

“Damn, dude.”

Chase sat up and grinned. “I played lacrosse. Spent a lot of time in my high school gym. Glad to see I haven’t lost it.” He rolled his arm in the socket. “Although I don’t think I can do two more sets like that.”

“Fuck that, you looked strong. I think you can finish them.”

He did a second set without trouble, then failed on the third set. But I was ready to grab the bar and help him rack it again without it falling on him.

“Glad you didn’t try to choke me with the bar,” he said while wincing.

“There’s a specific rule against harming my competitors,” I said as if that were the only reason I didn’t. “Nice job.”

I extended my fist, and he bumped it. It was the longest the two of us had been in the same room without snapping at each other. I decided that was a win.

And then he said, “Sorry for the way I’ve acted. You seemed like a douchebag when we met. It’s taken a while to change that impression. That’s my bad.”

“Yeah, it is your fucking bad,” I replied.

He stared at me.

“Fuck. I mean... You’re right. I was a douchebag when I got here. I was bottling up grief for Alistair’s death, and that just made it all leak out as douchebaggery. Sorry for that.”

“Forget it,” he said. “Water under the bridge.”

I grunted. “I never understood that metaphor. What does a bridge and water have to do with two guys arguing?”

Chase chuckled and said, “Now that I think about it, I don’t know what it means either.” He glanced at his phone. “I’ll get out of your hair. I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

I watched him go down the hall to his room. *That was weird. Why is he buddying up to me all of a sudden?*

Robyn made dinner for everyone: waffles, fried eggs, and bacon. It still felt sacrilegious to have breakfast food while the sun was setting, but after a few bites I realized something: it was really, *really* good.

“I think he’s coming around,” Robyn said approvingly.

“It’s not bad,” I admitted. “Mostly because of the bacon. I could eat bacon any time of day.” I tore into another piece and munched happily while smiling at her.

Anything I want. My imagination was running wild. There was a *lot* I wanted to do with this girl.

Chase and Xander went upstairs to play pool in the parlor after dinner. Robyn announced that she was going to watch them. After finishing the dishes, I collected a few bottles of champagne from the wine cellar and brought them upstairs.

“Which one of you said French 75s were Alistair’s favorite drink?” I asked.

Robyn perked up from the chair in the corner. “I did.”

“Let’s put it to the test. I’m playing bartender tonight.” I winked at her, and she playfully bit her lip.

Let’s get you nice and tipsy, just like you wanted.

I pulled four martini glasses down from the bar and got to work. The drink was easy to make: the ingredients were gin, champagne, simple syrup, and a squeeze of lemon juice. But by the time I was done making the first batch, and started sipping my own, the others had finished theirs and needed refills.

“Did you find any new clauses when you got the champagne?” Robyn asked while leaning on the bar.

She was wearing a tank top, which showed a *lot* of cleavage. It had to be intentional. I showed admirable restraint by not looking. “Nope. No clauses.”

“I’ve been through every liquor and wine bottle in this entire house,” Xander said while rubbing chalk on his cue tip. “I’m beginning to think the part about drinking his favorite drink was merely a red herring.”

“Or an excuse for us to drink to his name,” Robyn said, raising the drink I handed her. “To Alistair.”

All of us toasted. “To Alistair.”

“I can see why he liked these,” Chase admitted. “This is *good*.”

“Blame the bartender,” I said. “When I was a kid, I used to make these for him when we came to visit. My parents didn’t like that Alistair had me handling liquor, but the skills I learned made me a popular guy in college.” I winked at Robyn.

“I have to admit, I’ve enjoyed being here,” Chase said after sinking a billiard ball. “Granted, I’ve been working a lot, but I would have been doing the same thing at home. And this place is a lot nicer than my apartment.”

“Fuck yeah,” I agreed. “This has basically been a vacation for me. It feels great.”

“That feeling,” Robyn teased, “is your heart growing three sizes. It’s probably good for your soul that you’re not slinging deadly pharmaceutical products.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s a misrepresentation of what I do.”

“So you *don’t* work for a big evil pharma company?”

“I work for a pharmaceutical company,” I replied, “but it’s not evil. It’s one of the good ones.”

“Sure it is,” she teased.

I glared at her.

“Will you quit your job?” she asked. “If you win the inheritance.”

“Big if,” Chase piped up.

I shrugged. “Probably not. I like what I do.”

“A demon who enjoys torturing souls for his master,” Xander mused.

“Nah, it’s not like that. The company I work for doesn’t prey on sick people the way other pharma companies do.”

“Like how Alistair was one of the good Nazis?” Chase asked.

“Bro, he wasn’t *any* kind of Nazi!” I argued.

Chase and Xander shared a skeptical look.

“Just for that, I’m not making you any more drinks. The rest of these are only for Robyn.”

“Woohoo!” she said.

“Aw, come on,” Chase said. “I didn’t mean it.”

I started to explain more about the company I worked for, but then decided I didn’t have the energy for it. *I thought they were starting to trust me more.*

“What about you?” Xander asked Chase. “Will you quit your job if you win?”

Chase leaned on his pool cue. “Yeah, actually. I might still do some coding work as a contractor, but I wrote in my letter that I would keep half of the inheritance for myself.”

“And the other half?” Robyn asked.

“Donated to the NRDC. The National Resources Defense Council. Honestly, I would love to go work for them. I’d do it for free if I didn’t have to worry about money anymore.”

Robyn cocked her head at him. “I knew you liked plants, but somehow I didn’t connect the dots that you would be an environmentalist.”

Chase shrugged. “I just don’t want to see the whole country paved over with concrete.”

The two of them smiling at each other caused a jealous flare to ignite in my gut. I shook it off and said, “That’s pretty cool.”

“What about you?” Xander asked Robyn. “What will you do with the money?”

She shrugged. “I’m keeping some of it for myself. Not too much, of course! But the rest is getting donated to seven or eight charities that I listed. I actually spent all day doing research on it and waffling about which ones to pick.”

“It’s hard, right?” Chase agreed.

“That’s what she said,” I replied. When all three of them groaned, I added, “Hey, I had to.”

“What did you write down?” Chase asked me.

I carefully measured gin out into another drink. “It’s supposed to be a secret.”

“Technically,” Xander chimed in, “the clause never mentioned secrecy.”

“But it did say the letters will be read out loud after seven days,” I pointed out. “Which implies we *shouldn’t* reveal what we wrote ahead of time.”

Xander gave me an approving nod. “Spoken like a lawyer.”

“Oh, come on,” Robyn said. “Tell us what you wrote down.”

“I’ll tell you in...” I checked my watch. “Five days and twenty-two hours.”

“Are you embarrassed about your letter?” Xander asked.

“Of course not.”

“You’re keeping all the money for yourself,” Chase guessed. “Didn’t you?”

The more they prodded, the less I wanted to give in. “No.”

“We told what we wrote,” Robyn insisted. “Why won’t you?”

“Because I don’t want to! Can we just drop it?”

Robyn’s face twisted in annoyance. I could see the gears turning in her head as she judged me. As she assumed the worst. It felt like I had blown a first date by saying something offensive.

“I just don’t understand why you’re keeping it a secret,” she said unhappily. “Unless it’s something bad.”

So much for having tipsy fun with her tonight.

I put down the drink I was in the process of making. “I thought you of all people would understand wanting to keep something to yourself.”

I stormed out of the parlor, my mood ruined.



Robyn

I watched Brody hurry out of the parlor. Why was he being so secretive about this? It was just a stupid letter. Keeping it to himself was totally unlike him. I would have expected him to be bragging to the entire house about what he would do with the money.

He was secretive about the safe location, too, I reminded myself. *Who knows what else he's hiding?* My eyes drifted up to the sketch on the wall, where the letters were securely stored in the safe.

“What’d he mean by that?” Chase asked. “About you of all people understanding?”

“He probably meant the secret I was keeping,” I quickly said. “Squatting in the house without Alistair knowing.”

“Huh.” Chase’s hazel eyes bore into me for a long moment, then he turned back to his pool game with Xander.

What’s his deal?

I excused myself and went downstairs to my bedroom. Brody wasn’t there, but the door to his room was closed. I could see movement underneath the door as he paced back and forth, talking softly on the phone. He must have decided to sleep by himself tonight.

“He really took the letter stuff personally,” I muttered to myself.

A door creaked across the hall. I followed the sound, thinking it might be Brody, but the room across from mine—a laundry room—was empty. The light was off, but the door was still barely moving. Like someone, or something, had bumped into it.

That’s impossible, I thought. *Chase and Xander are upstairs. And Brody is in his room.*

Suddenly, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Was it possible...?

I hurried back up to the parlor and told Chase that I may have found something. Xander remained there while Chase followed me back down to the laundry room.

“Are you making fun of me?” he asked. “Because if this is a prank, like when Brody said he heard moaning in the bedroom...”

“I swear, the door swung open,” I insisted. “It creaked. And when I got here, it was still moving.”

Chase went to his room and returned with several pieces of ghost equipment. The first thing he pulled out was the EMF reader. As soon as he turned it on, it began emitting a high-pitched beep.

“Holy shit!” He began moving the device back and forth across the door. When he aimed it away from the door, the device went silent. But as soon as he pointed it at the door again, the beep returned.

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“It’s a level two EMF event,” he explained, pointing to his device. There were five levels, all color coded. “That means something happened here. What did you see?”

“The door opened slightly,” I repeated.

“No, I mean what *else* did you see? Mist in the air? Little orb particles that look like snow?”

“Nothing like that.” I looked at the door. “Are you sure your device isn’t malfunctioning? Or picking up on something else?”

“It’s a plain wooden door,” he replied while the device continued beeping. “There’s no electronics within several feet. This is something paranormal for sure. I need to get more equipment.”

“Wait.” I grabbed his arm. “Are we okay?”

“We’re fine.”

“You hesitated before answering. What’s up with you?”

“Can we have this conversation later? I need to get my other equipment.”

“You only know about this door creak because I told you,” I replied. “You owe me. What’s wrong?”

Chase sighed and looked down at his feet. “I saw...” He met my gaze. “I saw Brody coming out of your room the other morning.”

I winced. "It's not what it looks like."

"Really? Because it looks like you two slept together."

He's right. That's exactly what it looks like, and unfortunately, it's the truth now.

"This is going to sound crazy, but Brody was afraid of sleeping alone."

Chase stared at me blankly. "You're right. That does sound crazy."

"It's true! About a week ago, he came into my room and asked to sleep on the floor. He said the big house gives him the creeps now that Alistair is gone. I had to let him sleep in there because he knew my secret. About how I was squatting in the house."

"So you're saying you two didn't sleep together?"

"Well... not at first. But after you started acting weird, we ended up... well..."

"It doesn't matter," he interrupted. "You and I aren't in a relationship. I don't care what you do. It's not a big deal. I just think we should all focus on the inheritance right now, okay?"

I started to apologize more, but the beep from the EMF reader abruptly ceased. Brody aimed it at the door, up and down across one side, then the other. There was only silence.

"Damn it. His spirit must have moved on. Hopefully it's not too late to track it..." Without another look, he ran off to his room.

My stomach was tight from the conversation. I hated to see him disappointed, and I knew I might have ruined any chance of us having a relationship when all of this was over. I wondered what to do.

Way to go, Robyn. You always ruin things.

I didn't want to go to bed, so I went back up to the third floor. I intended to watch a movie in the theater room, but Xander was still in the parlor.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He glanced at me, then back at the bar. "I was playing pool by myself and wondering what to do with all these drinks. Brody made four of them before going downstairs. It's expensive champagne. I hate seeing it go to waste."

I grabbed a drink, downed half of it, and said, "Not if I can help it."

Xander laughed and began sipping one of the others. “You want to play pool?”

“I’ve never played,” I replied. “I’m probably horrible at it.”

“And I’m resolutely drunk,” he said with an uncharacteristic grin. “So we’re probably even.”

With Brody in a mood about the letters, and Chase distancing himself from me, I was feeling more lonely than I had in a long time. So I said, “Sure, I’ll play a game.”

Xander showed me how to arrange the fifteen balls in the triangle-shaped rack. Then he started the game by hitting the cue ball *really* hard to break them all up, sending balls rolling in all directions.

“I sank a striped ball,” he said. “Which means you’re trying to knock the solid ones in.”

“I always liked solids more than stripes,” I said, gesturing down at the solid green T-shirt I was wearing. Xander laughed harder than the joke deserved. He really *was* drunk.

We exchanged pool shots while nursing our drinks. He was right: it *was* good champagne, and I was glad it wasn’t going to waste. Somehow, I managed to sink two solid balls before Xander eventually won.

“Did you tell the truth about your letter?” Xander asked while we started a second game.

“I did. You don’t believe me?”

He shrugged. “I’m not a very trusting person in general. And apparently, neither is Brody.”

“I know, right? Why wouldn’t he tell us what’s in the letter?”

Xander scratched chalk onto the tip of his cue. “We all have our secrets.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He gave me a long look. I felt myself withering under his intense gaze. I was certain he would say something more, but then all he did was shrug.

“What secrets do *you* have?” I demanded.

He leaned on the edge of the pool table while lining up a shot. “When I was in Mrs. Allen’s second grade science class, I peed my pants.”

I almost spit out my drink from surprise, which quickly turned into laughter.

“I asked to go to the bathroom, but she told me to wait until after the quiz. But it was a *long* quiz, and I was too much of a perfectionist to do it quickly. Luckily, I was sitting in the back, and class ended right after that so nobody noticed.”

“Thanks for the information, but I meant secrets related to the inheritance,” I replied.

“Ah, that’s too bad.” He made a shot, but missed the corner pocket. “I have a bunch of secrets about the inheritance I’m not telling.”

“Really!”

He shrugged casually. “You’ll never know.”

I tried to knock the blue ball in the side pocket, but missed by several inches. Groaning, I said, “See? I’m really bad.”

“Everyone is bad when they first start out at something. Here, let me show you a better way.”

Xander came up behind me, wrapping his arms around mine until he was practically molded against my body. “Lean forward, like this,” he whispered, breath hot on my neck. “Wrap your index finger around the tip. Good, nice and smooth. Your other hand should be gripping the base. Not the middle. See how you have a lot more leverage now?”

“Uh huh,” I replied.

“Now line up the shot. You want to aim right here...” His hands gripped mine as he shadowed me, moving me into position. His cologne was strong and spicy in my nose, and ignited a fire inside of my chest. “Now pull the cue stick back, and smoothly thrust it forward.”

I started to reply, *that’s what she said*, but the joke would have been too similar to one Brody had made earlier. I allowed Xander to guide my arm back, then smoothly forward. The tip of the cue stick struck the white ball, which rolled forward and knocked a solid into the side pocket.

“Perfect,” he practically breathed in my ear.

It’s perfect all right.

The warmth of his body left mine as he walked over to the other end of the

table. “Come make your next shot here. Let’s see, you have two good options...”

I admired him while he considered the next shot. He had removed his suit jacket, and the sleeves of his starched dress shirt were rolled up to his biceps, revealing lean forearms. He didn’t have as much muscle as Chase or Brody, but he was very sexy in a tall, slender kind of way. Especially while his intense eyes studied the table.

I gave myself a shake. *What am I doing?* I liked Chase. I kind of liked Brody, too. And I had slept with both of them. I couldn’t add Xander to the mix, no matter how suave, clean-cut, and gorgeous he was...

His gaze rose and met mine. Xander grinned again like he knew what I was thinking, and wanted to make a *closing argument* for why I should add him to the mix after all. He went to the bar, grabbed two more of the drinks, and brought them over to me.

“Say what you will about Brody, but he makes a fantastic French 75,” he said while standing very close to me.

I accepted the drink and took a long pull. I was very tipsy, bordering on drunk. I wanted to let loose. To finish this drink with Xander, have another one, and then see what happened. He was still in my personal space, the bare skin of his forearm brushing against my arm as he twisted to look at the pool table. I wanted to lose myself in the physical act the way I had with Brody, and Chase before him.

It’s so tempting.

The one thing that stopped me was how hurt Chase had seemed in the laundry room. I really liked him, and wanted to see if there was a possibility of something after this stupid game was over.

“I think I’ve had enough,” I said. “I’m going to bed.” Without waiting to see how he reacted, I put the drink down and left the parlor.



Robyn

My room downstairs was still empty. Brody must have really gotten his feelings hurt about the letter. I started to feel bad about it, but then shook it off.

We all told him what we wrote. This is his fault for keeping his letter a secret.

What was so bad that he didn't want to tell us? Was he donating some of it to organizations he knew we would disapprove of? Or was he spending the money on something frivolous, like a yacht? It had to be something like that.

I wondered why he didn't just lie about it. Although we would find out after a week, I guess. That was a point in his favor: he didn't want to lie. I should have respected him more for it.

Instead, curiosity was eating me up.

An hour went by without sleep before I finally gave up. I crawled out of bed and went into the hallway. The soft glow of electrical equipment came from the laundry room, but Chase wasn't in there. Brody's bedroom door was still closed.

Slowly, I tip-toed upstairs to the third floor. The parlor was dark, so Xander must have gone to bed. But when I walked inside, I realized there was a smaller light up against the wall. A cell phone light swinging one way, then another.

I flipped on the main light by the door. "Chase?"

He flinched on the top step of the ladder, which was positioned underneath the safe. He was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, like he had just come from bed too. The illustration had been removed, and was sitting on the floor. Chase's hand was on the safe's dial.

"What are you doing up?" he asked.

“What are you doing up?” I shot back at him.

“I asked you first!”

“I couldn’t sleep. I was bothered by Brody’s reluctance to tell us about his letter.”

“Same,” Chase admitted. “I need to know what he wrote. I can’t live in the same house with someone who might be donating all his money to, like, a hate group or something.”

“You know the safe’s combination?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I tried a bunch of dates that might be important to Alistair—his wedding anniversary, birthdays, etcetera—but nothing worked. We won’t know what’s in Brody’s letter unless we recruit Xander, and I doubt he’ll help us.”

“Fortunately, we don’t need him. Get down from there.”

He stepped down from the ladder and said, “You know the combo?”

“Alistair always said I have eyes like a hawk.” I climbed up to the safe and began turning the dial. “I watched Xander open it yesterday and memorized the code.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not telling.”

“Why not!”

“Because you’re being weird around me. I don’t know how much to trust you right now.”

“I’m trustworthy,” Chase replied defensively.

“I’m sure you are. But you don’t need to know the code since I’m opening it.”

The combination dial clicked as I entered each number. When I reached the last one, the handle on the safe turned, allowing it to swing open. I grabbed the stack of letters and climbed down.

“They aren’t labeled,” Chase said with a curse. “How will we know which is Brody’s?”

“We can open all of them, and put them back in new envelopes from the —” I cut off with a start. “Wait a minute.”

“What’s wrong?”

I fanned the letters out in my hand. “There’s four letters here, not three.”

“That’s impossible.”

I counted off each letter. “One, two, three, four. See? Very possible.”

“Brody must know the combination,” Chase said angrily. “That’s why he was secretive about the safe’s location. I bet he put two letters in the safe!”

“One with selfish intentions for the money, and one that’s more altruistic,” I agreed. “That’s really clever.”

“Clever? More like diabolical.”

“Let’s find his letter.” I started to open the first one.

“Wait!” Chase interrupted. “Let’s think about this for a second.”

“What is there to think about?”

“Are we violating any rules by opening these? I don’t want to get disqualified if we get caught.”

I frowned and considered that. “I don’t believe so. The will stated that we each had to write a letter, which will be legally binding. And it said the letters are to be placed in the safe for seven days, then read out loud. It doesn’t say anything about tampering with them before the seven days is up.”

“But would Xander, the arbiter to the game, agree with that assessment?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But I’m not going to be able to sleep until I know what Brody wrote.”

As I tore open each letter, I didn’t read the typed out parts—I skipped straight to the bottom to check the signatures. “This one’s mine. And the second one is yours.”

“Here’s one of Brody’s,” Chase said, eyes scanning the page.

I opened the fourth letter, expecting to see Brody’s signature at the bottom, confirming that he had written two letters. But it wasn’t his. I squinted at the handwriting before recognizing the big X at the beginning.

“Xander?” I said in confusion.

Chase pointed. “Xander!”

The lawyer himself was standing in the doorway to the parlor wearing a silk night robe over a pair of boxers. He let out a long sigh.

“Well then,” Xander said with a rueful grin. “I guess it’s time to come clean about everything.”

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Xander
Nine Days Ago

I was still sleeping when the phone rang. I considered not answering it since it was four in the morning, but my intuition told me it was important.

My intuition was right.

I showered and got dressed, then drove down to the morgue to identify the body. It was him, all right—Alistair Fritz Schreiber. Even though I had only met him a handful of times, the sight of his peacefully-arranged body stirred up a vague feeling of sadness in me. He'd seemed so healthy and upbeat, despite his advanced age. *The reaper comes for all of us*, I thought as I nodded to the mortician.

Now that he was gone, there was a specific sequence of events that needed to happen. It was now six in the morning. I drove to my office to begin the process. When I got there, I was surprised to find that one of the senior partners was in his office.

“Mr. Cranston?” I asked. “What are you doing here so early, sir?”

“Being a partner means always having work to do,” the gray-haired man replied. “What are *you* doing in the office? You usually don't come in until eight.”

“Mr. Schreiber passed away this morning,” I explained. “I just identified the body.”

“Ah, that's too bad. Alistair was a nice man.” He cocked his head at me. “I know there's a big commission coming from that estate, but surely it could have waited until normal work hours.”

“I'm afraid not, sir,” I replied. “The instructions for Mr. Schreiber's will are quite specific. I need to gather the beneficiaries for the reading of the will as quickly as possible.”

“Reading of the will?” He barked a laugh. “That’s only in TV shows and movies.”

“Mr. Schreiber’s requirements are very specific,” I reiterated. “He requested a formal reading at his estate.”

Mr. Cranston waved a hand. “Ah, fine. I’m sure the estate is in good hands. You know, Alistair had a lot of good things to say about you.”

I struggled to hide my surprise. “He did, sir?”

“Oh yes, he raved about you to myself and the other partners. Said you were detail-oriented, sharper than a razor, and completely dedicated to ensuring his estate was handled properly.”

I had only met Alistair Schreiber a handful of times, each one more brief than the last. I couldn’t understand why he had such a positive view of me. *Maybe he’s confusing me with someone else.*

“Oh!” Mr. Cranston said. “While I have you here, are you coming to the senior retreat in two weeks?”

“I... I wasn’t invited, sir.”

“Surely that’s an oversight. We can’t have the senior retreat without one of our top up-and-coming attorneys. Consider yourself invited now. Clear your calendar and find one of the interns to handle your workload while you’re gone.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

A bit dazed by the exchange, I fumbled the key into the company safe holding the estate instructions. Inside was a key to a safety deposit box, with instructions to contact the bank manager, no matter what hour. When he picked up the phone, he sounded unhappy at being woken. That changed when I told him why I was calling.

“I’ll meet you at the bank in ten minutes,” he quickly said. “Anything for Alistair.”

The bank manager was still wearing a night robe when he opened up for me. He led me into the vault where the safety deposit boxes were stored, then used his key on Alistair’s box, which was the largest one in the vault. Once he left the room, I used the second key to unlock the box. Inside was a wooden chest reinforced with iron. It looked like the kind of buried treasure a pirate might find on a beach.

“Crazy old man,” I muttered while lifting the box by the handles.

I returned to the office, then called three specific people listed in the instructions. One woman and two men. Only one of the men, Allen Broderick Schreiber, was related to Alistair. That was interesting, but not unusual. Last year we had a client who left half her money to the pool boy, and the other half to her Pomeranian dog.

It was seven in the morning when I got to the Schreiber estate. It looked unchanged from the time I visited months ago to arrange the estate affairs. The only difference was the police cruiser parked in the driveway. The cops were friendly, and I answered their questions underneath the watchful gaze of the massive oil painting in the foyer. Mr. Schreiber’s eyes seemed to bore into me, like the painting knew why I was there.

Chase, the gardener, arrived first. Then Robyn, Mr. Schreiber’s caretaker for the past year. She was a cute woman, with an open, innocent face and lips that were meant to be kissed. *It’s a shame she’s one of the beneficiaries*, I thought as she spoke with the police. *It would be a conflict of interest for me to ask her out. Not to mention inappropriate given the circumstances of our meeting.*

Still, I allowed myself to admire her for ten long seconds before pushing the bad idea out of my head for good. After today, I would never see her again.

Mr. Schreiber’s great-grandson arrived soon after that, and I gathered them all in the study. There was a flair of drama as I placed the chest on the desk and opened it with an ancient iron key. The will was waiting inside, covered in protective plastic. I skimmed it, then began reading.

“The people gathered in this room, and so listed individually in this will, are those dearest to me in this world,” I read out loud. “Broderick Schreiber, my great-grandson. Chase Sutherland, the gardener to my estate. Robyn, my trusted caretaker. And...”

I trailed off at the next words listed.

It didn’t make sense.

I read them a second time, then a third.

Xander Carlisle, my personal estate attorney.

The three beneficiaries were staring at me, so I quickly said, “...and that’s

it.”

They didn’t seem to notice my shock. They were busy looking at each other.

Why am I listed in this will? I barely knew the man.

The next paragraph surprised me even more:

The executor of this will, Xander Carlisle, may choose to reveal that he is a participant, or he may withhold this information as he deems fit. This decision shall have no bearing on his eligibility for the overall inheritance.

Overall inheritance? Surely not... My heart was pounding like it was trying to escape my chest. I tried to remain calm in front of the others as I continued reading.

“To each of you I have written a personal letter, to be opened privately after the completed reading of this will.” I moved the stack of letters to my lap, where the others couldn’t see it, then began handing them out. Brody, Chase, then Robyn. The last letter bore my first name in cursive handwriting. I tucked it into my pocket while the others inspected their letters.

The next part of the will listed specific items to be given to each beneficiary. A bible. Some roses. An antique chess set. When I got to my part, I quickly skimmed it without revealing anything to the others:

To Xander, my trusted estate attorney, I leave a snow globe that I purchased in Prague in 1972, when the city was still behind the iron curtain. You may find it in the north-east corner of the attic. I hope this gift will be key in influencing you to travel the world someday.

It dawned on me then. During one of our brief meetings, I mentioned wanting to visit the Charles Bridge in Prague. That’s why he included me in the will: not so that I could inherit his larger fortune, but to receive this small gift. It was a sweet gesture from the man, and I felt my heartbeat returning to normal.

But then I got to the first clause of the will. The part where everyone in the room would be eligible to win his fortune if they remained in the house the longest.

I dabbed my forehead with a handkerchief. I was sweating.

Brody seemed like an idiot surfer-bro, but he was the most astute about this. He pointed a finger at me and said, “Ah hah! You’re included in the

game, then.”

Thinking quickly, I said, “Legally, it would be an enormous conflict of interest for me to be the arbiter of the game while also actively participating.” It wasn’t technically a lie, because I was beginning to worry about such a conflict of interest and how it would hold up legally.

“And our names were specifically listed earlier in the will,” Chase pointed out. “Broderick Schreiber. Chase Sutherland. And...”

“And me, Robyn Winters,” she added.

I nodded. “There you go.” And fortunately for me, none of them pressed me further.

I read out the rest of the will to them, but my mind was racing. I was part of this crazy inheritance game. I could keep my participation a secret, or I could tell them the truth. The entire estate, worth tens of millions of dollars, could be *mine*.

A life-changing amount of money.

Brody wanted to read the will himself, but I held it out of his snatching fingers and made up an excuse about how I didn’t want him to damage it. Then, when I made copies of the will for everyone, I excluded the page where my name was listed. I was still skeptical that I was eligible for the inheritance, considering my conflict of interest as the arbiter, but that was a problem I could worry about later. For now, I was here in the house, and I had a chance.

Brody insisted he wasn’t playing any games, and went out to his car. While the others went to watch him from the window in the foyer, I opened my personal letter from Mr. Schreiber. Inside was a single piece of yellowed paper, with a single sentence written in that same flowing handwriting as my name on the outside. It was the last thing I expected the letter to say.

I want you to win.

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Robyn
Present Day

Chase and I listened while Xander calmly explained everything that had happened since the day we all arrived. He wasn't apologetic, nor was he smug about keeping such a secret for so long. He stated it all simply, like a lawyer explaining the facts of his case.

"You've been one of our competitors this whole time," I said when he was done. "And you didn't tell us?"

"The instructions in the will specifically gave me that power," he replied. "Believe it or not, I was reluctant to keep the secret. Until I read the letter Alistair left me." He pulled it out of the pocket of his robe. "Read it for yourself."

Chase snatched it out of his hand and held it up. The name *Xander* was written on the outside in Alistair's flowing handwriting. The letter inside was identical to mine.

"You're not going to believe this," Chase said, "but my letter—"

"Said the same thing?" I answered for him. "Mine too. This handwriting looks like Alistair's."

"I don't understand," Chase said. "Why would he tell each of us that he wants us to win?"

"Curious," Xander said, stroking his chin. "He found the perfect way to motivate each of us to stay in the game. As if the inheritance itself wasn't enough. Like throwing a steak into a pack of dogs."

"It worked on Brody," I added. "He started driving off the estate that first day, then turned back around. When he came inside, the letter was open in his hand."

"But you barely knew Alistair," Chase pointed out. "Why would he include

you in the will?”

“I’ve been asking myself that question a hundred times a day for the past nine days,” Xander replied. “Believe me: I wish I knew.”

Suddenly, Brody’s voice echoed down the hallway. “I know I stormed off in a hurry earlier, but I didn’t expect you all to have a party up here at midnight. If I had known my drinks would get you *that* hammered...” He appeared in the doorway and froze. “HEY! Who the hell removed the letters from the safe?”

I held up all four. “Xander put a letter in the safe. He’s been a participant this whole time.”

Brody rounded on him. “What the actual shit-fuck, dude?”

We spent a minute catching him up to speed on the new development. Brody looked like he wanted to get into a fist-fight with Xander, but he managed to show restraint.

“We should have known,” he said once we were done explaining. “He was in the attic snooping around for that snow globe. And he has been just as eager to find clues and clauses as us.”

“There were four pieces of candy in the safe,” Chase added. “One for each participant.”

“Oh, good catch,” I said.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” Brody said to Xander. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I was going to tell you,” he said. “The letters need to be read out loud for everyone, so there was no getting around that. Eventually I would have to come clean.”

“So you were going to choose a policy of honesty... once your hand was forced,” I said.

Xander held up a finger. “I want each of you to put yourselves in my shoes for a moment. You discover you’re one of the participants to this game, and might inherit tens of millions of dollars. Would you tell the other participants, three people you’ve never met? Or would you keep it a secret for a little while, as the will says you can?”

“I don’t know what I would do,” Chase admitted.

Xander pointed at him. "There you have it."

"I would have chosen honesty," I said stubbornly.

"Really?" Xander approached me and raised an eyebrow. "You would have chosen honesty?"

"Yes."

"You didn't even tell us the truth about your own circumstances," he accused. "Let alone a secret like this."

"None of my secrets affected the game itself," I argued. "It was different."

Xander's dark eyes pierced into me. "That's tough for me to believe, because I think you're *still* hiding secrets from us."

I tried not to flinch. *How does he know that?* He was probably bluffing. He didn't know my biggest secret of all. There was no way.

"Back up a few steps," Brody suddenly said. "Why did you open the safe early?"

Xander gestured at us. "They opened it. They wanted to see what you wrote."

"I knew you couldn't wait a week!" Brody exclaimed. "You're talking about trusting Xander, when none of us can trust you!"

"You were being secretive about it! We wanted to make sure you weren't donating it all to ISIS or something."

Brody crossed his arms and paced around the room shirtless. "Well, you might as well read them out loud, now that you know."

"We don't know anything," I replied. "We didn't read the letters yet."

Chase cleared his throat. "I read part of Brody's letter."

Brody made an exasperated noise.

"I could disqualify you both from the game for tampering with the safe like that," Xander said. "But, as a gesture of good will, I won't do that. Instead, we will pass the letters around for everyone to read. Then, in five more days, we will formally read them out loud the way the will instructed. How does that sound to everyone?"

"I think they should get kicked out of the house," Brody said sullenly. "And then *you* should voluntarily leave. I deserve the inheritance more than

any of you cheaters.”

“That is not an action I am prepared to take at this time,” Xander replied.

“Fine,” I said. “Chase, start passing the letters out.”

The four of us sat on the floor and began reading the typed letters quietly. I started with Chase’s letter.

I intend to donate 50% of the inheritance to the National Resources Defense Council. The remaining 50% I will keep for myself. I will pay off my student loans, then put whatever is left into a savings account for future use.

-Chase Sutherland

I was happy to see that Chase was truthful with his letter. I passed it to Xander, then picked up the next letter.

I, Xander Carlisle, will keep the full amount of Alistair Schreiber’s inheritance to myself. I will invest it in a low-cost index fund, putting aside \$10,000 in a separate account to handle any fees associated with the management of the account.

-Xander Carlisle

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered. “You’re keeping everything for yourself?”

“I am not!” Brody said defensively.

“Not you. *Him.*” I nodded at Xander.

“By investing the full amount,” Xander argued, “the account will earn *millions* of dollars per year in interest alone. That will allow me to donate far more in the long-term than just giving it away today.”

“Yeah, right,” Chase muttered. “Like we have any reason to believe you.”

“It’s the truth,” he replied.

While they snapped at each other, I skipped over my own letter and unfolded Brody’s.

I'm keeping \$1,000,000 of the inheritance for myself. I will use it to pay off Mrs. Canton's mortgage, and whatever is left I will use as a down payment for my own house someday.

Another \$1,000,000 I will donate to The Jews.

The rest of the inheritance I will donate to the United Way of California.

-Broderick Schreiber

My jaw dropped as I passed the note to Chase. He outright gasped when he read it.

“See?” Brody said smugly. “We all made a pact to donate a million bucks to the Jewish pope, but I’m the only one who honored that promise!”

“Oh my God,” Chase groaned.

“Who the hell is Mrs. Canton?” Xander asked while reading it.

A huge grin split Brody’s face. “She’s the secretary at my office. Super nice lady. Her house was all paid off, but she had to take out a new mortgage on it when her daughter got sick. Which is fucking bullshit. So I’m fixing it. If I win, I mean.”

“I can’t believe it,” Chase said. “You’re actually donating all of it to charity.”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “Because I’m a good person. Unlike you selfish assholes.”

“I donated half of mine to charity!” Chase said.

“Why did you want to keep this a secret?” I demanded. “Why not just tell us?”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t believe me. You’d call me a liar.” Brody swung an accusing finger in a wide arc. “Each of you has judged me since the moment I walked into this house. Well, I’m putting my money where my mouth is. That letter shows who I really am.” He puffed up his chest proudly.

“You don’t want *any* of the inheritance?” Xander asked.

Brody shrugged. “I make good money already. I’m not, like, *super* rich, but I have enough to live comfortably. It would be fucking rad to have a house all paid for, though.”

I stared at him with new eyes. This was the guy who had pulled up in a Jeep blaring music, who hit on me the moment we met, and who was more concerned with missing his surfing window than with his great-grandfather's death. Yet he was the most generous out of all of us.

Well now I feel like the biggest jerk in the world.

"I think we're missing the point in all of this," Chase said. "Xander has been lying this whole time, *and* he's keeping the full inheritance for himself."

"Temporarily investing," he corrected. "To be donated to charity in perpetuity. All of you are ignoring the power of compound interest."

"Suuure," Chase said doubtfully.

"How can we ever trust you again?" I said. I felt even more betrayed because he and I had shared a private moment in this very room, playing pool earlier. *Good thing I didn't kiss him when I wanted to.*

"How about this," Xander said. "I think I have another lead on a clue. If I share it, will that earn me some points?"

"You should have shared it before now," Brody said.

"It just came to me ten minutes ago," he replied irritably. "I couldn't sleep, so I examined the will for the millionth time. One part sounded familiar, and I finally realized why. I was going to tell you about it, which is when I heard you two up here messing with the safe."

"Which part?" I asked.

He unfolded his copy of the will and pointed. "*And so it is you few, you happy few, who shall be rewarded.* Recognize that?"

I glanced at Chase. "No."

"It's almost word-for-word from a speech in Henry V."

"Who's Henry?" Brody asked.

"Shakespeare," Xander said dryly.

"Huh," Brody said. "I thought his first name was William."

I reached over and touched Brody's knee. "Henry V is a Shakespeare play." Turning to Xander, I added, "Let's go check the library."

We all filed downstairs: Brody in his tight boxer-briefs, Chase in sweatpants, and Xander in his robe and boxers. Not for the first time, I was

struck by how good-looking the group was. If I was going to be stuck in a house with three people, I was lucky it was these guys.

As we passed through the foyer, the giant oil painting of Alistair seemed to stare down at me. *Hey, don't judge me*, I thought while glancing up at it. *You would do the same if you were in my shoes.*

Once we were in the library, we began searching the four walls of bookshelves. The order and arrangement seemed to be by genre. There was an entire shelf dedicated to religious texts from around the world. Next to that was an entire section of spy thrillers, and above that was a row of World War Two biographies. Finally, Chase found the section we were looking for: an entire shelf filled with the complete works of William Shakespeare in order of publication.

Xander grabbed the copy of Henry V and quickly flipped through the pages. He even held the book by the spine and shook it. But nothing fell out, clause or otherwise.

“Damn,” he said. “I guess I was reaching.”

“Are you sure it’s the right one?” Brody asked. “Maybe the quote was from a different play?”

“I’m positive,” Xander replied. “I’ve memorized the most popular Shakespeare plays by heart. The quote I referenced is in act four, scene three.”

Brody flipped through the book and began reading it under his breath. “From this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered...”

“It was a good effort,” Chase said grudgingly. “Thanks for sharing.”

“You didn’t already find the clause and remove it,” I asked slowly. “Did you?”

Xander shook his head. “I swear I did not.”

Brody was still reading. “...we few, we happy few, we band of brothers...” He perked up. “Hey! Band of Brothers. That show was *dope*. Especially the part where they parachute into France at night, with the flak blowing up all around them.” His eyes widened. “Hey. You don’t think the DVD is a clue, do you?”

Band of Brothers. Hadn’t I just seen something related to that?

“Another reference to Nazi Germany.” Chase gave me a sideways look. “They’re really starting to pile up.”

“Bro. Stop calling my great-grandfather a Nazi,” Brody snapped. “Let’s go check the DVD shelf up in the theater room.”

“There was already a clue in a DVD,” Xander said. “It’s clear that Alistair was not a lazy man. I doubt he would use the same clue location twice.”

“Not a DVD,” I said, scanning the shelves where I had started looking. I found the book I wanted and pulled it from the shelf. “But what about a book?”

The three of them gathered around and read the title:

Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters.

“Dick Winters,” Brody said with a grin. “You two weren’t related, were you?”

I frowned at him. “Why would we be related?”

“Why indeed,” Xander said while giving me a knowing look.

“Uh, because your last name is Winters,” Brody said like it should have been obvious.

“Oh, duh,” I replied. “No, we’re not related. Hey, I think there’s something inside!”

I flipped through the book. My thumb stopped somewhere in the middle, where there was a faded yellow envelope pressed between the pages. I turned it over in my hands while the guys all gathered around:

CLAUSE 7

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Robyn

“I’ll be damned,” Xander said. “My hunch was right.”

“Brody’s the one who made the connection to Band of Brothers,” Chase pointed out.

“Sure,” Brody admitted, “but I wanted to go hunting for a DVD. Robyn found the book.”

I tore open the envelope with shaky fingers. It had been a while since we had discovered a clause, and my heart was racing. Would this be the one that broke open the entire game?

I held up the clause for everyone to read.

Clause 7: With regards to the previous clause, wherein I said I will attempt to make contact from the afterlife: I will focus my efforts on one specific room. It is the room where I spent many a late night in the summer of 1951.

“Yes!” Chase said, pumping his fist happily. “I’ve been banging my head against the wall trying to get some evidence. This will make it much easier.”

“Will it?” Xander asked. “Do we know what room he is referring to?”

“He liked to stay up late playing pool,” Brody immediately said. He turned to gaze around the room. “He used to tell me stories about how the noise kept Annabelle up at night.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But what about the theater room?”

“Why the theater room?” Chase asked.

“He had an antique theater projector installed soon after moving in,” I explained. “It was really expensive for the time. Alistair spoke fondly of the movie parties he would host in the 50s.”

“But do we know it was 1951 specifically?” Chase insisted.

“I guess we don’t...”

Xander was staring off in thought. “I may have the answer down in the study.”

We followed him down two flights of stairs. The oil painting in the foyer, illuminated by two lights in the frame, seemed to watch over us as we went. Once in the study, Xander unlocked the box that the will was in. He took out the main copy and flipped to the back.

“All of his accounts and holdings are listed here,” Xander explained while scanning the page with a finger. He stopped on one line. “He created a corporation to handle the buying and selling of his vast collection of artwork.”

“Art collecting,” Chase muttered. “Hope it wasn’t art he collected from families in—”

“If you say Nazi Germany,” Brody snapped, “I’m going to smash your head into that grandfather clock.”

Chase held up both palms in surrender.

“The corporation,” Xander continued in an annoyed tone, “was formed in the spring of 1951.” He tapped the will with his finger.

“Which means he would have spent all of his time... where?”

“There’s some artwork in the attic.” Xander pursed his lips together. “But most of his collection is in the private climate-controlled museum in Los Angeles.”

Brody suddenly ran around to the other side of the desk and began opening drawers. He tossed papers and binders out onto the floor until he found a ledger, large and bound in faded leather. He flipped open to the first page and held it out.

“He kept an accounting of every piece of artwork in this book,” Brody explained. “When I visited, sometimes he would be sitting in here, going through the book.”

“The study does make sense,” Xander admitted.

I gazed around the room. So did Chase. Everyone became very quiet as we listened for any sounds or noises that could be paranormal.

I opened my mouth to say that there was nothing, but then there was a scratching noise by the outer wall. All of us whirled to face it. The scratching continued, barely audible.

“What. Is. That?” I whispered.

Chase laughed and said, “Follow me.” We went out into the foyer and through the massive front door. Pitch darkness surrounded the house, and the trees swayed and creaked with the wind, giving everything an eerie feel. I realized I was clinging to Xander’s arm, and hastily let go. Thankfully, he pretended like it hadn’t happened.

Brody was pointing to the front of the house, where a row of tall bushes were planted. One of the bushes was jerking back and forth with the wind gusts, causing a particularly long branch to scrape against the house. Right where the study was located.

“Well damn,” Brody said. “If this place had a competent gardener, that wouldn’t be scraping like that.”

Chase glared at him. “I’ve been meaning to trim the bushes on the front. I haven’t had time.”

As we went back inside, I said, “I do think the clue is referring to the study.”

“That’s my assumption as well,” Xander agreed.

“I’ll grab my equipment. I’m so excited!” Chase ran upstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

“He’s like a little kid who made a new friend,” Xander mused.

I whirled on him. “I’m not going to forget that you hid your participation all this time. And that you snuck a letter into the safe.”

“I don’t expect you to forget,” he said calmly. “But considering all the *secrets* everyone around here is hiding, I hope you’ll forgive me.” He gave me a pointed look.

I hurried upstairs and got back in bed. Brody came into the room moments later, but he didn’t appear to be staying: he was collecting his sleeping bag and blankets from underneath the bed.

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

“I want to spend the night in the study with Chase. If he finds evidence of

the paranormal and ends the whole inheritance game, I want to be there to stake a claim to it too.” Brody stared at the ground again and ran a hand through his blond hair. “I also don’t feel like sleeping in here tonight.”

I gave a start. “Why not?”

His blue gaze locked onto me. “I know we were all strangers when we first got here. But I thought we had put aside our differences. I thought we were starting to trust each other. So it *really* sucked when I caught you in the parlor, opening the safe so you could read my letter.”

“It wasn’t just me.” It wasn’t a strong excuse, but it was all I had. “Chase was doing it, too.”

“I expect it of Chase. He’s still wary around me. But seeing you do it, after we’ve... fooled around? That fucking stings, Robyn.”

He gave me a long, hurt stare, then carried his bedding out of the room. It felt like I had kicked a puppy.

I closed the door after him and got in bed. I had hurt my relationships with two of my housemates, and the third turned out to have been hiding his participation in the game the entire time. There was a hollow ache behind my breastbone, and the longer I thought about my situation, the more it hurt. I felt more alone now than I did the first night we had all arrived.

Brody gave me the cold shoulder the next morning in the kitchen, hunched over his cereal and refusing to make eye-contact. When I tried talking to him, he answered in one-syllable grunts, and eventually carried his bowl of cereal out of the room.

“Looks like he’s upset about the letters,” Xander commented from the table, spoon submerged in a bowl of oatmeal.

“I suppose I don’t blame him. Just like I don’t blame myself for being upset at *your* betrayal last night.”

He put down his spoon and gave me a level look. “Throughout this game, since we arrived, I have tried to ensure I have as little advantage as possible. I have shared all of my information with the three of you.”

“True,” I said. “Unless you’re hiding the really good clues.”

“I can assure you, I am not.” He tongued the inside of his cheek. “I am going to memorize the periodic table later, if you would like to help.”

“I would not like that,” I replied.

“Well, if you wanted to watch a movie in the theater room, or—”

“I’m busy.” I left the kitchen with my coffee before he could respond.

The truth was: I wasn’t busy. I didn’t have anything to do at all, so I went for a jog around the estate. It was a lot harder without a partner. I hadn’t realized how much Brody’s enthusiasm motivated me during our runs. I called it quits after just four laps.

Chase was in the study, surrounded by his ghost hunting equipment. His fingers were typing on his laptop at lightning speed, and he had headphones on. It looked like he was coding for his day job, so I didn’t disturb him.

Instead, I pulled out my copy of the will and spent a while reading it. And re-reading it. And after that, I read it some more. I eventually found a pen and began crossing off the parts we had already discovered.

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds, will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have ~~fanned the flames~~ of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be ~~extinguished~~ and ~~banishing the cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind~~. And so it is ~~you few, you happy few~~, who shall be rewarded. ~~Now that my soul has departed from my body~~, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. ~~Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.~~

The first sentence seemed to be normal legalese, and didn’t have any clues in it. After that, there were several parts that I wrote down on a separate sheet of paper:

-death of my beloved wife

-passion in my life

-shall be rewarded

-keep me in your thoughts

-reigniting a fire

-drink my favorite drink
-think of me—think of me fondly

The first four didn't *seem* to be clues. But the last three did. "Reigniting a fire" might have been a second reference to both the fire extinguisher and the fire lily plant. The part about drinks was self-explanatory, and we had searched pretty much every ounce of liquor on the estate—short of emptying the bottles. And the last one, thinking of him fondly, didn't ring any bells.

Suddenly, Xander appeared in my doorway. "Robyn..."

"I don't want to talk to you right now," I replied.

"I don't want to talk to you, either." He held up his phone. "The police do."

The hair on my neck stood on end as I got up and took the phone. "Hello, this is Robyn."

"This is Officer Cohen," a deep, feminine voice answered. "We met at the Schreiber estate the morning of his death. Do you have a moment to answer some more questions?"

More questions? "Of course I do, officer."

"Can you tell me what medications Alistair was taking?"

"Um. He took dozens of pills a day. If you give me a moment, I can check his bathroom, where they were stored..."

"Why don't you start with the medications you can remember."

Alarm bells were going off in my head at this point. "Is this somehow related to his death?"

There was a long silence on the line. "The medications, please?"

"Right. Um. Off the top of my head, he took indomethacin and celecoxib for arthritis. Enalapril for blood pressure. Ursodiol for his liver. Depending on his weight fluctuations, he took a diuretic. Hydrochlorothiazide, I think. Then there was—"

"Did you ever," the cop interrupted, "administer any opiates to Mr. Schreiber?"

"Opiates? No."

"You never gave him morphine?"

I felt my pulse quicken. “No, never any morphine. I think he had a bottle of Hydrocodone in his cabinet, but he almost never took it. He preferred to use Ibuprofen when his arthritis caused him pain.”

“You’re telling me,” the cop said slowly, “that you never administered morphine to Mr. Schreiber, nor did you ever see him take it?”

“Yes, I’m positive,” I replied. “I would have known about it.”

“Thank you for your help; I don’t have any further questions at this time.”

“Wait!” I said before she could hang up. “Is this related to his death? Was it a morphine overdose?”

“I’m sorry, but we cannot discuss the specifics of his death at this time. Thank you again for the help.”

The line went dead.

“The autopsy revealed morphine in his system?” Xander asked.

I handed him back his phone. “They wouldn’t say. But I don’t know why else they would ask.”

“We should check his medicine cabinet,” Xander suggested.

“We don’t need to do anything,” I snapped. “I’m going to check his medicine cabinet, while you go do something else that doesn’t distract me.”

Xander smiled apologetically, then left.

I went into the master bathroom where Alistair kept all of his pills. The bottles he used regularly were arranged on the bathroom counter in a cluster, but I didn’t see any morphine. Nor did I find anything in the cabinet where some of his lesser-used medications were stored. The bottle of Hydrocodone was there, but it was nearly full, which was how I remembered it the last time Alistair had needed stronger pain relief than Ibuprofen.

They’re probably just checking every angle, I thought. If he died of a morphine overdose, they would have searched the property more thoroughly.

Everyone ate dinner separately that night. I put on a movie in the theater room—the cinema version of *Phantom of the Opera*—but got bored after a few minutes. Eventually, I went down to the second floor to get ready for bed.

Brody was in Alistair’s bedroom, talking on the phone to a coworker about some new prescription drug they were going to offer. I hung out in the

doorway for a few minutes until he hung up.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“I owe you an apology. This inheritance has all of us on edge. Distrusting each other and being suspicious of every little thing. I should have respected your privacy regarding the letter.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You should have.”

“I hope you’ll forgive me. I’m making breakfast in the morning. Breakfast for breakfast, the way you think it should be made. You’re welcome to join me.”

He stared at me for a long while. Once again, I was struck by just how much he looked like a younger version of Alistair. The blue eyes, which were somehow warm instead of icy. The thick, sandy-blond hair. I remembered how *good* he felt up against me in bed, spooning me while driving his cock into me from behind. I missed that kind of closeness. I missed the flirty texts he would send me.

“I’ll think about it,” he finally said. “Night, Robyn.”

“Goodnight.”

I brushed my teeth in the hall bathroom and went to my room feeling lonelier than before. But then I realized something was different. Sitting on the windowsill was a small porcelain pot. Inside it, nestled into fresh black soil, was a green plant with bright orange petals.

There was a note stuck into the soil:

I don’t know what’s going on between us, but here’s a peace offering. Remember not to eat the petals. They’re poisonous.

Smiling to myself, I didn’t feel so alone anymore.



Chase

“Damnit,” I muttered as I highlighted a section of code and deleted it. “Why isn’t this working?”

I was so far behind on the coding project for my day job. I had been spending far too much time wandering around this big old house, searching for ghosts that weren’t there. And after one evening camped out in the study, I was starting to wonder if I had been wrong about the paranormal all along.

And if I wasn’t careful, I was going to lose my day job because of it.

“Knock knock.”

I looked up from my laptop and saw Robyn standing in the doorway to the study, with a pillow and blanket wrapped under one arm. She was wearing her pajamas, and looked as cute as the day I had met her.

“You know,” I said, “you don’t have to say *knock knock*. You can just knock.”

“I feel like someone has told me that before.” She gave me a small smile. “Mind if we have a slumber party? I would hate to miss it if you found proof of the great beyond and won the inheritance.”

I closed my laptop screen. “I don’t mind at all. But if a ghost appears, stay back and let me do the talking.”

I helped her arrange her blankets and pillows on the floor, then we both sort of stood there awkwardly. I went around to all my paranormal equipment, checking the sensors and ensuring everything was normal. Nothing *actually* needed to be checked; I was just trying to look busy because I didn’t know what to say to Robyn. How had things gotten so awkward between us?

“Thank you for the fire lily,” she finally said. “Listen, Chase... I owe you an apology. I’m sorry for sleeping with Brody. I’ve been feeling vulnerable

lately, and you were distancing yourself, so I turned to him. It shouldn't have happened. And if it means you and I have a chance at *something*, I'll stay away from him."

I gave a start. "That's why you slept with him?"

She frowned at me. "Well, yeah."

I sat cross-legged on my sleeping bag. "I feel like an idiot."

"Why did you think I slept with him?"

"I thought you were trying to play him for the inheritance," I admitted. "Like, using your feminine wiles to get in his head, so you could convince him to let *you* have the inheritance."

Her jaw dropped. "You think I'm that... that... nefarious? *Feminine wiles*?"

"I don't know!" I replied. "I was worried about how the inheritance would affect *our* potential to maybe go on a date or something, so I didn't want to get too close to you until it was all settled. Then I saw him coming out of your room one morning. I assumed you were being tricky with him or something. And when I started imagining you playing him, it made me wonder if you were playing *me*."

"Oh, Chase." She sat next to me and took my hands. "That's not true at all."

I laughed ruefully. "I realize that now. I got in my head and over-analyzed everything. So I pushed you away even more. But since then, I've felt awful. Like I've lost something really special."

Robyn's eyes were wide. "Me too."

"I've loved getting to know you. Before Alistair died, and since then. Making out with you in the greenhouse, and hooking up in the attic..."

"Oh thank God," she exhaled. "I thought maybe I was bad in bed, which is why you started acting weird!"

"No! You were very, *very* good. So much so that I haven't been able to stop thinking about it."

She grinned sheepishly. "I would say the same about you."

I smiled with her, but only for a moment. "Okay, so what about Brody? I'm not jealous, not *really*, but if you like him more than me..."

“No! I don’t like him more than you. But... I still kind of like him. He’s not as douchy as we originally thought. He’s actually kind of sweet, in a frat-boy kind of way.”

A little bit of jealousy *did* rear its ugly head when she said that, but it faded quickly. Deep down, I didn’t care who she slept with. If the roles were reversed, and I was alone in a house with three women, I might have done the same thing. Maybe. And ultimately, I didn’t feel threatened by Brody.

“You can do whatever you want with Brody,” I said. “That doesn’t affect anything between you and me.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I swear. As long as you like me more.”

She smiled. “You don’t have to worry about that.” The smile faded. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Of course.”

“I was hurt when you said you wanted to wait until we got out of the house to date, and how we should keep it casual in the meantime. It made me think you wanted to wait and see if you won the inheritance. That you would be with me if you didn’t win it, but if you *did*, you would run off and start dating supermodels or something.”

I barked a laugh. “Supermodels?”

“Yes,” she said sullenly. “Supermodels. Down in Los Angeles. With tiny waists, big asses, and huge fake boobs.”

“Hmm. Every man *does* love big fake boobs,” I said.

Robyn playfully smacked me on the thigh.

“I don’t know why I said that,” I admitted. “I guess I was afraid of the inheritance changing us. Or it getting in the way.”

“I get that.” She patted my thigh now. “I’m sorry I slept with Brody...”

“No,” I interrupted. “Don’t apologize. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Are you sure?”

I answered by cupping her cheek and pulling her into a hard kiss. The kind of kiss that takes your breath away and leaves you gasping after.

The kind of kiss that soothes all wounds.

Her chest heaved when we finally pulled away. It took a lot of effort not to stare at her hard nipples poking through her pajama top.

“Are the walls in this room thick?” she asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” I replied. “Why?”

She smiled. “Because I want you to do things to me that might wake up the whole house.”

My cock stirred at the comment. She was staring at me with those big brown eyes, innocent and sexy all at the same time.

Before I could make a move, a piece of equipment began clicking excitedly. Both of us turned toward it in surprise.

“What’s that?”

“The Geiger counter,” I said, jumping up and grabbing the device. “It’s detecting an abnormal amount of radioactive energy.”

The clicking stopped, so I began aiming the device in a circle. When I reached the wall by the door, the clicking resumed. I hurried over there and pointed the instrument at the wall, following the clicks as they moved across the room. It began sloping upward, then faded away as we reached the corner.

“Could something else cause that?” she asked. “Like a rat?”

“Not unless the rat swallowed a gram of uranium.” I stared at the wall and ceiling, picturing the layout of the house in my head. It was moving toward one of the bedrooms upstairs. I glanced over at Robyn.

“We can pause our kiss,” she assured me. “Let’s go follow the activity!”

We hurried upstairs and down the hall to the bedroom that was directly above the study. It was another spare bedroom next to the laundry room, which none of us were using. The bed and sitting chair in the corner were covered with plastic, and dust hung in the air.

“This was his wife’s bedroom,” Robyn explained. “She was prone to sleeplessness, and would come in here occasionally to avoid disturbing Alistair.”

I aimed the Geiger counter at the corner of the floor, and the clicking immediately resumed. Both of us leaned close to the wall as we followed it across the room, around the corner by the bed, and then off into the next wall.

But when we hurried into that room, there was no clicking to be found. I scanned every inch of the room twice, then returned to the bedroom next door. The source of the radioactivity was gone.

“Okay,” Robyn said. “The hair on my arms is standing up. What was that?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But it’s *something*.”

“Was that enough evidence to satisfy the clause? The one about winning the inheritance?”

“Surely not,” I replied. “It said the evidence needs to be *definitive*. We need more than that.” I looked around the room. “But we’re getting closer. I can feel it.”

“Do you want to bring more equipment up here and search around?” she asked.

I thought about it for a moment, then shook my head. “Whatever it was, it’s gone. Paranormal interactions like that are usually fleeting.”

She arched an eyebrow at me. “You’ve had enough paranormal encounters to know that?”

“Well... not *me*, exactly. But ghost hunters in general. Point is, the ghost encounter is over.”

“Good,” she said, backing me up against the wall. “Because I’m going to need your complete, undivided attention.”

And then she kissed me.



Chase

I was so focused on the potential ghost that I wasn't expecting Robyn to make a move on me. She stood on her tip-toes, wrapped her arms around me, and smashed her lips against mine.

And for a while, I forgot all about the reason we had come up here.

"Sorry," she breathed when it finally ended. "I just had to—"

She didn't get a chance to finish her sentence, because I was closing the door with one hand and pushing her toward the bed with the other. I tore away the plastic cover, revealing soft sheets underneath. Robyn's ass bounced on the edge as she sat down, and I covered her with my body and kissed her again.

"I only wanted a kiss!" she protested. "I wasn't trying to turn this into more."

"Too bad," I replied. "Because I have to have you now."

She moaned as I dove into her again, kissing her neck and digging my fingers into her thigh, squeezing her with need. I could feel the heat from her pussy radiating up through her pajamas, a heat that I desperately needed to feel without any impediment. I tore away the pajamas, paused for a moment to savor the beautiful sight of her white cotton panties, then ripped them away just as quickly.

"I want you," she whispered. "*Badly.*"

I was rock hard by this point, and wanted to bury my cock deep inside of her. I wanted to shake the bed on its foundation in a way that hadn't happened in who-knows how many years.

But even more than that, I wanted to taste Robyn first.

I spread her legs and knelt before her, inhaling her womanly scent. It drove me wild. Yet as I leaned into her sopping wet lips, I felt her tense.

“You don’t have to,” she said meekly.

I grinned up at her. “Nobody *has* to do anything. I’m doing exactly what I want to do.”

I couldn’t resist. My desire was too strong. Gripping her legs tightly, I devoured her pussy while she squirmed and moaned. She tasted so wonderful, soft and warm on the inside, a blossoming pink flower for me to please. As she arched her back and gripped my hair she began making more noise, so I ran one hand up her chest, brushing past a hard nipple through her shirt until I found her mouth, then clamped my hand over it.

This made her go wild; she let out louder moans, muffled properly by my hand, and her pussy lips quivered and contracted around my tongue. Finally she let out one long cry of pleasure and arched her back so violently I was certain it would snap. Her fingers gripped the plastic cover and squeezed as tight as she could.

Slowly, like a balloon deflating, she sighed back into the sheets.

I gave her inner thigh a final kiss before sliding up next to her, kissing her gently on the lips to allow her to taste herself. Her eyes were closed like she was already in a deep sleep, and she kissed me back so softly I wondered if she would pass out then and there.

“That. Was. Amazing,” she whispered.

“Thought your back was going to snap,” I said as I curled up against her body. It was hot like a furnace as she folded herself up against me.

“I wouldn’t have minded. I would have died happy.”

“If you insist...” I slipped a hand underneath her ass and another by her neck, pretending like I was about to snap her in half like a twig. She squealed and pulled away, laughing softly in the darkness.

“Careful,” I said. “You don’t want to make too much noise, or Xander and Brody might hear.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “Sometimes it’s fun to be secretive. Like in the greenhouse. Or the attic...”

She shoved me playfully. “You know what I mean.”

“I suppose.”

“You suppose?” She pushed me onto my back and swung a leg over my body. I could feel the juices of her pussy brushing along my cock, which made me twitch with desire. She leaned over me, brown hair like a curtain blocking out everything but our faces and tickling my cheeks.

“Every way with you is fun,” I said.

Robyn leaned back until her sopping entrance was pressed hard against my dick, then ground herself up and down my shaft. I let out a low rumble from my throat while she gyrated back and forth.

“This kind of fun?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

“Mmm hmm.”

Robyn pulled her shirt over her head, bare breasts bouncing back down. “How about now?”

“Very much fun, yes,” I grinned.

She didn’t torture me long; she reached in between her legs and shifted me into a vertical position. I felt the wonderful warmth of her inner walls as my tip pressed inside, and then she lowered herself farther. She didn’t hesitate, pushing all the way down until I was all the way inside, every trembling inch of me.

“Oh fuck,” I exhaled as she squeezed around my base.

Her smile deepened. She didn’t move up and down; she merely rested on me, back on her haunches like she was getting her bearings. Taking her time. In no rush at all. She was a goddess on top of me, the beautiful brown-haired girl I’d been dreaming of since she first arrived at the Schreiber mansion a year ago. Being here now didn’t feel real. I never thought we would be doing *this* in the house—not just once, but a whole bunch of times.

It was my every dream come true. I wanted her to do things to me—fuck, I wanted to do so much right back to *her*.

“You’re not allowed to make any noise,” she said. “Wouldn’t want to wake the others.”

Then she lifted her ass off me, the pleasurable friction from her tight pussy instantly raging through my lower body. She ran her fingernails along my chest as she moved, her hips pressing hard into my legs. I grabbed two handfuls of her plump ass and squeezed, which made her bite her lower lip.

“How’s that feel?” she whispered.

“Oh, I think you know.”

“I really don’t,” she said with a pout. “How am I supposed to know if you don’t *tell* me?”

“You feel good.”

“Just good?”

“Really fucking good.”

“That’s more like it.” She increased her pace a touch, a trot instead of a walk. She was so tight it was like a hand squeezing me, warm and wet and perfectly shaped to accept me inside of her. Somehow, she felt even better than our first time in the attic. I knew I wasn’t going to last very long tonight.

I wasn’t even embarrassed about it.

“Ohh,” she moaned softly, tilting her head back to show off her gorgeous neck. I ran my hands up her chest and squeezed her breasts together, fingers tightening on her nipples. That drove her to ride me faster, rising a little bit higher each time before lowering herself again. Her nipples must have been extra sensitive because she closed her eyes and lost herself in the rocking motion, up and down, up and down, swallowing my shaft whole with each stroke.

I kept my eyes wide, transfixed by her beauty on top of me, while she rode me.

Soon she began moving faster, crashing her body down on mine like a hammer, skin slapping together sinfully. Her mouth hung open in a silent wail of pleasure as she neared another climax. I did my best to hold onto my own, not wanting to release until she’d finished herself. And because I never wanted this to end.

Her legs began faltering from exhaustion or pleasure, so I grabbed her thighs and helped move her up and down. Her moans grew louder—almost to the point where I needed to cover her mouth—but then her legs spasmed on top of mine, and she groaned with ecstasy as the orgasm slammed into her.

I rose to take over, pushing her onto her back. But she immediately twisted around until she was on her knees, pressing her perfect round ass back against me.

“Hurry,” she moaned while touching herself. It was more like a beg. “*Hurry.*”

It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen: Robyn on her knees, heart-shaped ass waiting for me while she pressed her face into the sheets. I grabbed her narrow waist and thrust forward, allowing my cock to slide right in effortlessly. The pleasure was so intense it was a wonder I didn't immediately explode inside of her.

Robyn bounced her ass back against me, demanding I move faster. Gripping her waist tightly, I began thrusting deep inside her with long, agonizing strokes. She moaned into the bedsheets with her hair splayed around her like a dark halo.

The angle hit all of her buttons; I could feel her inner walls quivering with each stroke. She let out a long moan into the sheets while I fucked her from behind, my cock slamming into her harder and harder, urged on by her muffled cries of pleasure.

“Oh. My. God. Yes. *YES!*” she cried into the sheets.

She had no control of herself then, completely at the whim of her ecstasy. I leaned forward, grabbed a handful of her hair, and pressed her face into the sheets to muffle her cries; realizing she could now let loose, she screamed a scream that would have woken the house. I could feel her fingers moving rapidly at her clit, fast enough to start a fire, as she came again and again.

My own orgasm had been building, barely held back while I focused on her. As I felt and heard her climaxing I finally let go of my inhibitions and fucked her as hard as I could, so fast that my thighs burned almost as hotly as my pleasure.

“Come for me,” she begged, pulling her lips from the comforter. “Come *with me!*”

As I felt the tingling sensation run up my shaft, I had to bite my lip to stop myself from roaring as loud as I could. I grabbed a handful of Robyn's hair and yanked, arching her back wonderfully as I thrust one final time, burying myself deep into her as I let out my first spurts, filling her with more of my come than I thought was possible, again and again as I pressed my body as tight against her as I could because the last thing I wanted was to let go.



Robyn

It was exactly what I needed.

Despite my protests, I'd been daydreaming about Chase going down on me. Burying that beautiful face between my legs and worshiping me like I was a goddess. He made me feel like eating me out was the thing he wanted most in this world.

And that kind of enthusiasm had my toes curling within minutes.

There was something about having a *really* good orgasm that made all the aftershocks easier. I came a second time, a little bit smaller, while riding him. And then when he took over and fucked me from behind, slamming his cock into me with reckless abandon, I had the mother of all orgasms. The kind of earthquake-like climax that leveled cities and created humanitarian crises.

We didn't cuddle immediately; we hurriedly put our clothes back on, visited the bathroom, and then regrouped downstairs in the study. Once we were certain we hadn't woken the house, I curled up against his body and sighed happily.

"Forget everything I said," Chase told me while caressing my back. "I don't want to wait until we're out of this house to hook up."

"Good," I replied. "Because after that, I definitely don't want to stop. You've awoken the beast."

"The beast?"

"Mmm hmm," I said against his chest. "She's a moody, hungry monster. You need to feed her twice a day."

"*Twice* a day?"

"Sometimes more. She's demanding."

"I'll do my best," he promised.

I giggled to myself. “Do you think Alistair’s spirit watched us do it upstairs?”

Chase flinched and sat upright. “Why would you say that!”

“I was joking!”

“That wasn’t funny!” he insisted. “Now I’m going to be afraid of Alistair haunting us in our sleep tonight.”

He was half-joking, but I could tell he was half-serious, too. I shushed him and pulled him back down onto the sleeping bag and gently caressed his chest.

“Your Geiger counter was in the room with us when we had sex. It never went off again. Therefore, Alistair’s disembodied spirit did not watch us have sex.”

I felt him relax, and then he closed his eyes. Soon his breathing settled out and he was fast asleep.

I stayed up watching him sleep for a while. It was difficult to sleep with the equipment all around us, a cacophony of hums, clicks, and whirs. But I was also enjoying the sight of him too much to sleep. The cute boy I had been crushing on for so long while we worked here. I was glad that we had made up.

With Brody, it was mostly sex. The *mindless drive of our bodies*, as he had put it in one of his first flirty texts. And the sex was *great*, although I was working with a small sample size. But with Chase, it was so much more than that. I liked him. I *cared* about him. I felt the potential for so much more.

As long as the inheritance doesn’t get in the way.

My internal clock was still used to waking up super early to sneak out of the manor, so I got up before Chase and made breakfast. Xander joined me a little bit later. He didn’t say anything aside from a polite greeting, then sat at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee and browsed the news on his phone.

I was immensely suspicious of him now. The third competitor I didn’t know I had. It changed the way I thought about every interaction we’d had in the mansion. Especially when we were playing pool and I almost kissed him.

Deep down, I wanted to forgive him. But I wasn’t sure if I could ever trust him again.

“Here,” I said, sliding a plate of eggs and bacon in front of him.

“I wasn’t sure if you were going to be this nice to me,” he said, putting down his phone.

“We can live together in the house peacefully. But beyond that, we’re not friends.” *Or more than friends.*

“How can I change that?” Xander asked. “How can I make you trust me again?”

“By walking off the threshold of the Schreiber Estate.”

He smiled painfully. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. Not with this much money on the line. I don’t know why Alistair included me in his will, and it’s still a legal grey area since I’m the executor of the will, but I can’t just walk away from the opportunity.”

“I understand. And you need to understand that I can’t trust you because of it.”

He shrugged. “I would probably feel the same way in your shoes. Thanks for the breakfast.”

Xander was finished with his breakfast and long gone by the time Chase woke up and joined me. I was standing over a plate of pancakes at the stove when he came up and hugged me from behind. I put down the spatula and sighed against him.

“Morning, beautiful,” he breathed into my ear.

“Good morning yourself. Sleep well?”

“Oh, I slept *amazing*. Best night’s sleep I’ve had since we got here.”

“Even though you were in a sleeping bag on the floor?”

“Oh yeah,” he replied. “Something made it extra comfortable. I can’t remember what.”

I giggled, then twisted around and lost myself in a long good-morning kiss.

“Your breath is minty,” I said. “Did you brush your teeth before coming to breakfast?”

“Maybe.”

“You left the study,” I went on, “walked upstairs, brushed your teeth, then came *back down*?”

“I may have considered the possibility of a morning kiss when making that

decision,” he admitted while squeezing me tighter. “I also may have sat awake in my sleeping bag until Xander left, to make sure you were alone.”

“Not totally alone,” Brody said while striding into the kitchen. “Hey, don’t stop on my account. I’m just here for the breakfast you promised me.” He leaned past me to pick up a piece of bacon from the drying rack. “Breakfast *and* a show would be nice.”

Chase laughed it off and then made an excuse about needing to send a work email. When I glared at Brody, he gave me a confused shrug.

I fixed him a plate of food, but he was still in a quiet mood. It was unusual seeing the boisterous, unapologetic man acting reserved. It was like the universe had become unaligned.

As I went around the mansion tidying up that day, I wondered how I could fix it. Time would heal the wound of distrust we had caused, probably. But I didn’t like waiting. I didn’t want Brody to be this hurt person for that long. As crazy as it sounded, I wanted the *old* Brody back.

Since in-person efforts had not been successful, I started texting him that afternoon.

Me: I was thinking of getting all sweaty, but I missed my morning jog. Can you think of any other way to get all sweaty and out of breath?

Brody: Nothing comes to mind.

Strike one. Okay. Half an hour later, I tried again.

Me: How’s it hanging, hot stuff?

Brody: I don’t think you know how flirting works.

Me: You should come teach me. Meet you upstairs in the parlor? I can bend over the pool table and let you show me how to handle a stick.

He didn’t reply to that, either. Strike two.

Finally, after brainstorming ideas, I gave it another try. Brody was upstairs watching a movie with Xander, while Chase was out in the greenhouse. I

went into Alistair's bedroom, where all the weight lifting equipment was. I stripped out of my clothes until I was completely nude. And then I texted him again.

Me: I'm trying to bench press but I need a spotter.

Brody: Nice try. I'm not falling for that.

Me: Please?

Brody: I'm in the middle of 50 First Dates

Me: Wait a minute. You're watching a romcom?

Brody: I like Drew Barrymore. Don't judge.

Me: I need a spotter! See, I'm sitting here on your bench waiting for you.

I sent him a selfie of me sitting on the bench, strategically angled to hide the fact that I was nude. A few seconds later, I heard his footsteps as he left the theater room above me and came down the stairs. The portrait of Alistair above the bed loomed over me, judging me for sitting like that in his room, until I remembered that the eyes were closed on the painting.

Keep them closed, Alistair, I thought. I don't want you to see this.

"I should teach you how to do the roll of shame," Brody said while walking into the bedroom. "That way you don't need—oh fuck!"

I was straddling the bench, legs spread wide to show him *all* the goods. His response was total shock: he stood in the doorway, frozen by the sight of me.

"That's the look I was going for," I said. "You're definitely spotting me nicely right now."

"I can't believe you're naked on my bench," he said while shaking his head. "Like you own the fucking place."

"Well?" I demanded. "What are you going to do about it?"

And then he grinned.



Robyn

Brody gave me the hungriest, most intimidating look I'd ever seen as he kicked the door closed behind him and stalked toward me. I remained still, holding my spread-eagle pose. He stopped directly in front of me and gazed down, a whirlwind of thoughts passing across his blue eyes. He slowly pulled his shirt over his head, each of his abdominal muscles practically *popping* into view.

My fingers worked to remove his belt, then unzipped his jeans. I reached through the hole, finding his cock as warm and stiff as the last time I had seen it. He let out a long, deep sigh as I wrapped my fingers around his girth. It felt perfectly thick in my hand, the thing I so desperately needed inside of me.

"Xander or Chase might walk in," he said.

I stroked him a few times. "Then you'd better be quick."

He bent over me, kissing me back onto the weight lifting bench. I hissed with sudden pleasure as he rubbed my pussy, spreading one leg wider to give his fingers more room. Brody pulled his jeans and boxers all the way off, teasing me with a glimpse of only half his nude body. His legs were smooth and thick with muscle, a wonderful contrast to the pelvic bones that made those delicious V lines down toward his crotch. I reached out and touched him, running my fingers up his tan skin.

He stood before me, magnificent and beautiful. "I can't believe you tried to lure me down here with bench press safety."

"It worked, didn't it?" I said, grabbing a handful of hair and pulling him down to my lips. I felt the tip of his cock rub against my drenched slit as he covered me with his body, and just that touch was enough to send lightning bolts of pleasure through my legs. Everything below my waist was warm and desperate; a fire needing to be doused.

“I intended to be mad at you for a few more days,” he whispered while nuzzling my neck.

I reached down and took hold of his shaft, guiding it in between my lips. “Sorry to derail your plans.”

He pulled back and looked down at me with those crystal blue eyes. His angular jaw shifted with a lusty grin. “Not complaining.”

Brody sank into me steadily, until every inch of him was filling me. I let out a long moan while watching the ecstasy on his own face. He fit perfectly against my inner walls, that wonderful pressure of the first thrust. He paused there at the apex of the stroke, arms planted on either side of me, bulging with muscle like he was about to perform a set.

Slowly, he began to move back and forth. “Fuck, you feel good,” he growled, hanging his head to look down at me.

I ran my fingers into his hair and yanked his head back up. “Someone might come in,” I said, mocking his earlier concern. “Better hurry.”

I kissed him hard, and he pumped faster. With each stroke I could feel him surrendering to the pleasure, allowing himself to throw caution aside.

“Give it to me,” I crooned.

“You want it fast?”

“Ohh, I do. *Harder.*”

Soon he was pulling back all the way with each stroke and slamming into me, faster and faster, until he was a jackhammer of masculine flesh chiseling away at me from the inside. When he shoved his tongue back in my mouth I practically purred for him, my grip still tight in his hair while he had his way with me.

Every time he slammed his rod into me was like knocking a piece of brick out of the walls, until eventually I felt them all crumbling down. I clenched my inner muscles and screamed a silent scream, mouth open wide with paralyzing pleasure as my climax washed over me.

“Jesus,” he grunted, standing up straight and gripping my waist while pumping as fast as he could. “You’re so tight.”

“Come. For. Me,” I gasped as each wave of my orgasm wrecked me.

“Yeah? You want that?”

“Please.” I wanted him to feel what I felt. I wanted him to come while my orgasm was still ravaging me.

Brody’s face tightened with concentration as he gave me all he had. The veins in his arms bulged as he held my waist almost painfully, thick fingers digging into my flesh hungrily. He possessed me in that moment. I was his.

I clenched my lower muscles, possessing him, too.

“Oh shit,” he gasped, eyes widening almost with surprise. “Oh fuck...”

“Yes!”

“Oh God, I’m coming,” he warned.

I felt his first rope splash inside me, and it was like an afterburner for my own climax. The ceiling light brightened above Brody and gave him a halo effect as he tilted his head back and groaned with pleasure, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. He thrust again, and again, no longer smooth strokes but rough and desperate ones, each one sending another load of his seed deep inside me. It went on, and on, and on, until neither of us could move.

His chest heaved as he gazed down at me, an almost drunk look in his eyes. Then a huge grin split his face.

“I guess I’m not mad anymore.”

The comment made me giggle. “It took three damn tries for me to lure you into a sexy situation!”

“I was really hurt.” He leaned down and kissed me, and a bead of sweat ran down his cheek. He licked it away.

“And now?” I asked.

“Now I feel amazing. Consider yourself forgiven for reading my letter.”

“Victory!” I sat upright and reached around him to smack his chiseled ass. “Jesus. You could bounce a quarter off that.”

He twisted to show off his rump. “Squats and deadlifts, baby. Never skip leg day.”

Suddenly, there was a banging on the door. “Brody, you in there?” Xander called.

I leaped up and grabbed my pants. The bathroom was to my left. Just a few quick strides and I would be out of sight. But then Xander opened the door wide.

I had just enough time to cover myself with my clothes. Xander flinched in the doorway when he saw me, eyes lingering for a tense moment. “Good, you’re here too. I think I discovered another clue. We’re up in the parlor.”

He shut the door behind him.

Brody started laughing. “What’s so funny?” I demanded, even though I was giggling too.

“I’m just glad he didn’t open the door a couple of minutes earlier. That would have ruined the mood.”

I went to the bathroom to clean myself up. While there, I thought about what had just happened. I wasn’t good at initiating sex like that, but oh baby it was hot. The way Brody took me with animalistic desire, not wasting any time—I was *still* tingling with sexual energy.

When I came out of the bathroom, Brody was standing there. He cupped my face with both hands and gave me a long, passionate kiss.

“Thanks for the sex,” he said. “Let’s do it again sometime.”

“Your place, or mine?” I asked.

“We’ve already done it in my place every time,” Brody smirked slyly, gesturing broadly all around us. “Why stop?”

I glared at him.

“The joke is that I’m arrogantly assuming that I will win the inheritance,” he said.

“It’s extra funny when you have to explain the joke,” I teased.

He gave me another kiss, then went into the bathroom.

Once we were dressed, we went up to the third floor. Chase and Xander were standing around the old record player.

“So what’s this clue you found?” Brody asked.

A curious look passed across Chase’s eyes when he saw us enter together, but he didn’t seem jealous. “Phantom of the Opera,” he said.

“The movie with Gerard Butler?” Brody asked.

Xander gave him an even look. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that. Because Phantom of the Opera, written and scored by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, is the greatest Broadway musical of all time. The movie was an

abomination.”

“I thought it was cool,” Brody said.

“The clue,” I insisted. “What is it?”

“It’s the last line of the first clause,” Xander explained. “*Think of me—think of me fondly*. Those are the lyrics to the second song in the musical.” He held up the appropriate record sleeve, which had a picture of the white mask from the play on the front. “I haven’t listened to it yet. I wanted to gather everyone together in the interest of cooperation.”

“This doesn’t make up for you being a secret participant,” Chase warned.

“I do not expect so. But regardless, it is the right thing to do.” He placed the needle on the spinning record. Immediately, blaring organ music filled the parlor as the Overture began playing. “Ahh, I never get tired of hearing that. But the relevant song is after this.” He adjusted the needle.

The four of us leaned closer with anticipation as piano music played.

“*Think of me,*” sang a woman in a melodic voice, “*think of me fondly when we’ve said goodbye. Remember me once in a while, please promise me you’ll try...*”

Just when I was beginning to wonder if Xander was wrong about the clue, the woman’s voice cut off and was replaced with Alistair’s familiar voice. His soft German accent filled the room.

“Congratulations on deciphering another clue from my will! Assuming that is how you came to this record, rather than stumbling upon it accidentally. Oh, how I hope it is not the latter. Now then. The reason you are here. Clause Number Nine to my will...”

His voice cut off, and was promptly replaced with music from an electric synthesizer. I recognized the song right about the time Chase started groaning.

“*Never gonna give you up,*” Rick Astley sang. “*Never gonna let you down...*”

“I can’t believe he got us twice!” Brody laughed. “If Alistair is haunting us right now, he’s probably laughing his ass off.”

“Remind me,” Chase said, “is Rick going to make us cry?”

“*Never going to make you cry,*” Rick sang.

Chase nodded. “Glad that’s cleared up.”

The rick-rolling lasted ten seconds, then Alistair’s voice returned. “Oh ha hah! I am terribly sorry, but I could not resist another prank. But enough with the shenanigans! Clause Number Nine: the key to the inheritance is to make sure your eyes are open. Best of luck to you all!”

His voice ended, and the Rick Astley song returned. Xander stopped it by picking up the needle from the record.

“Aw, I was grooving to that,” Brody said.

“Make sure your eyes are open,” Chase repeated. “That’s similar to the other clause.”

“Clause Eight,” Xander read off from his copy of the will. “If you find yourself stuck, the key to advancing is to use four eyes instead of two.”

“Is this another reference to the sketch with Alistair wearing glasses?” Chase asked.

All four of us turned to look at the sketch on the opposite wall.

“I don’t believe so,” Xander said slowly. “They are similar, but different enough that I do not think it is referencing that picture.”

Picture. Eyes open. An image formed in my head, aided by a memory from only a few minutes ago. “I think I’ve got it!”

I ran from the parlor without waiting to see if anyone would follow. Down the steps I went, and back into Brody’s room. It still smelled like sex in here. I wondered if the others would sense that, too.

“The painting above the bed,” I pointed. “Alistair’s eyes are closed.”

“I think that’s the only one,” Chase said, seizing on the clue. “His eyes are open in all the other pictures in this house!”

I jumped on the bed and examined the painting more closely. I touched the closed eyes; nothing happened. Alistair was wearing a three-piece suit, with gold buttons with some sort of star on them. I gently touched each one with my thumb, but nothing happened.

“I think I see something behind it,” Brody said. He felt along the side border of the frame. “It feels like...”

There was a loud clicking sound, and then a groan of unseen machinery turning in the wall. Next to the bed, a wooden panel swung open.

“...like a lever,” Brody finished.

I hopped off the bed. The wood panel was a secret door, and behind it was only darkness. Xander turned on his cell phone light and aimed it inside.

“Is that...” I whispered.

Brody nodded excitedly. “A secret passage!”

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Robyn

“I knew it!” Brody shouted happily. “I knew this big mansion had secret passages! When I was a little boy, I used to tease Papa Alistair about it. He would just shrug his shoulders and say, “This house holds a lot of mysteries.”

I took a step forward. Before I could enter, Xander grabbed my arm. “I don’t think we should go in there.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Brody demanded. “We discovered a *secret goddamn passage* and you don’t want to explore it?”

“We don’t know how structurally sound it is,” Xander replied. “This could be from the prohibition era. A hundred years of moisture and rot might have damaged it.”

“Why are you so resistant, dude?” Brody asked. “Is your competitive side coming out, and you’re afraid one of us will discover something first?”

“My *lawyer* side is coming out, and is screaming at me that this is a huge liability concern,” Xander answered.

Chase put his foot into the passageway and tapped the floor. His shoe echoed on the wood. “Feels sturdy to me.”

“Fine,” Xander said reluctantly. “But let’s go inside one at a time.”

Brody gestured with a palm. “Ladies first.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. Xander found the clue on the record. And you discovered the switch behind the painting.”

“But you connected the dots to the painting in the first place,” Brody argued. “That was the toughest connection to make.”

“I agree with Brody,” Chase said. “You do the honors. Unless you’re afraid to go first.”

“I’m not afraid,” I said, although that’s *exactly* how I felt right then. The

secret passage was dark and narrow. My head brushed against the ceiling, forcing me to duck as I stepped inside. I paused, ensuring that the floor would indeed hold my weight, before continuing.

Suddenly the entire tunnel brightened with light. “Found the switch!” Brody said behind me. Construction lights were screwed into the wall every few feet. Dust motes hung suspended in the air, disturbed by my breath as I advanced. Everything smelled stale and mildewy. It was like I had stepped into an ancient Egyptian tomb. I glanced behind me; three sets of faces stared back at me from twenty feet away.

The floor sloped downward gently, and eventually turned into stairs. And on the wall next to them, affixed to a metal railing that followed the stairs down, was a modern chair lift.

“Son of a bitch!” I cried out.

“Are you okay?” Chase demanded, rushing into the passageway despite Xander’s protests. “What’s wrong?”

I pointed at the chair lift. “He refused to install one of these on the main stairs. He said he didn’t need it!”

“He was a stubborn man,” Brody said as he joined us. “Hey, Xander—it’s real sturdy in here. You can come with us.”

“I’m quite happy waiting, thank you,” he replied.

Chase and I descended the stairs. Brody climbed into the chair and pressed the button. The chair began moving on the rail at a snail’s pace.

“Get down from there,” I said.

“Aw, come on,” he argued. “My parents never took me to Disney when I was a kid. This is the closest thing to a ride I’ve ever been on.”

Suddenly, Xander was with us. “As an adult, you can take *yourself* to Disneyland whenever you wish.”

Brody barked a laugh. “A single guy in his late twenties going to Disney all by himself? I might as well drive a windowless van there, and carry around a sign that says FREE CANDY.”

The stairs descended about fifteen feet, then flattened out. The passageway continued for almost the entire length of the house before stopping at a dead end with a lever on the wall. Brody pulled the lever, and the dead end wall suddenly opened outward.

We stepped out of the passageway and into the library on the first floor. The passage was hidden behind one of the bookcases, which was now swung open on huge mechanical gears.

“This explains it!” I said.

“Explains what?” Brody asked.

“How Alistair got down to the library the night he died. I’ve been puzzling over that, because his arthritis was too painful for him to take the stairs by himself. It made me wonder if he was faking his arthritis pain all along. But the real answer is that he took the passageway down here.” I shook my head. “Even with my help, it took *twenty minutes* to escort Alistair up and down the stairs. And the whole time he could have just used this.”

Xander looked around the room. “It still does not explain *why* he came down here the night he died.”

“To use the typewriter?” Chase wondered. “To complete the clauses of the will.”

“Maybe,” I said.

Brody scratched the back of his head. “I don’t want to sound paranoid or anything. But are we absolutely sure Alistair is dead? I totally wouldn’t be surprised if he faked his death so he could crawl around in the walls, watching us.”

“That portrait in the foyer feels like it has been watching me,” I admitted.

Xander shook his head. “As the person who personally identified the body, I can assure you Alistair Schreiber is not alive.”

“The ninth clause led to this,” I said. “But how does this passage help us in any way?”

“Maybe he just wanted to show off his cool hidden passages?” Brody guessed. “He always got upset when people didn’t appreciate his riddles and stuff.”

“But the clause specifically states that opening your eyes is the *key* to the inheritance,” Xander pointed out. “So how is this passageway key to anything?”

“Maybe there’s a key inside we missed?” I said.

The four of us went back inside and searched every inch of the

passageway. We felt along every wall and examined each lamp. It took almost half an hour, and at the end we were left with nothing.

“So much for that idea,” Xander muttered as we regrouped in the library.

Brody joined us with four bottles of Budweiser. He began passing them out.

“I don’t want one,” Chase said. “I’m sick of Bud. I want a craft beer, like a nice IPA.”

“Aw, don’t be a beer snob,” Brody replied while shoving it into his hand. “There are only a few beers left, then we can toss the box out of the fridge and buy you a pack of whatever you want.”

“Or toss them right now.” Xander took a sip of his and grimaced. “Let’s review the clauses we have so far.”

He pulled out his printed copy of the will and clauses we had found. At the bottom, he hand-wrote the most recent one from the Phantom of the Opera record.

Clause 1: Of those gathered in this room at the time of the reading of my will, whoever remains in this house the longest, without leaving the grounds, will receive the entirety of my fortune. Since the death of my beloved wife, it is you few who have fanned the flames of passion in my life these last few years, reigniting a fire i had thought to be extinguished and banishing the cobwebs from this ancient, Aristotelian mind. And so it is you few, you happy few, who shall be rewarded. Now that my soul has departed from my body, i hope you will keep me in your thoughts while you stay in this house. Cook my favorite meal, drink my favorite drink, and think of me—think of me fondly.

Clause 2: Each of you participating in my grand inheritance game must type out what you intend to do with my estate and fortune. These letters must be *specific*. You are required to specifically list what percentages you will spend on certain things. After seven days, the letters will be collected from the safe and read aloud. Keep your eyes open, all of you.

Clause 3: The letters you write and place in my safe shall be legally binding.

Clause 5: The first person to read this letter must immediately strip down

to their underwear for the remainder of the day, or forfeit their claim to the inheritance.

Clause 6: Upon my death, I will attempt to make contact from the afterlife. Anyone who records concrete evidence of this will receive the full inheritance and the game will immediately end.

Clause 7: With regards to the previous clause, wherein I said I will attempt to make contact from the afterlife: I will focus my efforts on one specific room. It is the room where I spent many a late night in the summer of 1951.

Clause 8: If you find yourself stuck, the key to advancing is to use four eyes instead of two.

Clause 9: The key to the inheritance is to make sure your eyes are open.

“That’s funny,” Chase said. “At the end of the second clause, he mentions keeping your eyes open.”

“I guess he thought we needed multiple clues to find the secret passageway,” I said.

“He was right,” Brody muttered. “I slept under that painting for the first few nights and didn’t notice the eyes were closed.”

Xander pointed. “We’re missing the fourth clause. And then any other clauses that are after nine.”

“How many clauses are there?” I wondered out loud.

“Too many,” Xander said with a big sigh. “I’ll admit that I’m growing weary of this game.”

“Enough to leave and let us fight over the inheritance?”

“Let’s not go too far.” Xander pinched the bridge of his nose. “Besides, it’s my job to be here. I’m violating my executor duties by leaving.”

It was late, so we ordered pizza and then got ready for bed. When I finished brushing my teeth in the hall bathroom upstairs, I found Chase plugging in his iPhone in the wall of his original bedroom. The one across the hall from mine.

“Sleeping up here with the rest of us paranormal skeptics?” I asked.

He let out a long sigh. “I’m beginning to doubt that the room he referenced in the seventh clause is the downstairs study. After the radioactive event

yesterday, I haven't detected anything. And I need to get a good night's sleep, because I'll be spending all day tomorrow working on my coding project. I'm really behind."

I glanced over to my room, then back at him. "Mind if I join you?"

A sultry grin appeared on his face. "Well, that's certainly tempting."

I held up my palms. "My intentions are pure, I swear. I just want to cuddle. I'm actually..." I lowered my voice. "I'm kind of *sore*. From the sex."

Chase laughed and waved me inside. "You've got a deal. Cuddling only."

I went down the hall and told Brody that he was on his own tonight, then returned to Chase's bedroom. We crawled underneath the covers and I threw a leg over his body, resting my head against his chest.

"So are you sore from the sex with me," Chase said, "or with Brody?"

I hesitated before answering. "Both. How did you know about...?"

"Xander said he found you two together. When he was collecting everyone for the Phantom clue."

"Are you jealous?" I asked.

I felt Chase shake his head. "Weirdly, no. It helps that I'm getting to know Brody better. It was one thing when I hated him, or *thought* I hated him. Now that he's not as douchy as he seemed... No, I'm not jealous."

"I don't think I want anything serious with him," I reiterated. "I really like you, and want to pursue whatever *this* is when we get out of here."

"Me too. Which is why I don't care about any of that right now. Seriously, Robyn, you don't need to worry about me." He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "We're all having fun here until the inheritance is won."

I wanted to kiss him, to climb on top of him and show him how grateful I was, but I intended to keep my promise about just cuddling. So I snuggled against him even tighter and savored the warmth of his body.

I slept amazingly, and woke up with Chase spooning me. Just like with Brody in my room before, I could feel Chase's morning wood pushing up against my ass. Heat radiated off his cock, and it was as firm as iron. I began fantasizing about all the sexy ways I could wake him up.

Then there was a loud, insistent pounding on the door downstairs.

Chase and I both jerked upright in bed. The pounding continued, followed

by the doorbell. Chase got out of bed and ran to the window, which overlooked the front courtyard. When he turned back around, his face was pale.

“The cops are here.”

I felt a knot tighten in my stomach. “What do you think they want?”

“Maybe it has to do with Alistair’s autopsy!” Chase quickly put on some clothes while I got out of bed, and then we went downstairs. Brody was already in the foyer, speaking to two police officers in the doorway. I recognized the same two cops who had been here the day Alistair had died, and the one who had called me to ask about his medication.

“Here she is now.” Brody looked up at me. “The cops want to talk to you.”

A chill went up my spine. *No. Not now.*

“I’m Robyn,” I said in a shaky voice. “Robyn Winters.”

The second cop laughed. “No, you’re not,” she said with a snarl. “You’re Robyn *Schumacher*. And you’re being accused of identity theft.”



Brody

I wasn't a jealous kind of dude. If a guy decided to sleep with multiple women, he got high-fives and cool nicknames. I would know; I was that guy for a big part of my life. On the flip side, why did people get bent out of shape if a girl was sexually liberated? That was a double-standard, and it was *bullshit*.

So when Robyn told me I was on my own that night, and I saw her go into Chase's bedroom and close the door, I didn't get jealous. I wasn't threatened by a fucking *gardener*. He was a big guy, but I was stronger. I could take him. Which meant I wasn't threatened by him.

Robyn and I had a good thing going. I wasn't going to let her involvement with Chase get in the way of that.

But when the cops showed up the next morning and called her Robyn *Schumacher*? Yeah, I kind of freaked out.

"She's not Robyn Schumacher," I said to the lady officer. "Robyn, tell them your last name is Winters. *Tell them.*"

"I can't," she said, eyes welling up with tears. "I..."

"You're not formally under arrest," the other cop said. "Not yet. But we'd like you to come down to the station to answer some questions."

They waited while Robyn put on her shoes, then led her outside. I shared a helpless look with Chase, who was just as shocked as I was. Once our surprise wore off, we followed them outside into the sunshine.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Robyn called over her shoulder while gravel crunched underfoot. "I wish I had been honest from the start."

"She's been working here under false pretenses," the lady cop said. "Pretending to be someone she isn't, and collecting the paycheck."

"What the fuck?" I said. "You've been taking advantage of Alistair?"

“No!” Tears were rolling down her cheeks now. “That’s not true! I would never do that.”

They were about to take her away, off the estate, disqualifying her from the inheritance. I wanted to stop them, but my heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vice. If she had taken advantage of Alistair...

I realized in that moment that I cared about Robyn deeply. This woman wasn’t who she said she was, and she might have taken advantage of my great-grandfather who was nearly a hundred years old. But despite that, I wanted to defend her. I wanted to body-slam the cops and help Robyn run away. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and tell her it was going to be okay. With every fiber of my soul, I wanted to protect her.

Can I even feel this way if she’s not the woman she said she is?

Xander came running out of the house in his underwear and a T-shirt. It was the most dressed-down I had ever seen the lawyer. “Robyn, don’t say another word!”

“I’m sorry Xander, I—”

“Stop talking!” He skidded to a stop between the cops and their police cruiser. “I’m the legal representative for Ms. Schumacher. I would like a moment to speak with her.”

The officers looked at each other, then stepped back to give them some room. Chase and I watched as Xander put a hand on Robyn’s shoulder and spoke quietly to her. He seemed to be asking questions. She nodded, then shook her head, then nodded emphatically. Finally, Xander turned back to the police.

“This is all a huge misunderstanding,” Xander explained. “You’ve made a mistake.”

“Well isn’t that a relief?” the male cop said sarcastically. “I’m sure Robyn whatever-her-name-is can clear things up down at the station.”

His partner gave him a look.

“Sorry. I’ve been working on my sarcasm. My therapist says it’s a defense mechanism when I’m forced to be confrontational.”

Xander shoved a copy of the will at him. “Alistair Schreiber’s will specifically lists his caretaker, Robyn, as one of his potential inheritors. It’s all a big game to see who inherits his fortune. If she leaves the estate, if *any*

of us leave the estate, then we're disqualified."

"That's very sad for her," the lady cop said. "But if you're her lawyer, you probably need to come down to the station with her. She's looking at several charges of identity theft and unauthorized computer access."

They opened the rear door to the cruiser and began pushing Robyn inside. Xander looked pained for a moment, then said, "Okay! I'll come down to the station."

"Dude!" I said. He would actually give up his shot of the inheritance? Just like that?

"But first, I want you to read this." Xander shoved the will at them again. "Please, read the preamble to the will. This part right here." He tapped the page emphatically.

The male cop began reading, then blinked. His eyes scanned the page.

"There's more back here." Xander flipped a few pages. "See? Right here. If she was committing identity theft, then why would Alistair put *this* in the will?"

"Hey, Carmen?" the cop said to his partner. "I think you ought to read this."

She took the will and read the same parts. She looked at Xander, then at Robyn, then continued reading the will.

"If you're positive she did what you say, then take her away," Xander insisted. "But if you're wrong, and I think this proves you might be, then you're destroying her claim to the inheritance. Don't do that to her. I can assure you: she needs this more than any of us."

"Son of a..." The lady cop shook her head in annoyance. "Fine. We will take her statement here. But if charges end up being filed, either by the caretaker agency or the Schreiber family, we're dragging her off this estate no matter what that piece of paper says."

Chase nudged me in the elbow and gave me a pointed look. "Oh, right," I said. "I'm the Schreiber family! Literally the last member who's alive. And I don't want to file charges against Robyn." After a second, I added, "At this time," because that's the kind of language lawyers were always using.

The cops and Robyn went into the study to get her statement. Xander accompanied her. The door was closed, so Chase and I couldn't hear much.

We sat on the stairs overlooking the foyer and waited for them to finish.

When the door opened, the cops didn't say a word. They just walked out the front door, got in their cruiser, and drove out of the gate.

"Thank you," Robyn said, hugging Xander tightly. "Thank you for saving me."

"Consider ourselves even," he said. "Since I hid my participation in the game from you."

"Deal," she said.

"You told the cops about the game," I said.

"He did," Robyn said. "It saved me."

Xander gasped. "Oh no."

"What?" Robyn asked.

"That was against the rules," I pointed out. "The will specifically states that we cannot tell anyone else about the game, or we forfeit our chance at the inheritance."

Everything was silent while that sunk in.

"Dude..." Chase said.

Xander stood up straighter. "I do not regret my actions, and I fully accept the repercussions."

Robyn whirled to him. "But Xander..."

"Come to think of it, I don't remember him saying anything to the cops," I said casually. "I'm totally mistaken. You wouldn't do that."

"Yeah," Chase said, joining in. "I didn't hear him tell the police about the game."

"Robyn?" I asked. "Did you hear him? If you didn't, then it's unanimous, and Xander remains in the game."

Her eyes were still shimmering with tears as she looked at me, then turned to Xander. "He never said anything about the game."

"There you go," I said conclusively. "Xander isn't disqualified. Now let's never speak of this again."

Xander gave me a grateful smile. I shrugged it off.

"I don't mean to break up the emotional moment," Chase said, "but can

someone explain what the hell just happened? Are you Robyn Winters, or this Robyn Schumacher person?”

Robyn wiped her eyes with a sleeve. “We should all sit down for this.”

We went into the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee. Xander made himself a mug of tea. I poured a little bit of vodka in my coffee, and then added some to Robyn’s when she held her mug out. When all of us had something hot to drink, we sat at the kitchen table and Robyn began explaining herself.

“It started a year ago. The caretaker agency where I work employs about two dozen caretakers like me. When there is a job available, they assign it to a caretaker. Well, the administrator who’s responsible for making these assignments? She hates me. I don’t know why, but she’s held a grudge against me since the day I started working. For the first year, she made my life a living hell by giving me all the worst assignments. Contract work at nursing homes. Palliative care for patients who are incontinent. Lots of jobs over on the *bad* side of town. I got car-jacked twice!

“So when I heard about a potential long-term job opening up here, at a private estate on the rich part of town? I begged her for the assignment. I baked her cookies. She collects little figurines of baby Jesus, so I brought her a whole box full of them. And what did she do when it came time to assign the job to someone? She gave it to Robyn *Winters*, the new girl! Who had only been there for a month! Caretakers are usually notified of their assignments via email, but the administrator sought me out first thing in the morning to make sure I heard it from her. I can still remember the sick smile on her face when she told me.”

“Fucking bullshit,” I said. Since I knew Robyn—*our* Robyn—I felt invested in the story.

“I couldn’t do it anymore,” Robyn went on, sniffing pathetically. “So I waited for the administrator to take her lunch break. And when she did, I got on her computer and switched the names on the assignment. Since we had the same first name, all I had to switch was the last name. I put my name on the good assignment, and the other Robyn’s name on the bad one that I was given. The following Monday, the automated system sent everyone their assignment information. And that’s how I started working here, for Alistair.” Her hair swayed as she shook her head. “But by then, the administrator had already called Alistair and told him they would be sending Robyn *Winters* to

assist in his care. So when I showed up on my first day, I had to lie and pretend to be her.”

“Why didn’t the agency find out about it?” Chase asked. “Surely someone would have noticed that the caretakers were going to the wrong locations.”

“That’s the thing: once the jobs are assigned, the administrator never sees it again. The assignment goes into the computer system and it’s payroll’s job to make sure the customer is paying for the services on time—or that their insurance or Medicare is paying, I should say. And then payroll deposits our paychecks directly into our bank account. Nobody knew I wasn’t supposed to have this job.”

“Then how did they find out?” I asked. “If you got away with it for a year, what changed suddenly?”

Robyn chuckled. “Alistair died, that’s what changed. And the assignment went back to the administrator for a final review. It’s her job to contact members of the family and make sure we did a good job, and that they’re satisfied. Only after that survey can the assignment be closed, and a new one given out.”

“You illegally accessed someone else’s computer and used it to change some information for your benefit,” Chase said. “As someone who works with computers, I can assure you that’s a *big deal*. Like, jail time.”

“I know.” Robyn took a long sip from her coffee. “I never should have been here. I never should have gotten close to Alistair, which means I never would have met any of you. It’s all because of a lie.” She started crying again.

I moved my seat closer and squeezed her shoulder. “Shh, it’s okay. They left without arresting you. That has to be a good sign, right?”

“Maybe,” she said, sobbing harder now. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Why doesn’t it matter?”

“Don’t you see?” she asked. “I’m in Alistair’s will as Robyn *Winters*. I’m not eligible for any of this.”

Chase gasped. I muttered, “Oh fuck,” under my breath.

She’s been here this whole time, and it was all for nothing.

“That,” Xander said with a smile, “is not exactly true.”

“What do you mean?” Robyn said. “How can I still be eligible for the inheritance?”

“Yeah, wait a minute,” I added. “What did you show the cops in the will to make them leave?”

Xander pulled out his copy of the will and carefully unfolded it. “The answer to both questions is the same.” He tapped the page. “This part here.”

The other three of us leaned forward to read it. I recognized it as the beginning of the will, before the individual gifts were listed.

The people gathered in this room, and so listed individually in this will, are those dearest to me in this world. Broderick Schreiber, my great-grandson. Chase Sutherland, the gardener to my estate. Robyn, my trusted caretaker. And Xander Carlisle, my personal estate attorney.

“There’s no last name given,” I said.

Xander nodded. “Precisely.”

“You said the individual participants are listed at the back of the will,” Robyn pointed out. “With all their personal information. That’s how you knew who to contact for the reading.”

Xander’s smile deepened. “And if Alistair was given the other Robyn’s information, how do you suppose I was able to call you?”

Robyn’s mouth hung open. “I don’t know! How?”

“Yeah! How?” I demanded. “Stop dragging it out!”

Xander flipped to the last page. It was another page not listed in the copies he had made for us. My full name was listed first, Allen Broderick Schreiber, along with my mailing address, email address, and phone number. Chase was next. Robyn was listed third.

Robyn Schumacher
rschumacher@gmail.com
831-555-4291
12 Schreiber Court

Santa Cruz, CA 95065

“That’s all of my information!” Robyn blurted out. “My real name, my real email, my phone number. Except...”

“Except the mailing address is *here*,” I said. “That’s the address to this estate.”

“I don’t understand,” Robyn said. Chase handed her a tissue, and she blew her nose. “If Alistair put all of this in his will, then...”

“Then he knew,” Xander finished for her. “Alistair has known the truth about you this *entire time*.”

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Robyn

I struggled to process this new information as I went about my day. I jogged the perimeter of the estate and lifted weights with Brody. I tidied up around the house and ran a vacuum in every room. But late in the afternoon, I was no closer to clarity about the whole thing.

Alistair knew. And he never said anything.

I wasn't the kind of person to use alcohol as a crutch, but as soon as it was five o'clock, I went down to the cellar and picked an expensive-looking bottle of wine. I gulped down the first glass in ten seconds and poured myself a second.

"Amici's reserve blend, 2005," Brody said while examining the bottle. "That was a fine year for them. You've got a good eye for wine."

"I liked how the label looked," I admitted. "That's all. How do you know it's a good year?"

He sat at the table with me. "I told you: I've spent a lot of time wining and dining clients. My palette isn't super great, but I can pick the bottles. You doing okay?"

"No," I admitted. "Want to get drunk with me?"

"Sorry, but I only drink with Robyn *Winters*. I don't really give a shit about Robyn *Schumacher*."

I laughed even though the joke stung. "Pour a glass. If you help me get drunk, you can do whatever you want with me." I was feeling buzzed, so I added, "And I mean *anything*."

"Anything? I've got a big imagination."

"Anything within reason." I grinned lustily.

Brody groaned. "You're killing me. How can I say no to that?"

“You can’t. So pour a glass and say yes.”

“I’ve got a conference call tonight,” he revealed, waving his coffee mug for emphasis. “Our company is negotiating with the Japanese government about prescription pill access. It’s a breakfast meeting for the guys in Tokyo, so I actually don’t mind bacon and eggs for dinner. It’ll help set the mood.”

“Really? You’re turning me down for *work*?”

“Afraid so. Rain check?”

“The only rain I want is your *come*,” I said, “raining all over my boobs.”

The lewd joke caught Brody so off-guard that he almost choked on his coffee. I laughed with him. “Damn, Robyn. You’re making this hard. And I’m not talking about the decision, if you catch my drift.”

“Does that mean you’ll skip the conference call?”

A pained expression covered his face. “I really can’t, no matter how much I want to.” He patted my thigh and then got up from the table. “Good thing you’ve got Chase. Let him have his way with you tonight.”

I didn’t feel like cooking for dinner, so we ordered Indian food. It was thundering outside when the delivery guy arrived. I wolfed down chicken korma and naan bread like it was my job. I had a lot more drinking to do tonight, and I needed the dense food to absorb as much alcohol as possible. It made me feel like a marathoner carb-loading before a race.

Brody was setting up his laptop in the study, so I wandered upstairs with my bottle of wine and empty glass. Since I was still gross from my workouts earlier, I took a long, hot shower. That helped me relax, and bought me some time before I could start drinking again. Rain was pelting the windows when I came out of the bathroom, and wind howled through the many cracks in the big, empty house. I put on some fresh clothes in my bedroom and then stared out the window at the sheets of rain coming down. It had been a while since we’d had a nice summer storm.

I found the other guys playing pool in the parlor. Based on the way Chase was cursing to himself, Xander was winning.

“Did you go outside?” Xander asked when I walked in.

“Huh?”

“Your hair’s damp.”

“Oh. I just got out of the shower,” I replied.

“You look like you got started without us,” Chase said. He put his pool cue down on the table and pointed to the bottle. “Whatchya drinking?”

“Wine!” I said happily. “Brody said I have a good eye, but I can’t tell the difference between this and five dollar wine.”

Xander leaned on his pool cue. He was wearing a dress shirt, but he had rolled up his sleeves and removed his tie. “Are we finishing our game?”

“You’re crushing me. I can’t take another loss.” Chase joined me by the bar. “I could use something stiff myself.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing for me,” I said, and promptly giggled at the stupid joke.

“I believe,” Xander said, “our new friend Robyn Schumacher is drunk.”

“I’m only tipsy! But I would very much like to get drunk soon. That is my objective for the evening, for those of you keeping track.”

“Cheers to that,” Xander said. He turned to Chase and added, “Whatever you’re making, I’ll have one too.”

There was still a bottle of champagne up here from the other night, so Chase made French 75s again. They gulped theirs down quickly and then made another round. After that, Chase and I sank into the sofa by the billiards table while Xander played a game of pool by himself.

“Taking the news about Alistair hard, huh?” Chase asked.

“Understatement of the century,” I replied. “He knew everything. My real name. My homeless situation. The fact that I was sneaking into the house every night to sleep, then escaping in the morning before he woke up. I thought I was being careful, but apparently not.”

Xander scratched chalk onto his cue’s tip. “Why didn’t he invite you to stay with him? If he knew you already were, I mean.”

“He did, and I turned him down. I hate charity. It makes me feel pathetic. Or a burden on everyone.”

“Sleeping in your car isn’t pathetic?” Chase asked.

“Not if nobody knows about it!” I took another sip of wine. “But that’s only part of why I’m emotionally wrecked. I got caught. I haven’t been contacted by the caretaker agency yet, but I know I’m going to get fired.

Worse, I'll probably have charges filed against me. They listed a bunch of laws I broke..."

"Identity theft." Xander lined up a shot. Pool balls bounced around the table. "Unauthorized computer access. Violations to the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986."

"Pile it on," I said. "Now's the time, while I'm halfway to Drunkville."

"It depends on what evidence they have against you." Xander leaned on his stick and grinned at me. "You listened to your lawyer's advice today and didn't admit to anything, which is good. But they might have video footage of you accessing the computer and changing the names."

Suddenly, I realized I had forgotten a big part of what happened today. Xander had come running out of the house to my defense. He stopped the cops from dragging me away. He had *saved* me, and I hadn't even thanked him. I put down my bottle, approached Xander, and threw myself into his arms. He was so surprised that he dropped his stick, then hesitantly wrapped his arms around me.

"Thank you for today," I said. "You saved me. I would be sitting in a jail cell if not for your legal intervention."

"It surprised me, too," Chase admitted. "You told the cops you were going down to the station with Robyn. You were going to throw away your chance at the inheritance just to protect her."

Xander let go of me and shrugged uncomfortably. "It felt like the right thing to do. I would rather win the honest way."

"Still think you're going to win, huh?" I said.

"I certainly hope so." He downed his drink in three long gulps and went to the bar. This time he filled his glass with straight whiskey. "Because I'm probably going to get fired."

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Is it because it's a conflict of interest for you to be participating in the game?" Chase asked.

"My firm doesn't know I'm participating," he revealed. "Remember, telling anyone about the game is against the rules. My partners think I'm here solely in a legal capacity. But they're not happy about it. We've been here two weeks and they keep demanding to know when I'll return."

“But it’s not your fault,” I said. “You’re just doing what the will says.”

Xander shrugged. “Tell it to the senior partners. They’re upset I allowed this farce of an inheritance game to happen in the first place. They insist I should have stopped it before the will was sealed. And every day that goes by, they grow more impatient. My work is piling up. There’s only so much of it the paralegals and interns can shoulder.” He sipped his whiskey and gave us a big fake smile. “So, yeah. I’m still hoping to win the inheritance.”

“Nope,” Chase said, shaking his head. “I know what you’re doing. I won’t let you guilt trip us into letting you win.”

“No guilt tripping,” Xander said. “Just the honest truth.”

“So that makes two unhappy souls,” I said. “You’re probably getting fired, and I doubt I’ll ever be able to get another job again after this. Nobody will hire a girl who lied about her name and took advantage of a ninety-nine year old man.”

“You didn’t take advantage of Alistair!” Chase protested.

“You’re right, I didn’t. I treated him like family. But nobody else will believe that.”

“What about you?” Xander asked Chase. “You’re not close to getting fired too, are you?”

Chase scoffed. “I might be. I’m so far behind on my coding project that I’ve delayed the completion twice. They’re expecting my code submission to the beta-testing team this Friday, but I’m still weeks away from being done.”

“Why don’t you take a few days off from everything and focus on your day job?” I asked. “You can go into the library and do nothing but coding. The estate’s plants can survive without you for a few days. And if not, you can give me instructions on what needs watering and stuff.”

“I wish I could do that.” Chase peered into his empty glass. “I’ve tried sitting down and focusing only on my code, but I can’t stop thinking about this house. The chance at discovering paranormal evidence from someone I knew personally. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Programming jobs will come and go, but this may never happen to me again.”

“We can lock you in the library, if it would help,” Xander offered. “Slide food under the door like you’re a prisoner.”

“Tempting, but I would just escape through the secret passage,” he replied.

“This house has *secret passages*. And lots of other clues we haven’t discovered yet. How am I supposed to program in this environment?”

“At least you’ve got your gardening job to fall back on,” I said.

“Not quite.” Chase stared into his empty glass again like he wished it was full. “Alistair was my only full-time client. There aren’t a lot of people who can afford to hire a gardener anymore.”

“You need to spend more time rubbing elbows with the rich and famous,” I said. “Maybe talk to Brody’s clients. He’s on a conference call with people in Tokyo right now.”

“I wish,” Chase muttered.

Xander brought him a glass of whiskey and then sank into the couch on the other side of me. “Can we all agree that there are no more secrets between us? Everything is on the table now?”

“All my secrets have been revealed,” I said.

Xander nodded. “My participation in the game was the only thing I was hiding from the group.”

“I never had any secrets to begin with,” Chase said proudly. “But I still don’t know very much about any of you. Brody surfs. Xander is training for Jeopardy. Beyond that, you’re all still strangers.”

“We’ve spent a lot of time competing,” Xander observed, “and not very much time *talking*.”

“I know how we can learn more about each other. Let’s play a game. Like truth or dare.”

Xander snickered. “Truth or dare? What are you, seven?”

“What are you, *ninety-seven*?” I shot back.

“I like that idea,” Chase chimed in. “Let’s do it.”

I expected Xander to resist. He seemed too straight-laced to play a game like that when he could be studying for Jeopardy instead. But then he downed the rest of his whiskey in one long pull and went to the bar to get a refill.

“Okay. Let’s play truth or dare.” Mischief sparkled in his eyes as he fell back onto the couch next to me.

My body tingled with excitement. *This is going to be fun.*

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Robyn

“Since it was your idea, you have to go first,” Xander said. “Truth or dare?”

“We’re trying to learn about each other, so... truth,” I answer.

“When did you lose your virginity?”

“At my twenty-first birthday party,” I answered without hesitation. The story was embarrassing, but I was in that perfect groove between tipsy and drunk where I didn’t care. “My girlfriends took me out to a bar and gave me a stupid sash. I think it said *birthday slut* or something stupid.”

“Tough to be a slut when you’re a virgin,” Chase said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” I said. “One of my friends was saving herself for marriage, but she did everything else with half our senior class. Blowjobs underneath the bleachers, butt stuff in the gym locker rooms...”

“Is that how you stayed a virgin until you were twenty-one?” Xander asked with a small smile. “Butt stuff?”

“Nope! I waited to do butt stuff until later.” I punctuated it with a wink. I had never *actually* done anything like that, aside from fantasizing a little bit when I was alone, but I was in a fun mood teasing the two of them.

“Noted,” Xander said while taking another sip of whiskey.

That turned him on, didn’t it? I realized. *Interesting.*

“Your birthday party,” Chase nudged me. “What happened?”

“I had a sash. And one of my girlfriends stood up on a table and announced to the entire bar that it was my birthday, and I was looking for some *birthday dick*. I had guys hitting on me and buying drinks all night. Most of them were cheesy, but there was this one guy who seemed kind of bashful. Like he wanted to hit on me, but was nervous. I thought that was really cute, so I

went home with him.”

“Get it, Robyn!” Chase said enthusiastically.

“And then, halfway through sex, I threw up all over him.”

Chase’s grin promptly disappeared. “Ew. Don’t get it, Robyn.”

“He didn’t even get to finish, poor guy. But it still popped my cherry, so to speak. Okay, your turn, Xander! Truth or dare.”

“Dare.”

“Aw, we’re supposed to be learning stuff about you,” I said. “You’re supposed to pick truth.”

“I’m not drunk enough to start telling sex stories,” he said.

I put on an innocent face. “Who said I would ask sex questions?”

Xander gave me a skeptical stare. “Dare.”

I sighed. “Fine. I dare you to...” I looked around the parlor. “Take a shot of Jägermeister and prank call someone.”

“That’s two dares,” Xander protested.

“The shot is crucial to the prank call,” I argued.

“How so?”

“It will make it funnier.”

“Let’s go,” Chase said, running over to the bar to grab the bottle and a shot glass. “Don’t think about it.”

He poured the shot and slid it across the bar. Xander sniffed it, then threw back his head.

“Oh my God,” he groaned after. “I haven’t had Jäger since college. It’s so much worse than I remembered.”

Chase examined the back of the bottle, then winced. “That’s because this bottle is from 1957.”

Xander started to gag.

“The alcohol kills any germs that might have grown!” I said, handing him my phone. “I just called a bar down in Santa Cruz. It’s ringing!”

“I have to think about...” Xander trailed off as someone picked up the phone.

“Thompson’s Bar and Grill, how can I direct your call?”

“Um...” Xander cleared his throat. “I’m looking for a Mr. Mehoff? Jack Mehoff? He should be sitting there at the bar.”

“Just a moment.” With the call on speakerphone, I could hear the bartender suddenly curse to themselves as they realized it. “Listen here, you little shit...”

Xander hung up and tossed the phone to me like it was a hot potato. Chase and I started laughing uproariously. Xander joined in a moment later.

“Okay, that was fun,” he admitted. “Next time I’ll do it without the shot of liquor that’s older than my grandma.”

“My turn,” Chase said as we returned to the couch. “Truth.”

“See?” I said to Xander. “Chase knows how this is supposed to work. Chase, who was your first celebrity crush?”

His cheeks turned red. “It’s embarrassing. Can I switch to dare instead?”

“Oh man. I bet it’s good.”

“You have to tell us,” Xander said. “That’s how the game works.”

Chase groaned. “Yeah, yeah. Okay. My first crush was... Miss Frizzle.”

Xander and I stared at each other.

“The teacher from *The Magic School Bus*?” I asked.

“The *cartoon*?” Xander added.

“I told you it’s embarrassing!” Suddenly, Chase shook his head. “No. You know what? I’m not embarrassed about it.”

“Yeah! Lean into it!” I urged.

Chase began ticking points off on his fingers. “She’s *Miss Frizzle*, which means she’s single.” Another finger. “She’s a redhead, so you know she’s a freak in the sack.”

“Of course,” Xander said as if that were common knowledge.

“Third, she’s in a position of authority. And she’s assertive. Both are very attractive qualities.”

“I can see that,” I said.

“And finally,” Chase said, “Miss Frizzle is being played by Elizabeth Banks in an upcoming reboot of the series. And Elizabeth Banks is *super*

hot.”

“You didn’t know that when you were a kid, though,” I said.

Xander pulled his phone out and began a Google search. “The original Miss Frizzle was voiced by Lily Tomlin.”

“Even better,” Chase said.

“I’m pretty sure she’s a lesbian,” I pointed out.

Chase gave me a deadpan stare. “None of these facts are lessening my childhood crush on her.”

“Fun fact,” Xander said. “Lily Tomlin was born on September 1, 1939, which was the same day World War Two started when Germany invaded Poland.”

“Alistair was probably there!” Chase said.

I began giggling. “Don’t tell Brody. He’s really sensitive about Alistair being a you-know-what.”

“At this point, I’m fairly certain he was a Nazi,” Xander whispered. “The timeline matches too well.”

I showed Chase my own Google search. “Okay, I totally see what you mean. Miss Frizzle always has that sexy little smile. Like she’s thinking about dicks.”

“She’s totally thinking about dicks!” Chase exclaimed.

“Your turn again,” Xander said to me. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth. Duh.”

I tensed as Xander considered what to ask. I knew it would be something dirty, and I was weirdly excited to answer. My sex life had never been very exciting, but if we started talking about fantasies...

“What’s the most embarrassing moment of your life?”

Disappointment washed over me, but I quickly brushed it aside. “Third grade field trip to the planetarium. While we were in the big room with the projector showing all the stars and planets on the ceiling, I got my period. And of course, I was wearing white shorts that day. It was dark, so I tried to sneak off to the bathroom without anyone noticing. When I was halfway to the door, the show ended and the lights came on. I *screamed*, like as loud as I could, then sprinted out of the room in embarrassment. Turns out I didn’t

bleed through my panties, so nobody could see anything. But they *did* see me scream and sprint out of the room like a maniac.”

“I got an erection once in math class and got called up to the chalkboard to answer a problem,” Chase admitted. “I can still hear the kids giggling about it.” He shuddered. “I need another drink.”

“Me too!” I said, handing him my empty bottle and glass. “I’ll take whatever you feel like making.”

“Two more French 75s, coming up.” Chase retrieved a fresh glass from the cabinet and then added, “Your turn, Xander. Truth or dare.”

Xander pursed his lips and said, “Truth.”

“Atta boy!” Chase began mixing champagne and gin together. “What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done in bed?”

I folded my legs underneath me on the couch and leaned toward Xander. “Good one!”

“Well, for one thing, it didn’t happen in bed.” A small smile touched Xander’s sharp face.

“Oh snap!” I replied.

“It was back in law school,” he explained. “We spent months studying for the bar exam, so once it was over, we let loose with a huge party. Some of the lightest drinkers I’ve known were getting shitfaced at this party. It was like the Super Bowl of drinking for those of us who had taken the bar. I don’t remember who was hosting the party, but I went with two friends: Mark and Lisa. Mark was my best friend, and Lisa was a good friend who had hung out with us since undergrad. We were a really tight-knit group.

“The night goes on, and of course we get good and drunk. I hit my stride early and managed to hold onto it for hours. Mark and Lisa were even drunker, though. Eventually we left the party and stumbled back to Lisa’s apartment, because it was closest, and none of us wanted to drive. Mark stumbled and fell on the floor, so Lisa and I pretended to fall with him out of solidarity. We laid on the floor and guzzled water and laughed about the silliest things. It was a weird feeling, being giddy after the exams.

“Eventually, Lisa mentions that she was hoping to hook up with Edward Horner at the party. Mark and I laughed and said there are much better-looking guys than Edward that she could sleep with. She asked me to name

one, and I threw out Mark's name. Mark laughed it off and joked that I would do a better job. So Lisa made a joke about how both of us would work better together than by ourselves.

"And then," Xander said, "we all realized we weren't joking. Suddenly, Mark was kissing Lisa. Then I was kissing her. And before we knew it, all of us were naked on the floor. Doing... *things*."

"Oh, damn," Chase said while bringing me my drink. "A devil's three-way."

"That's hot," I said, admiring Xander from above my glass while I took a sip. It was tough not to imagine it. Xander and another guy on either side of a woman, kissing and fondling and squeezing her. Passing her back and forth. Worshiping her between them.

Xander glanced over at me, and we locked eyes for a moment. The normally-serious lawyer had a glimmer of mischief in his gaze tonight. *I wonder what that's all about.*

"It wasn't as great as I imagined. We were all drunk and sloppy. Okay, your turn," Xander said, turning back to Chase. "Truth or dare?"

"Truth!" he said while bouncing back onto the couch next to me.

"When did *you* lose your virginity?" Xander asked.

I spun around to face Chase. "Yeah! When did you get your cherry popped?"

"Well..." He awkwardly scratched the back of his head. "It was actually a week ago, in the attic above us..."

I gasped. "No!"

His poker face fell apart and he started laughing. "Oh man, you should have seen your face!"

"You almost gave me a heart attack! I would have wanted to know if I was your first!"

"I was fourteen. I hated riding the bus because I was a freshman, so my neighbor, Sarah, started giving me rides."

"I'll bet she did," I said suggestively.

"You're not wrong. We rode together for a few months. No flirting or anything; we barely knew each other, and didn't hang out when we weren't

driving to and from school. She was three years older than me, after all. One day, she drops me off and sees that my mom's van wasn't in the driveway. I told her that my mom was out of town on business. So Sarah casually says, *cool, want to go inside and fuck?*"

"That's it? That's the big pickup line that led to your virginity being lost?"

"Guys don't need pickup lines," Xander said. "A straightforward offer of sex will usually do it."

"And it did." Chase sighed wistfully. "Sarah had curly red hair, like Miss Frizzle. I never stood a chance."

"Wow," I said. "I'm beginning to feel self-conscious about having brown hair."

Chase cupped my jaw and gave me a quick peck on the lips. "I like your brown hair."

"You're just trying to avoid telling the rest of the story. What happened?"

"What do you think happened? She asked if I wanted to go inside and fuck. So we went inside and fucked."

"Did she rock your world?"

"Oh yeah. I enjoyed myself very much. Sarah, though... probably not as much. I had no idea what I was doing."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Well that's definitely changed in the decade since then."

"Why, thank you, Robyn." He patted my thigh. "Your turn. Truth or dare?"

We went around in a circle a few more times learning dirty details about each other. I had a perfect buzz going, so I sipped my drink, but the guys were pounding theirs to catch up. Eventually it came back around to Chase.

"What's your biggest fantasy?" I asked him.

"To hit a home run in the bottom of the ninth to win the World Series," he replied without hesitation.

"Shut up! You know what I mean. *Sexual* fantasy."

"It's not my fault you weren't specific enough!"

"If you don't answer the question the way you knew I meant it," I warned, "I'm going to pour my drink all over you."

“Hmm.” His handsome face twisted with thought. “It’s a tie between two fantasies. I’m not sure which is better.”

“Then you have to tell us both.”

“Okay. Growing up, my parents had our internet locked down. I couldn’t access porn. At least not until I got older and learned how to use a VPN. Honestly, accessing porn is the reason I got into computer programming in the first place.”

“I can’t help but notice none of this has anything to do with a sexual fantasy,” Xander said.

“I’m getting to it! Since we didn’t have porn, I had to resort to borrowing stuff from my friends. One buddy of mine stole his dad’s Playboy magazine. That was cool. But then we hit the jackpot: we found a stash of porn by a dumpster on the way home from school. A bunch of old VHS tapes. I used my allowance to buy a cheap TV with a built-in tape player just so I could watch the video. The theme was French maid. Black and white outfit, skirt, feather duster. I watched that video a *lot*.”

“Yeah?” I teased. “How much is a lot?”

“I was a teenager with a libido of *infinity*. I watched it almost every day. I’m shocked the magnetic tape didn’t wear out. I wonder where that video is now. Probably still at home in my closet. Anyway, that video is permanently burned into my brain. So I have a French maid fantasy.”

“Noted,” I said, pretending to write something down on an imaginary piece of paper.

“And the other fantasy?” Xander asked.

“That one’s a lot simpler,” Chase replied. “I’ve always wanted to have a threesome.”

A tingle of excitement ran up my neck. *Really?*

“Take it from me,” Xander said. “Threesomes are overrated.”

“Hey! That’s for me to figure out on my own,” Chase said. “It looked really fun in the second scene of my French maid porn. And the fourth scene.”

“What kind?” I probed. “Two girls, or two guys?”

He shrugged. “Either. It’s the group aspect that’s hot.”

“Really?” I asked doubtfully. “You would be fine being in bed with another guy? Sharing a girl?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he replied. “I’ve never done it, so I don’t know how I would feel in the moment, but I don’t think it would weird me out. Or make me jealous.”

My body was coming alive at this point. I was already turned on after hearing Xander’s story, but learning that Chase had always wanted to have a threesome too... it made my mind race with possibilities. There was another man in this very house I’d had sex with, a guy who had specifically mentioned a threesome before. And in spite of all odds, Chase knew about us. Was that why he was so cool about things with me and Brody? Because he was hoping for the possibility of a three-way?

Probably not, I told myself. He and Brody are still adversarial. I glanced at Xander. But what about him?

Xander was checking something on his phone, so I was able to give him a long look without him noticing. The crisp dress shirt that fit his lean frame like it was cut by a master tailor, sleeves rolled up to reveal his forearms. The angular face, strong cheekbones that seemed to pop out when he frowned. The way it always seemed like he was thinking about something; a hot intellectual. Like the male equivalent of a sexy librarian.

Has he always been this good-looking, I wondered, or am I just in a special mood tonight?

Xander had been so passionate this morning, throwing himself between the police cruiser and the cops. Keeping me from going to jail *and* from losing the inheritance game. Out of the handful of boyfriends I’d had in my life, none had ever treated me that way before. It made me look at him in a totally different light.

And now I can’t stop thinking about his threesome.

“Okay, your turn again,” I said to Chase. “Truth or dare.”

“I just went,” he protested.

“I don’t care. Truth or dare?”

“Uh,” he said. “Dare?”

Perfect.

“I dare you to make out with me right now.”

A silly grin slipped onto his face. “Yeah? Right now?”

“Right now. Are you just going to sit there, or...?”

Egged on, Chase slid closer to me on the couch. He hesitated a moment, then crushed his lips against mine. His hand slid up my thigh while our mouths churned together, and my body came alive beneath his touch.

As Chase deepened the kiss, I could feel Xander’s eyes on my back. I opened one eye and found the mirror behind the bar, which allowed me to see him behind me. He watched us hungrily, biting his lip and adjusting his legs on the couch. *I bet he’s hard.* Imagining his lips, I shoved my tongue into Chase’s mouth and ground it against his own wet tongue.

“Okay,” Chase said, tearing his mouth away from mine. He was panting from the effort. “That’s enough of that for now.”

For now. The words echoed in my head, bursting with possibility.

“You tried skipping your turn, but you can’t fool me,” Xander said. He had a knowing smile on his face, now. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” I replied.

Xander’s smile deepened. “What’s *your* biggest fantasy?”

Honestly, I didn’t really have one. I occasionally watched porn, but there wasn’t a specific act or type of guy I sought out. I just browsed the videos until I found a couple that I thought was hot, then touched myself to them having sex.

But despite the name of the game we were playing, I wasn’t going to tell them the truth. I was going to feed a few more firewood logs into the fire that I could feel burning between the three of us.

“My biggest fantasy,” I said, “is anything group-related.”

“Group?” Xander asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Threesomes. Foursomes. Orgies, and...” I hesitated. “Gangbangs. All of it is hot to me.”

“So you want to get railed by an entire football team?” Chase asked.

I laughed at the mental image and said, “That’s probably too much for me. There’s definitely a point where you get diminishing returns from adding more guys into the pile. But two, or three, or four guys?” I let out a very soft, tactful moan. “*That’s* the stuff. I’d love to do something like that. Too bad I’ll

probably never get the opportunity.” I locked eyes with Xander. “Probably.”

I twisted to look at Chase. He was smiling broadly, now. Like he knew what I was thinking.

Is he on board with this? I wondered. If we go any farther, will it hurt our chances of dating when we get out of here?

I decided I didn't care. I was the perfect amount of tipsy, and I desperately wanted to see where this went.

“Your turn,” I said to Xander. “Truth or dare?”

He took a long sip of his whiskey and smacked his lips. “Truth.”

“You mean dare?”

“No, I said truth.”

I shook my head. “Pick dare.”

“That's not how the game works,” he said playfully. “I picked truth.”

“I don't care what you picked,” I said, emphasizing every word. “I want you. To pick. *Dare.*”

Xander was quiet for a moment. His eyes held a world of thought and consideration, analyzing every angle of what I had said. He took another sip of whiskey, then carefully put his glass down on the table.

“Dare.”

I smiled. “I was hoping you would say that.”



Robyn

I was intensely attracted to Xander. He didn't have the raw strength of Chase or Brody, but he was lean and dangerous in his own way. A stalking cat whose every step was carefully placed. A panther with dark hair and eyes that saw everything. His normally-serious demeanor only added to the impression.

It was sexy the way he was finally letting loose tonight, too.

They were waiting for an answer. Both of them. And I was the right kind of tipsy to give it to them.

"I dare you," I said slowly, drawing out every word, "to kiss me even more fiercely than Chase did."

That was it: the die was cast. The cat was out of the bag. I had shot my shot with these two, something women rarely had to do, and now I had to wait to see how he would react.

Except I didn't have time to react, because before I was finished saying the dare, Xander threw himself into me. His lips found mine with magnetic force, and he pushed me backwards on the couch until my head was resting on Chase's thigh.

I closed my eyes and lost myself underneath Xander's desire. His lips were warm and perfect, and tasted faintly of smoky whiskey and licorice from the Jägermeister. I savored the way his body was pressed against mine. Grinding into me ever so slightly. I was keenly aware of Chase behind me, gently lacing his fingers into my hair in a caress. Watching while another man made out with me on the couch.

And then, just when I thought Xander was going to rip my clothes off and take things to the next logical level, he pulled away.

"Dare completed. That was more fun than prank calling a bar." He cocked

his head at me. “Truth or dare. Was that just a fun little experiment, or are you attracted to me?”

“I don’t know,” I said, letting my hand drift down to his pants. They were dress slacks, thin cotton which made his thigh underneath feel warm and hard. “I *guess* I’m attracted to you.” I smiled lustily to let him know I was playing coy.

I was afraid of how Chase would react to all of this. Guys could be weird about this sort of thing. Protective. But he finished his drink and dropped the glass to the ground, not caring that it rolled away. “Nothing wrong with that. Xander’s a good-looking dude. A solid five.”

“Five!’ Xander sputtered.

“Okay, six because you’re wearing a suit.”

My fingers slid closer to Xander’s bulge. It was impossible to miss. “You don’t think it’s slutty to be attracted to two guys at the same time?”

“Three guys, if you count Brody,” Xander pointed out. “Remember, I caught you two together yesterday.”

“Okay, then do you think it’s slutty to be attracted to *three* guys?”

Chase barked a laugh behind me. “That whole thing is bullshit. Guys can sleep with whoever they want and nobody judges them for it. But if a girl explores her options and has a little fun, society slaps a label on her? It’s not fair.”

That’s exactly what I was hoping you would say. Finally my fingers reached the outline of Xander’s massive cock. He sucked in a breath as I moved over it. “What about *being* with two guys? At the same time?”

“Okay,” Chase said, “that’s a *little* slutty.”

“Hey!”

“But in a good way. The kind of way that should be celebrated. After all, I literally just said that was one of my biggest fantasies.”

“But Xander thinks threesomes are overrated,” I said. “Too bad.”

“Now, hold on,” he said. “The one I had was overrated. But that’s the only one I’ve ever had. If I were to expand my sample size...”

Bingo. That was all the invitation I needed. I threw back the rest of my drink, tossed aside my glass like Chase had done, and leaned closer. I

unzipped Xander's pants and reached inside. He was fully hard, his cock like a huge rod of heat.

"I'll be your slut tonight," I said, glancing back at Chase to let him know I meant him too.

Despite getting every green light from them, I hesitated. It was tough to take the next step like this. To go from second base to third. Even though Chase's presence was a huge turn-on, a small part of me wondered if he really wanted to do this. If it would change things.

And then he gave me the tiniest little smile, and a nod.

Here we go.

I pulled Xander's cock through the hole in his pants, bent forward, and wrapped my lips around the tip. It was like swallowing a plum, but Xander's loud moan turned me on enough to take as much of it as I could into my mouth until I was gagging. I pulled it out and gasped, wonderful tears in my eyes.

"Tell me what you want," I said.

Xander's eyes sparkled with lust. "I want those beautiful lips wrapped around me again."

I bent down once more, one long stroke as far as I could go before coming up for air. I turned to Chase.

"You just gonna sit there and watch?"

I returned my attention to Xander's dick, swirling my tongue around his crown. Behind me, Chase scrambled up to his knees and leaned over me.

This is happening, I realized. This is really happening.

Chase bent down to kiss my shoulder, but that's not what I wanted. If I was going to be their slut tonight, I wanted to *really* be their slut. I had Chase's pants open within seconds and his own dick exposed, one on either side of me on the couch.

"Tell me how it feels," I ordered as I got to work.

I alternated between them, one stroke each. All the way down on Xander, back up for air, then down on Chase.

"That feels so fucking *good*," Chase groaned.

Xander only moaned loudly, unable to find the words while he devoured

me with his eyes. I had never been this girl before, the kind of girl to sleep with two guys at the same time, but tonight it was exactly who I wanted to be. I wanted to let loose.

I wanted to be a more adventurous version of myself.

“Am I your slut?” I asked, looking from one man to the other.

“Such a good slut,” Chase said, getting into it. “We can train you.”

“Mmm, train me how?”

Chase grabbed a fistful of hair and kissed me hard, shoving his tongue back into my mouth. His grip on my hair tightened and he pushed my head down on his rod, as deep as I could go until most of his shaft was in my mouth. The force of his need, the strength in his arm, made me even wetter than I already was.

Just before I couldn't take any more, he pulled me up by my hair. I gasped and grinned up at him, and he gave me another kiss, rougher this time.

“Xander's turn,” he said, spinning me around and shoving me down onto the other man's waiting manhood. I couldn't take much of his but I did what I could, widening my lips and trying not to gag on the hot, hard cock.

“Robyn,” Xander moaned, turning my name into an expletive. “You're better than my wildest dreams.”

Chase tugged on my hair, pulling me off. “You've dreamed, huh?” I managed to ask between gasps.

“You could say that.” His hand curved over my hip and he found the place where my legs met, rubbing in a circle with his long fingers. “Watching you strut around the house every day, sometimes still full of heat from your... other encounters... how could I *not* think about it?”

“We're only just starting,” I said, ending with a moan as his fingers hit just the right spot.

Chase responded by pulling me into another kiss. His tongue swirled in a circle with mine, and I closed my eyes and surrendered to how *good* he felt.

But I had gotten enough kissing for one night. This new version of myself wanted more—*much* more. I got up from the couch and slipped out of my jeans.

“Well?” I asked while they drank in the sight of me in my panties. “Don't

keep a girl waiting.”

“One more truth,” Xander said. “Then we can have fun.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Okay.”

“If you weren’t afraid of asking for it,” he said with a smile, “and weren’t afraid of being judged for it... what would you want two guys to do to you?”

I wanted a threesome, but I could tell he was searching for more. A sexual desire of mine to match theirs. I scanned my brain, thinking of all the hot things I had seen online before, things I had fantasized about being done to me...

“I would want two guys to come all over me,” I said.

Chase grunted. “Yeah?”

“Where do you want it?” Xander asked. “You’ll have to be more specific than that.”

“All over my... chest,” I said. “Both of you, coming at the same time on my breasts.”

They looked at each other, then nodded. “I’d be into that,” Chase said.

“Absolutely,” Xander agreed.

“Okay then,” I said simply. “Then I think we can have some fun tonight.”

Xander pushed aside Chase’s hands and took over, gripping me by the waist and lifting me into the air. He placed me on the edge of the couch and then stripped his clothes; first his pants, then he pulled his dress shirt over his head to show off the impossible muscles of his chest and abs. Sure, he wasn’t bulging with muscle the way Brody and Chase were, but he was lean. Every groove and vein on his body popped out in beautiful contrast. I ran my hands over the ridges to make sure they weren’t painted on.

They were real. Deliciously real.

Chase ripped off my panties, and then Xander took my legs in his hands and spread me wide. I grabbed hold of his warm cock and rubbed the head up and down my slit, coating it in my juices.

Xander didn’t push forward, though I could feel how much he wanted to. He let me take my time moving the head in and out of my lips, slowly getting a feel for him. Then a little bit of the shaft. I used my fingers to coat more of him with my natural lubrication. All the while he looked down at me with

hunger in his eyes.

God, I want him so bad.

“Fuck me.” The words rolled out of my mouth, more emotion than thought.

He hesitated. “Robyn. I can take it slow if you—”

“Fuck me.”

The muscles in his hawkish face strained as he thrust forward. I took the first half of him without trouble, but then the pressure became intense. Right on the edge of what was painful. I took immense satisfaction from the ecstasy in his widening eyes, and the way he gasped as if surprised at how good I felt.

And then he was all the way inside of me. Every ounce of him filling every inch of me, more than I had ever taken before. He stopped there, letting me savor the size of him before we went any further. I bit my lip and breathed heavily while he began to sweat from concentration.

“You take that dick well,” Chase said from the couch to my right. He had stripped down when I wasn’t paying attention, and was stroking his own cock gently, admiring the sight of me filled to the brim with another man’s hard length. He was a Greek god of muscle, chiseled by an artist. It was unacceptable that he was over there instead of *here*, with me.

“Here,” I breathed, reaching for him. “I need you, too.”

When he came within arm’s reach I grabbed hold of his shaft and pulled it toward my mouth. Laying on the edge of the couch allowed me to turn my head sideways and begin sucking him off while Xander held my legs apart, arms spread wide like an angel. A beautiful, muscled angel.

“Sweet Christ, your mouth feels amazing.”

“She feels even better from this side,” Xander said, biting his lip and letting out a groan. He still remained completely inside of me, but was now rotating his hips in a circle.

“I know exactly how she feels,” Chase grinned while his eyes raked over my body. “And I’ll get my turn eventually.”

I surrendered to the sensations overwhelming me as Xander finally began to move. It didn’t hurt anymore—I was wetter than I had ever been, which had done a good job of coating him with lubrication. I moaned around Chase’s prick while Xander paced himself, in and out with wonderful

rhythm.

“Robyn,” Xander moaned. “You’re so tight. So tremendously, incredibly, *wonderfully* tight!”

I gasped and looked up at him. “It’s because you’re enormous. I can barely handle all of you.”

Chase tightened his fingers into a fist in my hair and pushed me back toward his cock, taking control. “She’s not wrong, pal. I didn’t expect a skinny guy like you to pack so much heat.”

All the nerve endings in my sex were on fire with ecstasy; every stroke was a sunrise of intense pleasure. While Xander fucked me steadily, Chase took my head in both of his strong hands and fucked my mouth faster. I tightened my lips around his shaft, trying to emulate how tight my pussy was for Xander. From the sounds coming out of *his* mouth, I was doing a good job.

“I like fucking your pretty mouth,” Chase sighed. “You’re a good little slut.”

“Mmm hmm,” I moaned around his thickness.

“You know,” Chase said, “there’s a third fantasy I’ve always had. One I didn’t mention. And it’s bigger than the others.”

I tried to pull his cock out of my mouth to respond with a teasing comment, but his hands wouldn’t let me for several more strokes. I gasped when he finally let go and I looked up at him through my eyelashes. “Double-teaming me isn’t your deepest fantasy?”

“It’s up there,” he said. “But not at the top.”

“I’m listening.”

Xander rumbled with laughter, which vibrated through his huge shaft and into my body. “I bet I can guess.”

“You probably can,” he replied. “I hinted at it when we watched the movie the other night.”

“What?” I asked, unable to contain myself any longer. “Tell me!”

“You think we should?” Chase asked Xander. As if I weren’t even there. “I bet she’d like it.”

Xander pushed all the way to the hilt inside me and paused. “I bet she would. She looks like a dirty girl.”

“Oh, I am,” I said. It was incredibly freeing being this way with them, without inhibitions. “I’m dirtier than you know.”

Chase shrugged elaborately. “Nah. I don’t think we should tell her.”

“Please,” I said. “Please tell me. *Show* me.” I took hold of his hard length and gave it a demanding squeeze.

Chase grinned a wolfish grin. “Okay. You asked for it.”

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Robyn

Xander pulled out of me before I knew what was happening, then flipped me over so that I was on my knees, bent over the couch. Chase placed a hand on the small of my back, pushing me down into the soft cushion. I trembled with anticipation as I waited to see what he would do.

With both hands, he spread my plump ass cheeks apart. He paused, admiring the view, breath hot on my bare cheeks. Then he licked from my clit, up my dripping wet lips, continuing upward...

“Oh *fuck*,” I moaned with equal parts surprise and pleasure as his tongue flicked across my rear entrance. I was self-conscious about it for a brief moment. I knew I had a curvy ass, but *that* part of my posterior had always been off-limits. The naughty part men ignored while squeezing the flesh of my ass, despite my occasional fantasy.

“Is this okay?” he asked softly.

“Don’t stop,” I breathed without thought. “Keep going.”

He buried his face in my ass again, this time wedging his tongue deep inside my rosebud. The wriggling, wiggling sensation made me shiver with new pleasure while his chin rubbed against my pussy. Any embarrassment I might have felt about having this forbidden part of my body focused on melted under the waves of ecstasy coming from his tongue.

Or maybe it felt so good *because* it was so naughty.

“I think she likes it,” Xander said.

“Yes!” I managed to gasp. “She likes it very much, so much that—*ohhh...*”

While Chase went to town on my rear end, Xander went to his knees on the couch next to me. I wrapped my lips around his crown and sucked while swirling my tongue—because I couldn’t take any more of him than that down my throat. But Xander didn’t seem to mind. He moaned and rolled his head

back, gazing at the ceiling like he was in heaven.

“I like your fantasy,” I said while jacking Xander off. I twisted to watch Chase’s face disappear in the curves of my ass, a mop of wavy brown hair tickling my skin. “I’m glad you told me.”

Even though his mouth was firmly planted on my posterior, I could see the smile in his eyes. “This isn’t my fantasy. At least, not all of it.”

“But... then what is?”

Xander chuckled some more. “Chase isn’t just rimming you for his own pleasure, though he seems to be enjoying it.”

I realized what he meant. “You’re lubing me up?”

“Have you ever... tried it?” Chase asked.

I hadn’t. I’d watched porn where girls had anal sex, but it was one of those things that always *looked* more fun than I thought it would be. Porn stars took it in the ass. They were professionals. Someone like me couldn’t.

Could I?

“That’s a no,” Xander said with a laugh. “There is a first time for everything, though.”

Chase’s tongue moved up between my cheeks to my lower back, kissing up the ridges of my spine. “Only if you want to,” he said. “I don’t want to do anything to make you uncomfortable, and—”

“Yes,” I interrupted him. I hadn’t known it until that moment, but now I was certain. “I want to try it.”

The desire on Chase’s face could have melted steel. His thighs straddled mine and he grabbed hold of my waist, his cock sliding in between my round cheeks. Brushing against my tight little hole.

Ass play. It’s what Chase wanted. And that made me want it too.

Xander leaned down and kissed me while Chase ground his shaft in between my ass cheeks. He spit on his hand and covered his tip with the saliva, then slowly pushed his head down. Xander’s tongue was in my mouth, dancing with my own tongue and making me even wetter while Chase prepared to take me from behind.

You’re about to take a big, throbbing cock in your ass. The voice was there in my head, excited by what was about to happen. *He’s going to fuck you in*

the ass.

“Tell me what you want,” I said, pausing just long enough to speak before kissing Xander some more. I wanted to hear him say it. I *needed* to hear him say it.

“I want to stick it in your ass,” Chase said in a husky voice.

“Stick *what* in my ass?”

“My hard cock,” he said. “It’s going right in that tight little ass of yours.”

I trembled with anticipation as he pressed against my rear entrance, waiting for admission. Xander’s kisses helped me relax, and paired with the slick skin back there I felt his head slip inside. I felt myself tighten around the ridge of his head.

“Oh my God,” I moaned.

Xander grinned at me while stroking himself. “Yeah?”

I knocked his hand away and jerked him off. “It’s a lot. It’s intense.”

“If you can’t handle it,” Chase started to say.

“No! I can. Just go slow...”

He raked his fingers up and down my back while I kissed Xander, and the entire time the tip of his penis was inside me. It was a nice little introduction. Easing into the forbidden pleasure.

And I realized something: I liked it.

A lot.

There was something intensely erotic about the forbidden. Chase could fuck my pussy... But he wanted my ass for himself. He’d already worshiped it with his tongue, so why not let him have it in other ways?

“Fuck me,” I whispered while licking the underside of Xander’s shaft.

“You sure?” Chase hummed.

“I’m ready.” I hesitated, then said the words I knew they wanted to hear. “Take my ass.”

Xander leaned over me and grabbed my cheeks, fingers digging into the flesh of my rump, spreading it for the other man. Spreading *me* wide.

“Come on,” Xander said. “You can do better than that.”

“It’s her first time.”

Xander glanced down at me. "I bet she can handle it."

"I can," I said. Begged. Pleaded. "I can take it. Please let me show you."

His cock pushed deeper. Not just the head anymore, but a few millimeters of the shaft. The indirect pressure against my inner pussy walls was different. Intense in a fun and exciting way. I slid a hand down between my legs and rubbed my clit, and suddenly everything felt ten times better than before.

"Yes," I moaned, stroking Xander faster. He rumbled with more laughter.

"Her ass practically swallows that cock. Don't be shy."

Egged on by the other man, Chase grabbed my waist for leverage and gave me another two inches. I moaned with simultaneous pleasure and shock. Shock at how *good* it felt. I was being filled in a completely new way. A way that Chase wanted.

I can't believe it. I have a dick in my ass right now. And it feels amazing.

"I think she likes it," Chase said.

"Yes."

"What do you like?" he asked. "Tell me."

"I don't like it. I *love* it."

"Love what?"

"Your cock in my ass," I breathed, new heights of pleasure striking me as the words poured out of my mouth. "Your thick cock deep inside my ass, I love it, I *need* it, give it to me, please..."

Chase was breathing hard now as he pushed deeper, and deeper, and just when I thought I couldn't handle any more he pulled back.

"More," I begged.

"Come on," Xander chuckled. "Give her what she wants."

"*Ohh*, I can."

The intensity was incredible. Previously unknown pleasure centers fired in exciting new ways. It awakened a hunger in me that had always been just beneath the surface, waiting for the door to be opened. I could be dirty with them in a way I never had with anyone else.

Xander grabbed my head with both of his hands and pushed it back down on his throbbing rod. I didn't have to move: he steadily moved his hips back

and forth, fucking my mouth like it was his play toy. He let out a long, deep moan that echoed off the walls of the parlor.

I'm being filled from both ends.

The thought was as pleasurable as the act itself. I relaxed and savored the naughtiness of it while they fucked me from both sides, moving faster and faster, rocking me between them.

"I'm going to come so hard," Chase said in a throaty voice. It was a tease, not a warning of what was about to happen.

I pulled Xander's dick out of my mouth so I could say, "Tell me where you're going to come."

"Deep in your ass."

The thought was tempting. New. *Exciting* in a way that made me shiver with anticipation. But it wasn't what I wanted most. "That wasn't the *deal*," I said, turning the last word into a moan as his shaft pushed deeper than it had before. "You have to come *on* me."

Chase grabbed my hips possessively. The way he controlled my body made me shiver with delight. "What if I want to come in *here*, filling your ass to the brim?"

That suggestion turned me on even more, but I said, "You would make me a very unhappy girl."

Xander leaned back on his haunches, stroking himself while watching Chase fuck me from behind. "A deal is a deal. You got what *you* wanted from her, and she has been a good girl."

"So good," I said.

"We'll see if you can be good a little longer." And with that, Chase crashed deeper into me, one hard stroke that made his boulder-like thighs slap against my ass. I yelped with surprise and pleasure, and he pulled back and fucked me again, each stroke faster than before. The pleasure was intense, right on the edge of what I could handle. But with my fingers circling my clit, it was perfect. A chorus of angelic voices hitting *just* the right note.

"Fuck me," I moaned. "Right there. Just like that..."

I was surprised to feel my own climax building suddenly, whipped into a frenzy by his hard length. I didn't think I was going to make it. He was going to come before I did, winning that race men and women ran when in the

throes of passion. But then Xander fell to his side on the couch and reached up underneath, his fingers taking over on my throbbing clit. The intensity was like being launched into space, bright and blurry and *fast*, faster than I could have ever expected, and while simultaneously being stimulated by the two of them I screamed, a never-ending exhale until all the air was gone from my lungs and white spots flew across my vision.

“There it is,” Xander rumbled.

“Yes!” I said, gasping for breath. Wave after wave of orgasms hit me, each one stronger than the last. “Oh my God, it just keeps going.”

Xander leaned down and drank my cries with a kiss. I grabbed a handful of his dark hair, holding onto him for dear life because it felt like I was going to collapse with exhaustion whenever the ecstasy subsided. Chase was moaning loudly, fingers gripping my hips tightly while he drove into me, burying his hard length into my ass again and again.

And then Chase pulled out. Xander spun me onto my back on the couch, holding me down with a palm, strong and commanding. The two of them appeared on either side of me, stroking themselves to completion. Two beautiful men of glistening muscle, their throbbing cocks ready to unload all over me.

“You ready for it?” Chase purred.

My voice was raw, so I bobbed my head in a desperate nod. *Give it to me. Please.*

“Squeeze your tits together for us,” Xander commanded, voice tight with concentration as he reached his climax. “Give us a target.”

I bit my lips and obeyed, pressing my chest together with both hands. Chase moaned at the sight which drove me wild. Seeing these two men driven to orgasm by the mere sight of me was hotter than any porn. Pre-come glistened on the tip of Xander’s head. I leaned up and licked it off with my tongue, leaving a silky strand connecting my tongue to his cock.

“Oh, Robyn,” he said, head tilted back and his dick held tightly in a fist. “Robyn!”

“Yeah?”

“I’m coming!”

“Give it to me,” I begged. “Come all over me.”

Milky seed shot from his cock like a firehose, splashing down across my breasts. I moaned and drank in the sight of rope after rope shooting onto me, covering me, bathing me in the evidence of his pleasure. It trickled down between my breasts, a warm trail slowly making its way to my belly.

Chase's cry was even louder as he roared his own orgasm. His seed was thicker as it landed on my skin, hot little bursts that drove me crazy with lust. I shuddered and trembled with each one as I shared in their mutual ecstasy.

I closed my eyes and savored their moans for as long as they lasted.

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Xander

I had never fucked a woman in the ass before.

It was one of those things every guy thought about at least once. The forbidden hole. Taboo and out of bounds. Like a lot of things in life, I didn't expect it to live up to the hype. I thought it would be a letdown, the way my bar exam threesome had been.

But based on Chase's reaction, I was wrong.

The sight of it was ridiculously hot. Robyn's tight rosebud gripped Chase's cock like it was trying to squeeze the come from his body. And the way she reacted to it...

"Fuck me," Robyn moaned, eyes lidded with pleasure. "Fuck me in the ass."

The sight of her sexy body bent over the couch was scintillating, the round globes of her ass shuddering as Chase pounded her again and again. She arched her back as she came, moaning louder than any woman I had ever been with.

I want to try that, I thought while watching the scene hungrily. *I want to bury my cock deep inside Robyn's ass.*

And when it was time, and we rolled her over on the couch so we could unload all over her chest, she gave me a look of desire that could have melted steel. I'd never had anyone look at me that way, in the throes of passion or elsewhere. It heightened my own pleasure as I came all over her, seconds before Chase did the same. Robyn arched her back and moaned louder, so convincing that I was certain she was enjoying it as much as we were without faking it. She closed her eyes and literally *trembled* with pleasure until my cock, and then Chase's, finally stopped spasming.

There were different types of feminine beauty in the world. A woman

wearing a summer dress with sunlight streamed through her hair. The first smile of being in love. The vulnerable look in a woman's eyes when she trusted you completely.

But the way Robyn looked on the couch, chest heaving with ragged breaths, skin glistening with our seed? It was a wonderful new kind of beauty. I slid a hand behind her neck and gave her a long, deep kiss. Then I pulled away and turned her toward Chase so he could do the same.

"You two are good at sharing," she purred.

Fuck me, I thought. *I could take her again right now, without a break.*

"That sounds like a kindergarten report card," Chase replied. "Good at sharing. Colors within the lines. Followed instructions by coming all over Robyn's chest instead of in her ass."

"I don't know what Kindergarten *you* went to," I said, "but I have a lot of follow-up questions."

Robyn giggled at that, then hopped up and walked to the bathroom in the hall to clean up. Chase and I both admired her nude form as she went.

"That was something," Chase said, collapsing on the couch.

"Yeah," I admitted, cautiously sitting down on the other end of the couch. Now that the sex was over, I was keenly aware that I was sitting next to another guy whose dick was hanging out. "You okay?"

Chase frowned at me. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"When I first met you both," I carefully said, "you were kissing in the library. That was the morning of Alistair's death. Since then, I have not been able to get a read on the two of you. One day, you're having sex in the attic. The next day, you're keeping your distance. And then everything with Robyn and Brody... I just wanted to make sure you aren't jealous at all."

Chase chuckled to himself. "Honestly? I'm kind of surprised at how okay I am. It doesn't bother me that she's fooled around with Brody. And sharing her with you just now... it was hot. *Really* hot. So hot that I kind of want to do it again."

"There's no *kind of* about it. I would enjoy doing this again very much," I replied.

"Everything that happens while we're in this house feels temporary," Chase went on. "We're stuck here together, held hostage by the promise of an

inheritance. We're competing against each other. These aren't the normal circumstances where two people start dating and fall in love."

"Is that what you want from Robyn?" I asked. "You want to fall in love with her?"

"Man, I don't even know," he said, staring off. "I want to date her when we get out of here. I'm drawn to her in a way I've never felt from anyone else. When she smiles, it's like a firework goes off in my chest. Does that make any sense?"

It makes a lot of sense, I thought. I feel myself drawn to her, too.

"Sure. I just wanted to make sure we're cool."

"We're definitely cool."

Robyn returned, nude and beautiful. Her brown hair was draped over her shoulders, the ends tickling against her nipples. Her face was flushed with satisfaction. Once again, I felt myself stir at the sight of her.

I can see why Chase feels the way he does. I can almost feel myself leaning that way, too.

"My legs feel like jelly," she said with the cutest little smile. "I need to lie down."

"Meet you downstairs in my room?" Chase asked.

She glanced at me. "Only if Xander joins us. If he's okay with a big cuddle party."

"Coming all over a woman is one thing, but cuddling is weird." She stared at me, mortified, until I laughed. "I'm joking. I'll cuddle for a little while."

Despite my joking attitude, I did have some boundaries when it came to this sort of thing. I didn't like sleeping with women. *Actually* sleeping, not the euphemism for sex. Cuddling was fine. Pillow talk was fine. But when it came time to turn out the lights and *sleep*, I struggled if there was another body next to me in bed. Rolling over, snoring, exuding heat like my own personal furnace. All of it interrupted the eight hours of sleep I expected to get each night.

I'll cuddle for a little bit, then excuse myself to my own bed.

We all split up to clean ourselves off and get ready for bed, then met in Chase's room. Robyn was wearing baggy pajamas, and somehow she looked

even sexier in them than when she was totally nude just minutes before. Chase had a queen bed, which was the perfect size for the three of us to crawl into, with Robyn in the middle. I laid on my back while she curled up against me, and Chase spooned her from the other side.

“I have a confession to make,” Robyn said.

I felt myself tense. “Those words are pretty triggering to a lawyer.”

“Sorry! It’s just that... I have to admit a threesome isn’t my biggest fantasy.”

Chase pushed up onto one elbow. “It’s not?”

“I only said that because both of you mentioned being turned on by it,” I replied. “And I really wanted to try it. I’m glad I did, but I wanted to tell you the truth.”

“Then what’s your biggest fantasy?” I asked.

Her breath tickled my chest as she sighed. “Honestly? I’ve never had one. Is that lame?”

“Really? Never?” Chase asked. “Then what do you search for when you watch porn?”

“She might not watch porn,” I pointed out.

“No, I do occasionally. Not, like, a *weird* amount. But I don’t look for the same thing every time. It changes depending on my mood. Tonight, I was in the mood for a threesome.”

“I’m glad you were,” Chase said.

Robyn twisted to look up at me through her eyelashes. “So. Do you still think threesomes are overrated?”

I grinned widely. “Now that I have a sample size of two, I can definitively say that threesomes are *fantastic*. In the right circumstances.”

“Okay, I have another question,” she said.

“This feels less like a cuddle party, and more like a deposition,” I replied.

“Last one, I promise! When we were... getting started, you seemed to know what Chase wanted. That he, you know, wanted to do butt stuff. How did you know?”

I chuckled to myself. “We were watching a movie the other day in the

theater room. The three of us, including Brody. And we got into an argument about who was hotter: Salma Hayek, or Penélope Cruz.”

“Salma Hayek,” Robyn replied quickly. “Her boobs are almost enough to make *me* into a lesbian.”

“That’s the answer I gave as well. Brody liked Penélope Cruz.”

“And Chase?”

“Chase agreed with me about Salma... but not because of her boobs. He told us he’s an ass man, and that...”

“Don’t say it!” Chase hissed.

“Why? It’s not embarrassing.”

“Tell me!” Robyn insisted.

“Chase said he wants to die by having Salma Hayek smother him with her ass.”

Robyn twisted around to face Chase, then busted out laughing. Chase turned red and glared at me over her body.

“I can appreciate that!” Robyn said when she finally stopped laughing. “No judgment here.”

“You’re not weirded out by that?”

“Chase, I just let you *fuck me in the ass*. Wanting Salma Hayek to smother you with her ass isn’t going to weird me out.”

“Okay, I believe you.”

She cuddled up against him, so I rolled onto my side to spoon her. The round globes of her ass pushed back against my crotch, and instantly I was hard again. She had to feel it, but didn’t say anything. She just sighed and closed her eyes while Chase reached over and turned out the light.

As I buried my face in Robyn’s hair and breathed her scent into my lungs, I thought about how crazy this all was. I was the executor to Alistair’s will, yet I was also a participant in the inheritance game. Now I was having sex with another potential inheritor. Two potential inheritors, technically. I wondered what the partners at my firm would say if they discovered what I was doing.

I don’t care anymore, I realized. I can’t spend my life worrying about what others think of me. At some point, I need to just relax and enjoy the moment.

I never got a chance to get out of bed and return to my own room. I fell asleep with Robyn in my arms. And despite all the little things that could have disrupted me—Robyn kicking her feet, the gentle wheezing from Chase, the combined heat of three people trapped underneath the down comforter—I slept as soundly as if I had popped a Valium.

I woke up to screaming.

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Chase

I had dreams, wonderful dreams about all the things I wanted to do with Robyn. The things I wanted to do *to* her. Sliding my cock in her ass again, this time in the missionary position so I could see the ecstasy painted on her face. Another threesome, this time letting Xander fuck Robyn so we could alternate between each other, making it last longer. Maybe even including the third member of our house, Brody, in the type of sizzling group activity that *definitely* only happened in porn.

I was in the middle of one scintillating dream when I was woken up by Robyn screaming at the top of her lungs. I bolted upright in bed, hand scrambling to the bedside table to feel around for a weapon. For anything to use as protection. I knocked over the lamp with a crash, and then my fingers tightened around the only other thing there: my cell phone. So I whirled around, holding it out in front of me like a knife.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?” Robyn demanded.

Brody was sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, a notepad of some kind in his hand. Despite Robyn’s panicked screams, he appeared totally calm. Unfazed by the disturbance he had caused.

“Jesus Christ,” Xander said. “That’s the creepiest thing I’ve ever woken up to.”

“What are you doing in here?” I asked.

“You didn’t close the door,” Brody said, gesturing to his left. “I walked by and saw all of you together. You looked really peaceful.”

“That’s all great,” Xander said, “but why are you *in here with us*?”

He turned the notepad around to show us. It was a big sketchpad, the kind artists used. And perfectly spaced in the middle was a rough sketch of the three of us in bed. Chase on one side, and me curled around Robyn’s body

protectively. It was done in pencil, with light shading.

“I was sketching you.”

Suddenly, Xander started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Robyn demanded.

“Brody’s full name is Allen Broderick Schreiber,” he explained. “It was listed on the will. I should have realized it.”

I gasped. “Allen Broderick Schreiber. ABS.”

Robyn was last to figure it out. “The sketch in the parlor? *You* did that?”

Brody shrugged sheepishly, a gesture which seemed totally unlike the cocky man.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t like to tell people about my sketches. It’s my own private thing. Alistair was the only person who knew about it. The portrait of him I drew is the only thing I’ve ever had framed.”

“Which is why you were weird about us messing with it,” Chase said like it was finally dawning on him.

“When I saw the three of you, I had to sketch you. The light coming through the window was perfect.” He shrugged again, more aloof this time. “Sorry you freaked out about it.”

Robyn let out an annoyed sigh. “You really need to stop sneaking into peoples’ rooms when they’re sleeping. One of these days, it’s going to end badly for you.”

“I’ve been threatened with a shanking before,” Brody said with a grin. “See you guys at breakfast. I’ll make the coffee.”

He whistled a tune while he left.

“That was an unpleasant way to wake up,” Xander said while swinging his legs out of bed. “It ruined an otherwise wonderful night.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Robyn sat up on her knees to kiss him. “And I’m glad you spent the night. I like waking up with two hunky guys on either side of me.”

“I’m glad I stayed, too.” Xander’s smile faltered. “Robyn, I was not myself last night. I allowed myself to be more free with my desires, in a way that...”

“I liked who you were last night,” she interrupted him. “Don’t apologize for a good thing.”

“Very well.” He glanced at me, gave her another quick kiss, then said, “I will see you both at breakfast.”

Robyn sighed back into the bed. “What a night.”

“It was pretty wild,” I admitted. “Speaking of wild. What we did... I want to make sure you’re okay.”

She blinked at me in confusion. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“We didn’t discuss any of it beforehand,” I explained. “About the threesome, and about... you know. The butt stuff.”

She laughed. “You don’t need to whisper. It’s not like anyone is going to overhear we had anal sex and judge us for it.”

“I just want to make sure it was okay,” I went on. “The way I licked you, and then held you down and slid it right in...”

Robyn started shaking with laughter. I frowned at her until she stopped enough for me to ask a question. “Why are you laughing?”

“Holding me down and having your way with me is *hot*,” she said. “It’s exactly what I wanted. I also gave you explicit verbal consent beforehand. You didn’t just, like, shove it in my ass without asking!”

I felt myself relax. “Good. Because the last thing I want is to pressure you into something you—”

Robyn punched me in the arm.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“That’s for being *too* polite,” she said. “You and Xander were amazing. You were assertive and sexy and everything I wanted. It takes away some of the fun if you’re both apologizing and acting like you regretted it the next morning.”

I grinned at her. “I definitely don’t regret it.”

“Good.” She leaned over and kissed my bicep where she had punched me. “Because I might want to do it again.”

We split up to get dressed and go through our own wake-up routines. While showering, I thought about how *fun* last night was. Yet as amazing as it was, I felt even more behind on my work than I did before. I had originally

intended to spend the evening focused on my coding project. I hadn't intended to get derailed.

No more screwing around, I thought. *After breakfast, I'm going to focus solely on my work until it's done.*

We all regrouped downstairs in the kitchen. Brody was waiting with a pot of coffee and mugs, like the hostess at a brunch get-together.

"Made it myself," he bragged while putting the coffee pot back. "Hope you like it."

I took a sip, and grimaced. "It's... strong."

"How many scoops did you put in the filter?" Robyn asked.

Brody shrugged. "I filled it to the top. That's what you're supposed to do."

"Sure it is," Robyn said, then went to the sink to water down her mug. I took a second cautious sip of my own. It was like having a full mug of espresso.

"I can't believe you did that last night," Brody complained.

Robyn tensed. "What? Slept with the third person in the house?"

"Had a threesome without me!" he answered. "I specifically told you I would be into that."

"You did?"

"Sure I did. A week or two ago, after we went jogging. I made a joke about how we should get sweaty in *other* ways. You were pretending to be reluctant, so I said that if it's because Chase is your boyfriend, I don't mind. I'd be down for a threesome. And then you went and invited the lawyer instead!"

Boyfriend. I liked the sound of that. I wasn't sure if she would want something serious, especially since she had fooled around with each of the other guys, but now it was in my head. *She would make a great girlfriend.*

"I thought you were joking," Robyn replied.

Brody stared at her with deathly seriousness. "I would never joke about a threesome."

"Surfing, and threesomes," I said to Xander. "The two topics that Brody takes *very* seriously."

Brody snapped his finger and pointed at me. “Bingo. This guy gets it.”

“I wonder if Alistair envisioned all of this happening when he wrote his will,” Xander said while spreading butter on a piece of toast.

“I hope not,” Robyn said. “I know he was kind of perverted sometimes, but he never made *me* feel weird.”

“I’ve got a birthday coming up,” Brody said. “If you’re wondering what to get me, a threesome would be dope.”

“You’re a Gemini?” I asked.

Robyn turned to me. “You believe in horoscopes?”

“They’re not any stranger than the Loch Ness Monster,” Xander pointed out.

“Hey! That’s a gross mischaracterization of the likelihood of Nessy’s existence,” I said. “I don’t believe in horoscopes. I just like reading them, is all.”

“If June 15 makes me a Gemini, then yeah, I’m a Gemini,” Brody explained. “All the Schreiber men are born in June.”

“Really? All of them?” Robyn asked doubtfully.

“My birthday is June 15, 1995,” Brody said. “My dad was born June 12, 1973. Grandpa Mark was June 9, 1951. And Alistair was June 20, 1923.”

Xander suddenly dropped his piece of toast. “Wait a minute. Say that again.”

“Uh. Alistair was born June 20...”

“Before that. Your grandfather. He was born in 1951?”

Hearing the year repeated made me leap up from my seat. “1951!”

Xander grinned at me. We had both figured it out.

“What am I missing?” Robyn asked.

I pulled out my copy of the will and smoothed it out on the table. “It’s the paranormal clue. Clause seven. He promised to haunt the room where he spent many late nights in the summer of 1951.”

“A baby!” Brody said. “They were late nights because he was up with a baby. My grandfather.”

“Was there a nursery in the house?” I asked.

Brody shook his head. “Fuck if I know. That was seventy years ago.”

“Oh!” Robyn blurted out. “I think I know where the nursery is!”

She ran out of the kitchen, forcing us to hurry to follow. Up the stairs she went, and straight into her tiny bedroom. By the time we caught up to her, she was standing on the bed to reach a corner of the wallpaper that was peeling away from the ceiling. She tugged, and a huge jagged section of wallpaper tore away from the wall.

Underneath was blue paint, with stenciled designs in white: clouds, rattles, balls, and blocks.

“This was the nursery!” she said, panting. “This is the room the clause is referring to!”



Robyn

I hadn't discovered many clues lately. It made me feel like I wasn't holding my weight around the house, that I would never be close to getting the inheritance without relying on Brody, Chase, and Xander to help me along. So when I realized that the room I had been sleeping in was originally the nursery, I was ecstatic to tell the others.

"This was the nursery all along!" Chase said. "Have you heard any strange noises?"

"Not really."

"What about other signs of the paranormal?"

"Well, I haven't had your equipment in here," I replied. "So, no. I haven't seen any signs."

Chase looked anguished.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I was going to spend the day working on my coding project. But now that I know the room the clause was referencing..."

"Forget you heard anything about it!" I insisted. "Focus on your job, and then you can investigate with your fancy equipment tonight. Ghosts only come out at night, right?"

He shook his head. "That's a really naive thing to say, Robyn. Ghosts don't care if the sun is out or not."

I held out both palms. "My mistake. But why not focus on your job and investigate the paranormal activity afterward? Like eating all your vegetables before having dessert?"

"And potentially miss out on Alistair making contact?" Chase scoffed. "I'll camp out in there while working on my code."

Despite what Chase said, he didn't do much coding work that I could see. He spent an hour setting up all his equipment in my bedroom—the former nursery—and then sat in the chair with his laptop out, but I never heard his fingers on the keys.

I jogged in the morning with Brody, who continued chastising me for excluding him from the threesome. Then I went about my day: showering, washing my hair thoroughly, and then tidying up around the manor. In the afternoon, I updated my resume so I could begin job hunting whenever we got out of the house. Now that my switcharoo at the caretaker agency had been discovered, I suspected I would need to make a change of career.

What am I going to do? I wondered while briefly job hunting. *I can't just change my entire career path in my mid-twenties.*

I heard the percussive sound of billiard balls smacking together that evening, so I went up to the parlor and found Xander playing by himself. He smiled when he saw me.

“How goes the job hunting?” he asked.

“You know I've been job hunting?”

“I assumed,” he replied while lining up a shot. The pool stick moved smoothly in his hands, gently knocking one of the striped balls into a pocket. “Today is the first day I've seen you use your laptop, so I figured that was why.”

“You figured correctly. I don't know what I'm going to do with myself. Even if the police don't charge me with any crime, my agency will surely fire me. And I won't be able to get another job without my new employer finding out why.”

“It's unfortunate for sure.” He chalked up the tip of his pool cue. “I'm feeling trapped, too. The partners at my firm are losing their patience, but I'm stuck here until the game is over.”

I joined him by the pool table and said, “I can't believe they're blaming you. How is any of this your fault?”

“They're insisting I should have reviewed the will prior to his death. That's usually protocol, to ensure everything is legally sound and there aren't any issues, but of course Alistair insisted his will remained sealed until his death. The partners understood this three months ago when everything was

arranged, but that's not stopping them from changing their minds." He let out a long, exhausted sigh. "I don't think I can stay here much longer."

"You would walk away from your chance at the inheritance?" I asked.

"If I have to," he admitted. "Or maybe I could find a loophole in the will that would allow us to end the game more quickly. Either way, I need to do *something*, or I'll be job hunting right alongside you."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've been so focused on my own issues that I haven't spared much thought about how this is all affecting you guys."

Xander's next shot missed; the eight ball bounced around the table a few times before becoming still. "Not your fault."

He gave me a wry smile, which was rare for him, and then examined the pool table like a lion stalking its prey. I thought about how assertive he had been last night, letting loose and taking control in a way that had turned out to be incredibly sexy. Just thinking about it was getting me a little excited all over again.

"Is there anything I can do to make it better?" I asked.

Xander shook his head and grimaced. "Not unless you know a way to make the partners at my firm more understanding of the situation."

I stepped a little closer and leaned forward to show a bit of cleavage. "I meant something more... sexual."

He paused while lining up his shot and gazed up at me. "That might work on the partners, but I have to warn you: they're all over fifty years old."

I laughed, and then Xander put his pool cue down and came around the table to me. His cologne or deodorant was faint on his clothes, smelling richly of spice and cloves.

"I had a lot of fun last night," he said.

"Me too."

"Did you enjoy my participation for its own sake," he asked softly, "or was it the allure of having two men?"

I pressed my chest against his and gave him a light kiss. "Both. Although you never actually got a chance to fuck me."

He gave me that little half-smile of his. "You're right. I didn't."

"Want to fix that?"

“I really, really do.”

Xander cradled my head in both hands and kissed me so hard that I was instantly wet. I leaned against the pool table and savored the way his lips felt, warm and soft and hungry.

The way he held me, the way he kissed me, made it clear he had been thinking about this for a while. And the longer we kissed, the more I could feel his desperate desire just beneath the surface.

“Take me,” I breathed. “I’m yours right now. Do whatever you want.”

Xander ripped away from the kiss and unbuttoned my jeans, then pulled them down along with my panties. I kicked them off and he lifted me onto the edge of the pool table, then kissed me again while removing his own pants. I heard them fall to the ground with his belt.

“You don’t want a drink first?” I teased.

“The only thing I want,” he said emphatically, “is you.”

He guided himself into my waiting lips, burying himself deep into my pussy without hesitation. Both of us exhaled together as the pleasure of our intimate contact took over. Xander rested his forehead against mine and caressed my cheek with his hand while I squeezed him with my wet heat.

The felt from the edge of the pool table was soft against my bare ass as Xander began making love to me. His tongue massaged its way into my mouth and I met it with my own, moving wetly together while his hips gyrated between my legs. For several minutes we were a jumble of grunts and groans and kisses.

“Is this what you wanted?” he rumbled into my neck. “Is this why you came up to the parlor?”

I draped my arms over his shoulders and said, “It’s kind of what I wanted.”

He bent down to kiss my neck. “Kind of?”

I bit my lip. “I was hoping you wouldn’t be so nice to me.”

Xander slowed down. “Not so nice?”

I nodded while looking up at him through my eyelashes.

I didn’t know any other way to ask. In fact, I wasn’t used to asking for what I wanted in bed—or on a *pool table*, as it were. But with Xander, I felt like I could tell him what I wanted. Like he wouldn’t judge me.

“I wanted you to *take* me,” I whispered.

He grinned lustily, then gripped my waist in his hands. He pulled himself back, then *slammed* forward as hard as he could.

I moaned as new elation spread through my body.

“Is that what you wanted?” he asked in his deep voice.

I nodded, and as soon as I did he pounded me again.

“Oh God yes.” I leaned back on my elbows as he fucked me harder.

Xander pawed at my breasts while jack-hammering into me, rougher and rougher. All the while he kept his eyes locked onto mine, drinking in my desire like it was as intoxicating as the drinks over at the bar.

After a few minutes he said, “I know what you *really* want.”

He pulled me down from the table and kissed my neck, dragging his teeth across my skin. Then he spun me around. He planted a strong hand on my back and bent me over the pool table, then filled my pussy from behind without hesitation.

I cried out with pleasure as he took control. The new angle was intense, but in just the right way. I gazed over my shoulder at him as he grabbed my waist and began slamming into me, holding nothing back. Letting go of his inhibitions the way I so desperately wanted.

Xander moaned loudly, and I opened my lips to join my cries of ecstasy to his. I rolled my head back and caught a glimpse of our reflection in the mirror behind the bar. I was bent over the pool table, back arched and ass in the air. Xander’s gorgeous body gripped mine tightly, arms bulging with taut strength as he refused to let go.

We looked *hot*.

Xander turned and looked toward the bar, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

As new pleasure overwhelmed me, I clenched my eyes shut and let my moan echo through the parlor. I desperately wanted to keep looking at ourselves, to drink in the sight of our torrid act, but it was all I could do not to scream at the top of my lungs. My legs turned to rubber as he fucked me against the pool table, crashing his hard length into me so hard that the pool balls began to move.

“God, Robyn,” he gritted out.

“Xander,” I moaned back at him.

He planted a palm between my shoulder blades and shoved me down onto the green felt of the pool table, holding me down while he took me the way I wanted. And then I felt his hand tighten around my waist, gripping me possessively. Xander buried himself as deep as he could with one thrust, then another, and then he was crying out with his own ecstasy. I felt him pull out and immediately erupt, coming all over my ass cheeks and lower back, thread after thread of his come until both of our cries trailed off.

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Xander

There was a very long list of ways I wanted to make love to Robyn. In every room in this big mansion, in every position possible. So when she told me not to be nice with her, I knew *exactly* what she meant. And I knew exactly what I was going to do to her. I'd known since the moment she teased me by bending over during our *first* pool game, almost a week ago.

You want to show off your ass? Well then I'm going to make it mine.

She reacted just how I hoped as I bent her over the table and buried myself into her. She was already soaking wet, but now she was *drenched*. My length slid in and out of her with ease, despite how tight she was.

Robyn's ass was a masterpiece. I don't want to overstate it, but the sight of it alone was enough to make any man cry with joy. The smooth, round globes of her ass pressed together, then tapering off at a narrow waist. I clutched one of her cheeks in my hand, squeezing her flesh beneath my fingers and letting it fill my palm. I savored the sight of my cock disappearing between those orbs, devoured by the lushness of her pussy within.

I've never been into a girl this much, I realized.

I grabbed a handful of her hair and gave it a testing squeeze. She arched her back and moaned loudly, just like I hoped.

The sounds she made grew louder as I slammed into her. Harder and harder I fucked her, pushing her down onto the table, giving her exactly what she wanted. I needed her to come, both to hear her scream with elation and because I wanted to come, and I wouldn't let myself do it until she had. But the way her slit was gripping me, tight like a vice...

Robyn twisted to look back at me, surprise and bliss in her dark eyes, and then she completely fell apart. Her cry of ecstasy was music to my ears. I fisted her hair and finally surrendered to the sweet release of her body. As I

began to come, I pushed into her as deep as I could, bottoming out inside her wet heat while it clamped around me tightly. I pulled out just in time, exploding all over her smooth skin.

When I came down from my eye-watering, toe-curling orgasm, I wrapped my arms around Robyn and pulled her up into a standing position, her pale ass cheeks pressed warmly against my skin. I twisted her face around so I could taste her lips, and we stayed like that until I finally went soft.

“That,” I breathed, “was exactly what I needed.”

Cognizant of the mess on her back, Robyn carefully stood and turned around to brush her lips against mine. “Me too.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “I wasn’t sure if you were hoping for…” I wasn’t sure what to say. Was it tactful to blurt out *butt sex*?

It took her a moment to realize what I meant. “More anal play?”

I nodded.

“No! I was hoping you would fuck me exactly the way you did.” She gave me a bashful little smile. “I’m actually a little too sore for more activities like *last night*.”

“I’ll give you a few days,” I said. “But then I’m coming for that ass.”

“More like coming *in* this ass,” she shot back at me.

The two of us laughed like a pair of idiots in the parlor.

After cleaning up, we made our way downstairs. Chase had headphones on that were attached to a localized microphone, so he didn’t appear to have heard what had just happened on the floor above him. He didn’t even realize Robyn was in the room with him until she walked up and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Put away the toys. It’s time for dinner.”

He removed the headphones. “Huh?”

“I said put your toys away. It’s time to eat.”

Chase glanced at me, then smiled up at her. “Your cheeks are flushed.”

I wasn’t sure how to handle the topic, now that it was here. Chase was totally comfortable with the sexy threesome last night, and the general arrangement she had with me and Brody, but did he want to know the specifics? Or was it more of a don’t ask, don’t tell situation?

“Well...” Robyn said, wondering the same thing I was.

Chase gave me a thumbs-up. “Nice. You didn’t get to do much last night, Xander, so I figured you might be antsy for it. What kind of food are we getting?”

Surprised at his comfort level, I said, “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

I heard the rest of their conversation from a distance.

“We’re thinking either Vietnamese, or Italian,” Robyn said.

“I’m cool with whatever,” he replied.

“Are you going to come down and help us order it?”

“I’ll probably just eat it in here while I work.”

“Are you working on your code project,” Robyn asked, “or playing with ghosts?”

He hesitated before answering. “Both?”

“Nope,” Robyn replied. “You need a break from searching for poltergeists. Join us for dinner, then you can return to commandeering my bedroom.”

The two of them met us down in the kitchen. Brody and I were leaning over the counter, evaluating two different take-out menus.

“Vietnamese is dumb,” Brody muttered.

“Settle down, Henry Kissinger,” I replied.

“Who?”

“Nevermind.” I glanced up at Chase and Robyn. “We need help breaking a tie.”

“Thai?” Chase said. “I thought we were getting Vietnamese.”

I pointed at him. “That was a cheesy pun. But I’ll allow it this one time.”

“We’ve had Asian food twice this week already.” Brody went to the fridge and began pulling out bottles of Budweiser. He shoved one at me and added, “I know you like pork fried rice, but I’m craving pasta.”

“I don’t actually like Budweiser,” I told him.

“Aw, come on. There’s exactly four left. Now we can throw out the box...”

“I’ll take one,” Robyn said, eyes flitting over at me. “I worked up a thirst.”

“Fine,” I said, winking at her. “But only because I worked up a thirst, too.”

Brody reached deeper into the fridge, then paused. “Huh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I think Budweiser was Alistair’s favorite drink,” Brody said with his head still in the fridge.

“I’m telling you, it’s the French 75,” I insisted. Then I recognized a strange tone in his voice. “Wait. Why do you say that?”

“Because.” Brody pulled out the empty cardboard box the beer bottles came in, then reached inside. “I just found this.”

He held up a faded yellow envelope:

CLAUSE 4

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Robyn

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chase said. “Budweiser? Really?”

“There’s a hundred grand worth of nice wine underneath our feet,” Brody agreed. “And *this* is his favorite drink? I feel like I’ve been rick-rolled by alcohol.”

“Assuming this is what was referenced when he said to *drink his favorite drink*,” Xander said while taking the envelope. “But that seems like a safe assumption. Mind if I...?”

“Go ahead,” Brody said, handing over the clue. “The last time I opened an envelope in the kitchen, I ended up naked for the rest of the day. Although I think that was a crowd pleaser.” He turned and winked at me.

“I couldn’t stand you back then,” I said. “A lot has changed.”

“Whatever you say, babycakes.”

Chase cleared his throat. “The clause?”

Xander carefully threaded a finger underneath the seal, then opened the envelope. His eyes scanned the words, and then he read out loud: “Clause number four: whoever opens this envelope wins the inheritance and the game immediately ends.”

The other three of us all began shouting at once.

“What!” I said.

“No fucking way,” Brody said.

“That can’t be...” Chase trailed off. “Wait. You’re joking.”

“Indeed I am.” Xander cracked a smile and then read out the actual clause: “Clause number four: the individual items I have given you in my will hold the keys to inheriting my fortune.” He handed the letter to Brody. “We all know what this means.”

“Yeah,” Brody said. “What a useless clue, Alistair.” Chase nodded in agreement.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Why do we all know what it means?”

The three of them looked puzzled. “The gifts Alistair left us in the will,” Xander explained. “They quite literally hold keys.”

“An actual key?” I asked. “The kind that opens a lock?”

“That is what *literally* means, yes,” Xander teased. He pulled a key out of his pocket. “This was taped to the bottom of the Prague snow globe in the attic.”

I took the key from him. It was as long as my palm, and made of heavy iron. It looked like it was older than Alistair himself.

“Mine was hidden in the soil beneath the rose bushes,” Chase said, fishing out his own key. “I didn’t realize it until the second day we were here.”

Brody reached into the pocket of his sweatpants and pulled out another. “I found mine the first day. Like, an hour after the will was read.”

“I remember you carrying the chess set up to your room!” I exclaimed. “I thought you were just paranoid that one of us would take the only thing Alistair left you in the will.”

“Nope!” he replied cheerfully. “Hidden compartment underneath the board.”

“Why are you surprised?” Xander asked. “You found yours in the bible.”

“Uh, no I didn’t?”

“Really?” Brody asked.

“There was no key,” I said. “We all went in the library and checked it together. Remember?”

“I assumed you had already found the key, and were being coy to throw us off the scent,” Chase said.

“That is the conclusion I also arrived at,” Xander said with a nod.

Brody cocked his head at me. “You really didn’t find your key?”

I wanted to throw up my hands and scream at them. “WHY DIDN’T ANYONE SHARE THIS INFORMATION WITH ME?”

We went to the library and checked the bible again. The guys took turns

examining the massive tome, turning it over and searching for hidden compartments in the pages or binding. None of them were successful.

“Now I just feel left out,” I muttered.

“The clues were all straightforward,” Xander said, scratching his chin. “I don’t understand why yours would be more difficult.”

“Maybe there’s another bible somewhere else in the house?” Chase offered. “Like in his bedroom?”

Xander shook his head. “The will specifically stated that he was leaving *this* bible to Robyn. The one in the library.”

“Can I see the keys?” I asked.

Chase and Xander handed theirs over. Brody hesitated for a few seconds, then reluctantly opened his palm. I held all three of them together between my fingers, lining them up against each other.

“They’re identical,” I said.

“Correct,” Xander agreed.

“I’m assuming you guys don’t know what they unlock, right?”

“Right,” Brody said. “I’ve searched the whole damn house for another safe. Nothing.”

“I have also done quite a bit of searching,” Xander admitted. “I am no closer to discovering it myself.”

“Then I don’t need to find my key,” I said. “As long as I find what it unlocks, I can use one of yours.”

“Hold on there, babycakes,” Brody said while snatching his key back. “That’s not how this works.”

“Only one person can win the inheritance,” Xander insisted. “The will was very clear.”

“And if I find whatever the keys unlock, then I win it,” I said.

“Not that I want to agree with them,” Chase said slowly to me, “but why would we give you one of our keys if it means forfeiting the inheritance?”

“Because I’m a pretty girl,” I said, batting my eyelashes.

“Although true, that is not enough reason to hand the inheritance to you,” Chase said. He reached over to boop me on the nose.

“If you lend me your key at the right time,” I said in a more sultry tone, “I’ll let you do more butt stuff.”

“*Let me* do more butt stuff? You enjoyed it as much as I did!” he said with a laugh.

“This is true,” I admitted.

“Back up a minute,” Brody said. “*More* butt stuff?” He looked at Chase, then me. “You guys did *butt stuff* without me, too?”

“A gentleman never kisses and tells,” Xander said. “But yes.”

“Aw, man. All we’ve done together is vanilla sex,” Brody said.

“It wasn’t vanilla!” I argued. “We did it on our side in bed. And again on the workout bench.”

“We’re getting off topic here,” Xander said.

“I’m only joking about letting me have one of the keys,” I explained. “I don’t want anyone’s charity. I want to find *my* key. This game was important to Alistair. Having us play it was literally his dying wish. We have to do it right.”

“We’ve all found our keys,” Chase said. “You’re the one who needs to catch up.”

“I’m trying!”

“Maybe we should start over and search the house together, room by room, until we find what the keys unlock,” Xander suggested.

“I want to do the really naughty stuff,” Brody continued saying. “The kind of stuff that’s *definitely* not kosher.”

“Maybe tonight,” Chase said. “After we have some *real* drinks, not crappy Budweiser. No offense, Alistair.”

Something Brody said triggered a memory in my brain. *Kosher*.

“I don’t believe Budweiser was his favorite drink,” Xander said. “I think he’s trolling us from beyond the grave, like with the rickrolling.”

“That would be a very Alistair thing to do,” Chase agreed.

“Kosher,” I muttered. Why was that familiar?

“I’ve already searched every room in this house,” Brody insisted. “Ever since I found the key on the day the will was read, I’ve been looking for a

place to stick it.”

“He wants a place to stick it all right,” Chase said, nudging me with his elbow. “Right, Robyn?”

“Kosher,” I said, a lightbulb going off in my head. “Kosher!”

“Okay,” Xander said soothingly. “I won’t get pork fried rice again. We can get something kosher.”

“Not that! *This.*” I ran out of the library and into the foyer. The tall oil painting of Alistair looked down on me.

“You can’t just run out of rooms and expect us to follow,” Chase said when they joined me.

“Sure I can. Especially when I discover the reason the key wasn’t in the bible.”

“Why?” Xander asked.

I pointed up at the painting and grinned.



“There, just below his neck. The first button on his tie. *See?*”

I watched with satisfaction as they all craned their necks. “The button?” Brody asked.

“There’s a design on it, but it’s blurry,” Xander said. “It’s pointed...”
He suddenly gasped.



“Do you get it, now?” I asked.

“It’s a star!” Chase said. “A star of David!”

“I’ve been looking in the wrong bible,” I said, running back into the library. One of the shelves held every kind of religious text, including several books of the Old Testament. I removed the first one I saw, which was the first of six books in the English translation of the Talmud. I opened the cover and grinned widely when I saw what was inside.

“Here’s my key,” I said, holding it up. “Alistair Schreiber was Jewish!”



Robyn

Xander took the book from me and examined the interior. There was a hollow space carved out of the margin, just deep enough to hold the key. And since it was in the margin, it didn't damage any of the text itself.

"I'm quite embarrassed I didn't figure this out," he admitted. "In retrospect, it seems obvious we should have checked the *other* religious books."

Brody looked shell-shocked. "I'm Jewish? But I don't even know who our pope is."

"Oh, honey," I said.

"Why do you sound like a kindergarten teacher consoling one of the dumb students?"

"No reason," I replied, rubbing him on the back.

"I guess he wasn't a Nazi," Xander said in a daze.

"He was the *opposite* of a Nazi," Brody said angrily. "Now do you feel bad about all the jokes?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "I feel like shit about it."

"This explains why he fled Germany in the forties," Chase said.

"But why hide it?" I asked.

"Maybe he converted for Annabelle," Xander said. "I found several portraits of her upstairs, and she's wearing a cross necklace in each one of them."

"The portrait in the foyer was when he was young," Chase agreed. "Before he met her."

"Or maybe," Xander mused, "he didn't want anyone knowing he was Jewish. Antisemitism was rampant in the forties and fifties."

"And sixties," I said. "And seventies, eighties, nineties..."

“Several clues mentioned opening our eyes,” Brody added. “Because the clue was right in front of us all along.”

“Perhaps so,” Xander agreed.

Chase suddenly frowned. “Let me see that key?”

I handed it over. Chase held it up next to his key to compare them.

“They’re different,” he said. “Your key has two of these protruding bits, and ours only have one.”

I examined the keys myself. Sure enough, mine was different than the other three.

“Why would he give me a key to one thing,” I wondered, “but give you three keys to something else?”

“Add it to the other mysteries about Alistair Schreiber,” Xander said.

Brody was reading something intently on his phone. “Guys. I can’t find any info about the Jewish pope. Is he, like, a secret?” He gasped. “Or maybe it’s a woman? A lady-pope?”

“Later tonight, when we’ve had a few glasses of expensive wine, I’ll explain it to you,” I said.

“But what about my letter?” Brody insisted. “I left a million dollars to the Jews. If we can’t figure out who their pope is, what happens to that money?”

“You should probably forfeit the game,” Chase suggested. “To make sure there’s no ambiguity around that.”

Brody scoffed. “You want to trick me into giving up the inheritance? Haven’t my people been through enough?”

“Your people,” Xander said, deadpan.

Chase and I were struggling not to laugh, so I quickly tried to steer us back on topic. “Now we have four keys. One of them is different than the others. We have to find out what they unlock.”

“We’ve been through the entire house already,” Xander said. Chase nodded along with him. “But I suppose we can search again.”

We spent the next morning and the better part of the afternoon going through the entire estate, room by room. We moved bookshelves and checked under beds. Brody ran his hands over the walls, searching for secret doorways or safes. We even went into the attic and sifted through the piles of

junk. Xander found a box full of antique Deutsche Mark coins that he estimated were worth a few thousand dollars, but we never found anything the keys could fit into.

After dinner, Brody took me aside in the foyer. “Got a second?”

“Listen, about the Jewish pope,” I began.

He shook his head. “It’s not about that.” He reached underneath a table and pulled out a small Amazon box. “I wanted to give you this.”

I tensed as he opened the box. Was Brody giving me a *gift*? Did he think the two of us were serious? I wondered what to say, dreading that it might be something extravagant, especially since he made a lot of money pushing pharma pills...

“Here.” He shoved a stuffed animal at me.

I held it up. “A penguin?”

“I’ve been thinking about the story you told me. About your parents. You seemed really happy that your dad got to see penguins before he died. So... here’s a penguin. I don’t know if this gift is sweet, or super fucked up,” he admitted. “If it totally reminds you of your parents in a bad way, I’ll throw it in the fireplace.”

“I love it,” I breathed.

“Really?”

I nodded. “It’s really sweet. It will remind me that no matter what happens in life, there’s always a silver lining.”

I hugged him, and he squeezed me tight in his arms. Seconds ago, I had been terrified by what he was going to give me, and now I found my heart melting. It was the sweetest gift anyone had ever given me. And it didn’t make me sad, not even a little bit.

“I’ll leave you alone, now.” He glanced at his watch. “Jeopardy is about to come on.”

I went into the library and watched the game show with Xander. I even kept track of his Coryat Score on a sheet of paper. But even though it was our nightly ritual, sitting with Xander left me even more confused than before.

I had liked Chase all along, and hoped to continue seeing him after this was over. But now I was intimately drawn to Brody, too. And unlike my previous

assumptions, it wasn't merely a physical attraction. He wasn't just some booty call I was hooking up with until we got out of here. I *liked* him.

Then there was Xander, sitting next to me while intensely focused on the game. My feelings for him were freshest, since we had slept together for the first time two nights ago, but they were bright and strong. I still thought about the way he came running out of the house when the police were taking me away, throwing himself between us and demanding they let me go. Not only did he save me from being disqualified from the game, but he risked his own stake to do so. That single act had completely changed the way I thought about him. Even now, sitting in the library answering trivia about the Roman Empire, the memory of his intervention made me want to jump his bones.

And then cuddle together afterward, I thought. Like Brody, it's more than just physical with him.

But there was a harsh reality I needed to face: I couldn't date all three of them. Everyone was cool with the situation right now, without debilitating jealousy, but surely that would change when we left the house. I would need to make a decision.

And that decision was becoming more and more difficult with every day that passed.

Later that night, Brody made a joke about getting dirty with me. Chase joined in and said, "Hey, I think I have dibs on her tonight."

"I don't remember you calling dibs," Brody argued.

"You're right, I didn't," Chase admitted. Then he blurted out, "Dibs!"

"Damn it!"

"I'm not a seat in a car," I told them. "You can't call shotgun on my vagina."

"Who says it's your vagina I'm talking about?" Chase said with a mischievous grin.

It was tempting, but I shook my head. "I'm not really in the mood tonight. I think I'm going to sleep alone, if that's okay."

"You don't want to sleep with a Jew?" Brody said. "Wow. Just wow, Robyn."

"Shut up."

Even though I didn't want to have sex with anyone that night, I still slept with two of them. Chase was still camped out in my room with all of his equipment. He had dragged a big, comfortable recliner into the room so he could sleep in it while listening to the data in his headphones. Meanwhile, Brody dragged his sleeping bag and blankets onto the floor and curled up like it was any other night.

"What?" he said. "I'm still freaked out by this house."

"I'm surprised you aren't bothered by all the equipment I have set up," Chase said.

"Bothered?" Brody scoffed. "I'm glad the room is full of this junk. If a ghost is wandering around, I want to know about it."

I drifted to sleep squeezing my stuffed penguin to my chest, while the two of them chatted idly about all the different types of paranormal evidence the equipment was gathering.

I took a long, hot shower the next morning, and felt more refreshed than I had in several days. Sometimes a girl needed to sleep in a bed alone, without any hanky panky.

The guys were in the kitchen, having an argument.

"...plenty who don't practice the dietary restrictions," Chase was saying.

"But won't I go to, like, hell?" Brody was holding up a piece of bacon. "I don't want to risk it. I bet Jewish hell is really shitty."

"Actually," Xander said, "Jews don't believe in hell."

Brody narrowed his eyes skeptically. "That doesn't sound right. Everyone believes in hell."

"I'm sure you are correct," Xander replied sarcastically. "My mistake."

Brody nodded in satisfaction. "You want my bacon, Robyn?"

"I do!" I said, biting into a piece. "But Xander is right. Plenty of Jews eat pork. I made ham sandwiches for Alistair plenty of times."

"I'm not going to take the chance. Too bad we're out of turkey bacon."

Suddenly, Xander gasped. He was reading his phone.

"No. I don't believe it."

"What?" Brody asked.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

Xander’s dark eyes were wider than I had ever seen them before. “Nothing is wrong. Things are very, *very* right!”

He held up his phone, even though we couldn’t see it from across the room.

“I got in,” he breathed. “I’ve been selected as a contestant on Jeopardy!”

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Robyn

“Jeopardy?” I said, not believing what he was saying. “Like, the TV show you’ve been studying for? *That* Jeopardy?”

“Is there any other kind?”

“I don’t know! I’m trying to gauge how excited I should be, and you’re just sitting there!”

“Very excited.” Xander leaped to his feet. “I’m going to be a contestant!”

We hugged and jumped up and down with excitement. Even Brody joined in. It was strange seeing the normally-subdued lawyer acting like a teenage boy who just saw his first pair of boobs, but that only emphasized how momentous the occasion was.

“Why are we celebrating?” Chase asked as he walked inside.

“Xander got invited to Jeopardy!” I said.

“Dude! No shit?” Chase grinned. “When do you go on?”

“Normally, contestants are given a few weeks notice before they have to be in Los Angeles for filming,” he explained. “But apparently I’m replacing someone who had to drop out for personal reasons. My filming date is...” He looked at his phone. “June 18.”

“That’s next week,” Brody said.

“I need to study!” Xander said excitedly. He ran to the coffee pot and refilled his mug. “There are still so many categories I need to brush up on. Greek history. Types of plants.”

“I can help with that,” Chase offered.

“There’s just one problem,” Brody said. “We won’t be done with the inheritance in a week.”

The excitement on Xander’s face drained away like the plug had been

pulled. “Oh.”

“Oh no,” I said.

“Sorry to ruin the moment,” Brody said. “But I have no intention of quitting before then. And I don’t think Robyn or Chase do, either.”

Xander looked to me for an answer. I grimaced and admitted, “I don’t want to give up yet. Not after coming this far.”

Chase didn’t say anything, but he gave an apologetic shrug.

“I see.” Xander cleared his throat, looked down at the email on his phone, then shoved it in his pocket. “I wouldn’t expect any of you to quit early because of me.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I need to spend some time thinking.”

Xander locked himself in the library all day. I brought him a sandwich around lunch, and he was grateful, but when I checked in on him a few hours later, the sandwich was untouched. He barely even noticed me, and was too busy poring over his copy of Alistair’s will.

Chase was still in my room, pretending to work on his coding project while he instead focused on a trace of EMF signal he was getting on the interior wall. Once it disappeared, I took the sensor from him, pushed him down onto the bed, and crawled into his lap. I rode him like that for what felt like hours, taking my time while kissing him passionately. And just when I thought I wouldn’t be able to come from that position, he rolled us both over and took control, pushing me over the edge until both of us were moaning together with sweet release.

“I haven’t found much,” he explained while we cuddled on the bed after. “I keep getting tiny little blips of signal on the EMF reader. Same for the Geiger counter; it lasts a few seconds, moves in a straight line across the room, then abruptly stops.”

“That sucks.”

“Something is here!” he insisted. “I can feel Alistair trying to communicate with me. But it’s not enough.”

“Keep trying,” I said gently. “If this really is Alistair trying to reach out, eventually you’ll get the evidence you need.”

He sighed. "I feel like I'm running out of time. I'm so far behind on my work project that my boss wants to have a call with me tomorrow morning. And the worst part is I'm not allowed to tell him about the inheritance game. That's strictly prohibited by the will."

"Maybe he'll understand why you're behind. Maybe you can beg him to give you more time?"

"Maybe," he said doubtfully.

Xander ate dinner by himself in the library, and then skipped Jeopardy and went straight to bed. I knocked on his bedroom door a few hours later.

"The light was still on," I said while entering. "My intuition tells me you're not sleeping."

"Your intuition is right." He was sitting up in bed, the copy of the will spread out in front of him on the comforter. "If you've come here to seduce me, I must regretfully decline."

I *was* coming up here to cheer him up with sex, but I quickly pivoted. "I just want to cuddle. You seem like you could use someone tonight."

He smiled. "I won't turn that down."

I took his copy of the will away, then crawled under the covers. His body was warm, and immediately took away the chill that I had felt from walking through the house.

"You want to talk about it?" I asked.

"Not particularly, no."

"Okay."

We were silent for about a minute.

"It's been my dream to get on Jeopardy since I was a little kid," he said. "I auditioned for the Teen Tournament, and again during the College Tournament of Champions. I've taken the online test every single year since then. Twice, I've been invited to the second round, which is another online test monitored by a proctor. I was beginning to give up hope that I would ever get invited. And then it happens now, while I'm trapped in this house."

"It's like a sick joke," I agreed. "But if it's your dream, shouldn't you follow it?"

"That's what I've been thinking about all day. Even though it's my dream,

I can't simply walk away from a chance at winning this inheritance. It would be like tearing up a winning lotto ticket. That money would set me up for life. How can I throw away that chance?"

"Maybe you'll do great on Jeopardy and win a bunch of money," I said. "That would be the best of both worlds. Getting on the game show, *and* becoming rich."

He laughed. "I'm good at trivia, but I'm nowhere near as good as some of the recent champions. I'm no Ken Jennings or James Holzhauer. I'll be lucky if I win one game."

I snuggled closer to him. "What happens if you turn down the invitation?"

"My name is taken out of the player pool and I start over from scratch," he replied. "I'll take the online test again next March, and hope to get invited to the second round. Then, if I do well enough there, I hope they select me to come to Los Angeles." He sighed. "I don't know if I can just start over like that."

"I don't blame you." I squeezed him tight. "I wish I had a solution."

"Me too."

I went for a jog with Brody the next morning. "You're sluggish today," I told him while we began our second lap around the estate. "And I haven't *weakened your legs* recently, if you know what I mean."

He chuckled and said, "I slept alone in Alistair's room last night. Which means I was too creeped out to sleep at all."

"You could have had another slumber party with Chase," I suggested. "Like the night before."

"It's weird when you're not there. Chase is cool and all, and we've put aside our differences, but I outgrew sleepovers when I was twelve."

"That's too bad," I said. "Because I think today is the day I *beat you*."

I increased my pace and flew around the estate. Brody was close on my heels, pumping his arms and legs to keep up. I stuck my tongue out at him as we raced, and he flipped me off. But despite my head start, he passed me before we made it back around the house.

"Race you a second time," he said as we began another lap.

He won again, even though I tried tripping him as we rounded the

greenhouse. Our playful mood continued as we went inside and gulped down water. When he went into Alistair's bathroom to take a shower, I joined him. We spent a few minutes allowing the hot water to run over our bodies, cleaning away the sweat and grime. Then Brody was kissing my neck, and squeezing my ass in his hands. By the time he bent me over in the shower, I was as wet on the inside as I was on the outside. The bathroom tile caused our grunts and moans to echo as he fucked me fast and hard, bending over me to sigh with ecstasy into my ear as he came.

As we dried off after, he said, "Tell me something."

"Shoot."

"You're fooling around with all three of us. Me, Chase, and Xander."

"The Count from Sesame Street would be proud," I joked.

"What's going to happen when this is all over?"

I turned to look at Brody. Rivulets of water ran down his serious face, and his blue eyes bore into me, waiting for an answer.

"I haven't thought about it," I said, even though it was a lie.

"You liked Chase first," he said. "Before Alistair died."

"I had a small crush on him, that's all."

"And now?" he insisted. "Is it still just a small crush, or are you going to commit to him when the inheritance game is over?"

"I just told you I haven't thought about it."

"Well, it's all I've thought about," he shot back fiercely. "I want to know where we stand."

"Where do you want us to stand?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"See?" I said, jabbing a finger at him. "It's not so easy to put into words, is it?"

"All I know is that we're not just fooling around. This," he pointed back and forth between us, "feels like something real. We have a connection. Tell me I'm wrong."

I couldn't do that, because I knew he was right. I *did* feel something for Brody, I just didn't know what it was. And how it compared to my feelings

for Chase and Xander.

“Say something,” he insisted. “Robyn?”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I whispered.

A blank look came over his face. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

He wrapped the towel around himself and left me alone in the bathroom.

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Robyn

My interaction with Brody put me in a sour mood the rest of the afternoon. Chase wasn't in my room, so I laid down in bed, snuggled with the stuffed penguin, and took a nap. When I woke up, I heard them on the floor above me; playing pool in the parlor, it sounded like, while music thumped in a steady rhythm.

I didn't feel like joining them. Brody had acknowledged something that I had desperately been trying to avoid: that eventually we would leave the house and I would need to get serious about them. About *one* of them. Chase still felt like the obvious choice, a man who was grandfathered in by my long-term crush on him, but it wasn't that simple anymore. Thinking about saying goodbye to Xander made my chest feel tight. Picturing breaking things off with Brody caused my eyes to well up with tears.

It was a huge mistake getting involved with everyone here. And now I didn't know what to do.

What a mess I've gotten myself into.

All three guys came down the stairs from the third floor at the same time. I listened to them march down the hall until they appeared in front of my room.

"Meet us downstairs?" Chase asked. "We want to talk about something."

"Is it to discuss what dinner we're getting?" I asked.

Xander gave me a wry smile. "Not quite. It's a bit more complicated than that."

As I followed them downstairs, I felt a strange sense of dread. Like I was in trouble, and was about to be confronted with something. After the argument with Brody, I had an idea of what it was.

They're going to make me choose one of them. Right now.

My mind raced as we entered the kitchen. What could I say to them? I

needed more time, but I suspected Chase and Xander would be as unhappy to hear that as Brody was. The surfer went down the stairs into the wine cellar, and returned with a dusty bottle of red wine. He popped the cork, gave it a sniff, and began filling four stemmed glasses. He passed them around, giving me a long look when handing me mine.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I began.

Xander blinked. “You do?”

“I can’t give you the answer you want,” I explained. “I just can’t—”

“We’re talking about different things,” Chase interrupted. “Let Xander speak first.”

I turned to the lawyer. He sipped his wine, smacked his lips, and nodded.

“I think,” he said, “I may have found a loophole.”

I gave a start. “Loophole?”

“Since the day of Alistair’s death, I’ve been going over the will,” Xander explained. “Reading it, searching for clues. Trying to find out how to win. But I was coming at it as a *participant*, rather than a lawyer. For the past day, I’ve been re-reading the will with new eyes. Searching for areas it does not cover. A way for all of us to get out of the game.”

“There’s a way out of the game, and it’s to walk away,” I said.

Xander held up a finger. “I have found another way. You see, the will clearly states that whoever remains in the house the longest will inherit Alistair’s fortune. All of the wording treats this as an inevitability: participants will drop off, individually, until only one person remains. But it doesn’t account for any other scenario.”

“Like a tie,” Chase said excitedly.

“A tie?” I looked at each of them. “The only tie I can imagine is if a bomb goes off and kills all of us at the same time.”

Brody burst out laughing. “Damn, Robyn. That’s dark.”

“What other tie is there?” I asked.

Chase smiled. “We can all leave the estate at the same time.”

“Normally,” Xander said with rising excitement, “there would be a clause in the will stating what would happen in such an event. Alistair’s will is far from standard, but that kind of language *is* standard, to account for any

unforeseen circumstances. But there's no such clause in the will." He waved the stack of papers in the air. "It's Alistair's fault for not allowing me to review the will first. I would have made everything airtight. But he *didn't* let me review it, and the loophole exists."

"Okay," I said slowly. "What happens if we all leave together?"

"Then there's no inheritor based on these clauses. It would go through the normal intestacy process for someone without a will. As defined by California law, all remaining assets would be distributed to Alistair's next closest relative."

Brody pumped a fist. "Yeah, baby!"

I stared at them in confusion. "Your proposal is to allow Brody to get everything?"

"Only at first," Xander replied. "Brody would then be free to split the inheritance four ways, and share it with the rest of us. That would be a taxable event, and we would each owe quite a large sum of money on next year's tax return, but the larger portion of the inheritance would be split evenly among us. Each of us would be rich."

I turned to Brody. "This is assuming we can trust him to follow through."

Brody recoiled like I had slapped him. "I thought you trusted me by now."

"I *think* we can," I admitted. "But asking someone to give up seventy-five percent of the fortune they just inherited..."

"You saw the letter I put in the safe!" he argued. "I was going to give all of my money to the United Way of California!"

"Plus a million dollars to *the Jews*," I said, hoping a joke would lighten the situation.

Brody didn't even crack a smile. "Be serious, Robyn."

"This is our way out," Xander said. "If the four of us walk across the property line at the exact same time, recording it for proof, then *all* of us win! The game will be over! We can be sleeping in our own beds *tonight*."

Xander winced after he said it, and gave me a sorrowful look. He quickly segued it into another point in his favor: "Your money troubles will vanish. I've conservatively estimated we would each inherit over ten million dollars, *after taxes*."

“You’ll never have to sleep in your car again,” Brody chimed in. “Unless you’re, like, car camping or something. But you’ll be rich, so you can afford a big camper if you want.”

Chase was nodding, too. “What do you think?”

My immediate reaction was relief. When I first discovered I might win Alistair’s inheritance, I was in disbelief. I didn’t deserve it, so I assumed I had no chance. When I read the letter saying that Alistair wanted me to win, it gave me a boost of encouragement. But even after that, I never *actually* thought I would walk away from all of this a rich woman. It was too crazy to wrap my head around.

Yet the three of them were here, standing in front of me in the kitchen, telling me it could happen.

No more ballooning credit card debt.

No more rent problems.

No more sleeping in my car, or sneaking into someone else’s house after they had gone to sleep.

“How would you divide the house into fourths?” I asked.

“I would sell it,” Brody replied. “The house, all the artwork, everything. Once it’s in cash, it’ll be easy to split up.”

“That feels... wrong,” I said.

Xander shrugged. “It’s the simplest solution.”

But it *wasn’t* the simplest solution. It wasn’t even really a solution at all: it was a loophole. A way to get around what was *supposed* to happen.

The words poured out of me without thought.

“This game was the last thing Alistair thought about. Our participation was literally his *dying wish*. And you want to weasel our way out of that?”

Xander took a step toward me. “Robyn...”

“We should abide by his wishes,” I insisted. “I don’t want to cheat. That feels *wrong*.”

“It’s not cheating. It’s simply a creative way of—”

“I don’t want some lawyer explanation of how Alistair should have made his will more airtight,” I said. “I liked Alistair. No, I *loved* him, like a great-

grandfather I never knew. And the very last thing you want me to do in this house, the last thing I do related to that sweet old man, is screw him over?"

The three of them looked shocked at my resistance.

"We've been here *weeks*, Robyn," Xander argued. "We could be here weeks more."

"He's holding us hostage in this house to play a stupid game," Chase said angrily. "And we can't even figure out what to do with the stupid keys he gave us." He tossed his key onto the counter, where it tumbled and clattered across the wood.

"We can't keep sacrificing our personal lives just to appease a dead man's prank," Brody said more gently. "He's been toying with us the whole time. Rickrolling us. Clauses that make us strip down to our underwear. Hiding clues in boxes of Budweiser."

"Pointless hidden passages," Chase added.

"Robyn, look at this logically," Xander said, putting a hand on my shoulder. He probably thought it was comforting, but it only felt pushy to me. "It's time to end this. And we have a way out that means we're *all* winners."

"It's kind of what Alistair wanted, if you think about it," Brody said. "He left each of us a letter saying *I want you to win*. By leaving at the same time, we can make that happen."

"That's not what he meant, and you know it," I replied. "Honestly, Brody, I'm shocked you want to go along with this. Xander and Chase both have pressing reasons to get out of here soon, but I thought you were in it for the long haul."

Brody grimaced and looked down at his feet.

"What is it?"

"I got an email from my boss," he explained. "I've coasted long enough. We're adding a new drug to our portfolio of medications tomorrow, and I need to visit my clients to spread the word."

I almost laughed in his face. "That's why you want to suddenly leave? So you can go back to slinging drugs tomorrow? You know, I thought I was getting to know the real Brody Schreiber, but it turns out you're the same guy I met on day one. The guy who only cares about surfing and pushing deadly pills."

His face twisted in anger, or maybe pain. “I told you. It’s not like that.”

“Then what’s it like?” I demanded. “Why exactly do you think *your* pharma company is one of... how did you put it? *One of the good ones?*”

Brody stood very still while staring at me. “You have my card. The one I gave you on *day one*. Maybe look up the company before you start judging me.”

He put his glass of wine down on the counter and stormed out of the room. A few seconds later, the library door slammed shut.

Chase let out a long sigh. “Brody is right, Robyn. We have to get out of here. I’m going to lose my job if I stay here and allow Alistair’s stupid game to distract me any longer. I need to move on.”

“Move on?” I shot back. “That’s how you feel about everything that’s happened in this house?”

He winced. “That’s not what I meant. I still want to take you out to dinner, like we discussed.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want that anymore. Especially if you’re willing to give up on Alistair’s game so quickly.”

“The game has gone on too long!” he replied heatedly.

“No, it hasn’t. Because we still haven’t found what our keys unlock.”

“We’ve been through the house,” Xander said. He sounded weary. “We haven’t found anything. For all we know, they don’t unlock *anything*. And the only man who knows for sure is dead.”

The word hung in the air with ominous finality: *dead*. Alistair was dead. His game was dead. Soon, his memory would be dead, too. Everything in this house, the flowers and plants and delicious smells from the kitchen, would die.

“No,” I said. “I cared about Alistair too much to cheat my way out of the game. And I thought the rest of you cared about him just as much. Clearly, I was wrong.”

With thoughts of dinner long gone, I retreated up to my bedroom.



Robyn

I felt very alone that night. More alone than I felt the first night after Alistair’s death. More alone than all those nights when I snuck up the lattice into the former nursery, curled into a ball on the bed so that I wouldn’t make the bottom half of the mattress creak.

I thought I knew Chase, Xander, and Brody. I thought I cared about them. I thought we shared the same values. Yet when things got difficult for them, they wanted to cheat their way out of the game. They wanted to quit.

It made me feel like I had never known them at all.

Part of me hoped they would come to me, individually or as a group. A soft knock at the door, with Chase saying *knock knock* as a joke. I wasn’t sure if an apology would make everything better, but a large part of me wanted them to *try*.

But my door remained closed all through the night, and the house was eerily silent—except for the quiet sound of my sobs.

I don’t know how I fell asleep, but eventually my body woke itself up. It was dark outside, as my internal alarm clock was still set to *trespassing*. I didn’t feel the least bit rested, but I couldn’t go back to sleep.

Instead, I fished out Brody’s business card from my backpack next to the bed and Googled the company he worked for. It was called *CostMinus*, and was founded by a tech billionaire I had never heard of. The front page was plastered with his photo and a quote:

“Everyone should have safe, affordable medicine with transparent prices.”

As I scrolled through the website, I was greeted with infographs comparing the CostMinus price for certain medications with the retail prices. *Imatinib*,

the generic brand of *Gleevec*, a leukemia medication, cost only \$12 instead of \$2,502. *Albendazole*, the generic brand of *Albenza*, which was a treatment for cystic disease of the liver and lungs, cost \$33 instead of \$438. Over and over, I was bombarded with affordable versions of life-saving medication.

Brody isn't a pharma-bro pushing deadly pills, I realized. He's helping people avoid price-gouging, and giving them access to cheaper versions.

I felt like the biggest asshole in the world. Especially when I clicked on the *Meet Our Team* section of the website and saw Brody's face listed alongside a dozen other company representatives. His biography mentioned that he used to work as a salesman for Pfizer Inc., but took a huge pay cut to work for CostMinus.

I've been criticizing him for his job since the day I met him, I realized. Him wanting to leave the inheritance game and return to his job was a virtue, not a weakness.

I cried some more after that. I wasn't even sure why. Grief, regret, remorse. Maybe even a little bit of happiness that Brody was a better man than I thought. I had been wronged a lot in my life, passed over for opportunities and kicked while I was down. But never had I been on the other end of it. Never had I been so *wrong*.

When the first hints of sunrise began shining through my window, I forced myself to get up and go downstairs. All three men were in the kitchen, speaking too softly for me to hear from the foyer. When I came around the corner and walked through the doorway, they all went silent.

"Talking about me?" I asked as a joke.

None of them said anything, and their eyes were full of guilt. Like criminals who had been caught devising their conspiracy.

"I owe you an apology. I Googled the company you work for. CostMinus. It's such a wonderful venture, helping real people who are in need..." I shook my head. "Why am I explaining this to you? You know who you work for. Point is, you're the opposite of what I accused you of being. Brody, I'm so, so sorry for the way I acted."

I felt like a cowed dog with her tail between her legs, and poured my heart and soul into the apology. Chase smiled to my right, and looked to Brody for his reaction.

“I don’t accept your apology,” Brody said.

It took me a moment to process the words. “What?”

“I’ve been telling you who I am all this time,” he said. “Insisting to you that I wasn’t pushing addictive pills for some evil pharmaceutical company. Fuck, Robyn—I gave you my card *on the very first day*, and you still didn’t bother looking it up. You just saw what you wanted to see, and believed what you wanted to believe. I can’t forgive that. Not yet.”

“You’re right,” I said. “All of that is true. I don’t have a good excuse for it, but I promise I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Yeah,” he said, almost sadly. “You won’t.”

That’s when I realized his duffel bag of clothes was on the floor by his feet. There was a suitcase next to Xander by the door, and Chase had a backpack slung over his shoulder.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

None of them wanted to speak. They all looked at each other, waiting for someone else to announce it. Finally, it was Xander who cleared his throat.

“The three of us came to a decision last night. We can’t stay in this house any longer. The game has gone on long enough. We’re going to leave.”

I felt my jaw clench stubbornly. “I won’t do it. I can’t just ignore Alistair’s wishes.”

“We know you can’t,” Chase said gently. “But we can’t allow this game to derail our lives any more. We have to return to our jobs, our homes.”

“It’s been three weeks, Robyn. We gave it a fair shake,” Brody added. “That’s much longer than I expected all of this to go on.”

“But I’m not going,” I insisted. “I won’t leave with you.”

“We’re not asking you to,” Xander said.

I looked at each of them in turn. Reading the expressions on their faces. If they knew I was staying, but they were leaving anyway...

“You’re letting me win.”

“All of us have reasons to go,” Chase explained. “My programming job. Xander’s law firm, and Jeopardy. Brody’s job.”

“But you don’t have any of that,” Xander said. “You’re going to lose your

job, if you haven't already. Your future job prospects will be poor since you're accused of stealing another caretaker's identity. And you..." He trailed off.

"You don't even have a place to live," Brody picked up for him. "Sorry to be blunt, but... if anyone needs this inheritance the most, it's you. Shit, it's not even close."

"What... what about us?" I asked, meeting Brody's gaze, then Chase's, then Xander's.

"We can all take a breather from our relationship with you," Xander said. "You clearly need time to figure things out, and stepping back might be the best way to get some clarity."

"Then we can regroup once we've all cleared our heads," Brody added with a hopeful smile.

I let the information sink in. They were leaving. I was staying. I would win the game. The house, the estate, the art in the attic, the wine in the cellar. All of it would be mine.

But more than wealth, it was freedom they were offering me. The freedom to do whatever I wanted. Freedom from poverty and desperation and despair. I would never have to work again. I could focus on what I *wanted* to do, without worrying about the money aspect.

It was everything I had ever dreamed of.

But it's wrong.

It felt like taking a shortcut. Or using a cheat code in a videogame to get to the final level. I didn't want to win the game because I was the most pathetic one here. I could never live with myself.

"No," I breathed, certainty growing with every word I spoke. "I've told you all along that I don't want charity. Not from Alistair, and certainly not from you three."

"Robyn..." Chase began.

"I wanted to win this game on my own. To know that I had held out the longest, winning the game with the virtues of my character, not because you *felt bad* for me."

"We tried to stay here as long as we could," Brody argued. "Eventually, we got to the point where we can't stay anymore. You *are* winning fair and

square! It's not charity!"

"Then why didn't you phrase it that way to start with?" I hissed at him, anger filling my voice. "You didn't congratulate me on outlasting you, or tell me I *won*. The three of you got together in secret, whispering your plot, and *gave* it to me. That doesn't feel like a victory."

Xander let out an exhausted sigh. "Ultimately, the reasoning is not important. We're done allowing Alistair to pull our strings. We're leaving." He glanced at the other two. "At least, I am."

He hugged me, then rolled his suitcase out of the kitchen. Brody was next, wrapping me in his arms and squeezing me fiercely. Chase cupped my cheek and kissed me softly, staring deeply into my eyes with sadness and finality. Then he was leaving, too.

"Don't go," I said, following them out into the foyer and then outside. "I don't want to win this way."

"It's over, Robyn," Xander said without slowing. The iron gate was swinging open, screaming on its rusty hinges.

"Stay a few days longer! You don't go on to Jeopardy until Monday!"

"I have to spend those five days fixing things at my law firm," he replied.

I threw myself between him and his car, blocking the door. "We haven't found what the keys unlock. Alistair's game isn't over."

Xander pulled his key out of a pocket and tossed it to me. I caught it in the air. "Text me if you figure it out."

He tried unlocking the car, but I knocked his hand away. It was childish and futile, but I couldn't stop myself. I desperately wanted them to stay. I wasn't ready for the game to be over.

I'm not ready to be alone.

Xander dropped his suitcase. "You're not going to let me leave, are you?"

"Nope."

He walked over to the open gate, gravel crunching underneath his shoes. I watched with horror as he stepped up to the edge, paused a moment, and then crossed it.

"It's official," he announced. "By leaving the Schreiber Estate, I am disqualified from the inheritance."

“Me too,” Chase said, stepping across next.

Brody jogged over to join the two men, not slowing as he leaped over the line. “All three of us are done. Which means...”

“Congratulations, Robyn Schumacher,” Xander announced, glancing at his watch. “You’re the last person remaining as of seven o’clock on June tenth. You have won Alistair Schreiber’s inheritance.”

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Robyn

All the fight went out of me once they crossed the property line and Xander announced that I was the winner. It was official. Alistair's fortune was mine.

But rather than celebrating, I felt like I was going to vomit. Victory and grief and a profound sense of emptiness washed over me.

It's over.

"I'll return later this evening to finalize the will, and submit it for probate," Xander said while returning to his car.

"You can leave, too," Brody told me. "The game is over and you won. You're not trapped here anymore. You can get In-N-Out for lunch if you want."

I didn't feel trapped while I was here, I wanted to say. For the last three weeks, I've felt more alive than ever before.

"Let us know if you find anything," Chase said, handing me his key. "I'll be back to get my equipment tomorrow or Saturday."

"I bet they unlock something good," Brody said while doing the same. "If anyone is going to figure it out, it's you."

And then he flashed me a smile, got in his Jeep, and drove away.

I stood numbly as his Jeep disappeared into the wooded driveway. Xander departed next. Chase stopped at the gate and rolled down his window, and looked out at me like he had something more to say. But he must not have been able to put it into words, because the window went back up and he followed the others off the property.

And then I truly was alone.

I made myself a mimosa for breakfast, because why the fuck not. It reminded me of Alistair. The second one reminded me of him even more. I

made myself a third mimosa, but didn't get a chance to drink it, because I realized I was firmly drunk at seven-thirty in the morning.

The house felt eerily quiet. It was full of life when Alistair was alive; he was always playing music, or watching a movie in the theater room, or muttering to himself while reading in the library. After his death, the house had been filled with the sounds of Brody pumping iron, or Chase frantically chasing ghosts around the hallway, or Xander watching Jeopardy on his phone.

Now, the only sound was the ticking of the grandfather clock in the foyer, next to the huge oil painting of a young Alistair Schreiber. Tick, tick, tick. As I stared up at the painting, the ticks reminded me that time marched on forever. Men like Alistair lived and died. Guys like Xander, Brody, and Chase came and went.

Now that the house was empty and still, it finally sank in that Alistair was gone. A deep sense of loss came over me as I accepted his absence. Over the past year working here, I had enjoyed long talks with Alistair about anything and everything. I would have given up the entire inheritance, every single penny of the fortune, if I could just have one more conversation with Alistair.

But no such trade could be made. That wasn't how the world worked.

I thought about leaving. The option hadn't been available to me for the past few weeks, yet now the gate to the estate was open, both literally and figuratively. But I didn't have anywhere to go. No home. No family. The only people in the world I cared about had just driven away.

Of course, I could see them again if I wanted. We all lived in Santa Cruz, and I had their numbers. But it felt like we had lost something this morning. Things were irreparably changed now that the game was over and I had won. If Chase and I went on a date, it would be as a millionaire dating a lowly computer programmer. If I asked Brody out, there would be a massive power imbalance. And I would never know if they really liked *me* for who I was, or if they were interested in the fortune.

I knew that all of us had an existing attraction to each other, but that wouldn't stop me from forever wondering.

Still buzzing from the mimosas, I tidied up around the house. *My* house. I could afford to hire a maid if I wanted. And a private chef. And a chauffeur, if I was so inclined. I didn't need to cook, clean, or drive for myself ever

again.

But as I wandered the quiet, empty house, none of those thoughts cheered me up. I didn't feel like a winner. I only felt alone.

I was collecting beer bottles from Brody's room—the master bedroom, actually—when I found the sketch he had drawn of the rest of us. He must have finished it after we woke up, because it was fully drawn. It was in the same style as the sketch of Alistair in the parlor, showing me wedged between Chase and Xander. I laughed like an idiot as I examined it. How many people could claim they had an artistic rendering of the dirtiest night of their life?

But even though it was a depiction of the sizzling night of lust we had shared, it was more than that. It reminded me of how happy I could be when I let go of my inhibitions and did what felt *right*. It reminded me of how happy the three of them made me.

Would we all still be that happy when we allowed our heads to clear? Or were the four of us only enjoying one another because we were trapped here, forced to interact?

I wanted to text them, each of them, but it felt inadequate. Too casual. I needed to tell them how I felt, which required a more personal medium. Alistair was always fond of writing letters, but my handwriting wasn't as beautiful as his.

And so, in my drunken state, I went into the library and removed the cover from his Underwood Golden typewriter. *My typewriter*, I corrected in my head. It was going to take a while to get used to the fact that every single thing in this house now belonged to me.

I fed a sheet of yellowed paper into the typewriter, the same paper that Alistair had used for the clauses of his game. Given the circumstances, that felt fitting. The typewriter was more difficult than using a keyboard, and required that I emphatically strike each key. After wasting one piece of paper learning how to use the damned typewriter, I tried again on a fresh sheet, not stopping despite the typos I was making.

Dear Chase, Xander, and Brody,

The past three weeks have been the happiest of my life. I have been an

incomplete person for the past year, and had no idea what was missin. After getting to no each of you, it is now clear what I needed. All three of you have helpd fill that void. Emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Love is a strong wird, but there are so many things I love about each of you. Xander, I love how you scrunch your face up whil thinking of the answers during Jeopardy. Chase, I love the way you sneeze with your whole body, jerking like youv ben shot by a sniper. And Brody, I luv that you aren't a evil pharma asshole the way I thought you were. Just kidding. There are many more things I care about, but I'm having trouble thinkin of them rite now. Cause I'm drunk.

In conclusion, your honor, I don't know how I can choose between you. Love is a strong word, but I think I'm falling for each of you. I don't know what hte point of this letter is. But I hope it makes sense to someone sober.

OH I JUST THOUGHT OF SOMETHING ELSE. Your dicks. I love your dicks, all three of them. I want them insid me at your earlies convinience.

Yours,

Robyn Winters and/or Schumacher

I re-read the letter and laughed at all the typos I had made. That was the problem with typewriters—it wasn't as easy to fix mistakes. The guys would understand, though. Especially if I blamed the typewriter for being old and broken.

Old and broken. That reminded me of something. There was something wrong with Alistair's will that Chase had blamed on the typewriter. What was it?

I left the library to get my copy of the will. I got distracted by the thought of food in the kitchen, and first spent ten minutes eating toaster waffles and spoonfuls of peanut butter right out of the jar. Then I found my copy of the will in my bedroom.

THE LAST WiLL AND TESTAMENT
ALiSTAIR FRITZ SCHREiBER

I didn't need to read past the title to realize what it was. The *I* key was broken. It would only type in lowercase. The entire will was that way, filled with lowercase i's.

But in my letter, the i's were uppercase.

That's weird.

I was still *very* buzzed, so I assumed I was just confused. If the typewriter was broken when he wrote his will, it must still be broken. He never had it fixed; in all the time I had worked in this house, the typewriter remained on that pedestal in the library.

I fed a new sheet of paper into the typewriter and hit the *i* key. It typed a lowercase letter onto the page. I held down the shift key, which caused all the typeface pieces to slide forward so the capital version could be used. I hit the key again. This time, the uppercase letter printed onto the page.

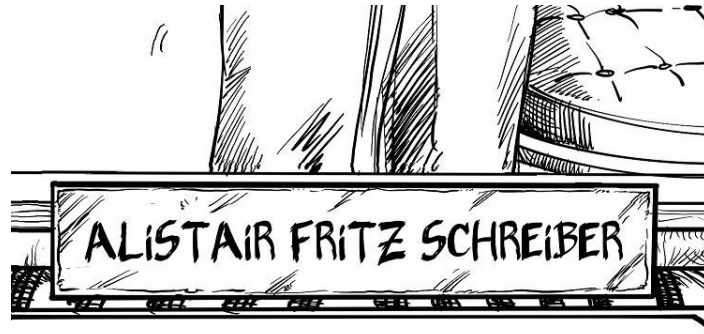
If it was broken when Alistair wrote the will, why was it fixed now? It was possible that the keys were stuck, and had become unstuck between then and now. But that seemed unlikely.

The other explanation was that the lowercase i's in the will were put there intentionally.

Then what does that mean?

I was too drunk for this, I decided. I needed a nap, and then some coffee, and then I could unravel this mystery. I left the typewriter in the library and went out into the foyer.

I don't know why the Alistair painting caught my eye now. I had passed it at least a hundred times since moving into the house, and thousands of times before that while working for Alistair. But now, something pulled my eyes like a magnet not just to the painting, but to the plaque underneath. It was brass, with concave letters that were stamped into the plate.



“Huh,” I muttered to myself. Was it my imagination, or were there lowercase i’s on the plaque, too? I touched the first one with my finger, feeling the indentation. Yep, definitely lowercase.

I gazed up at the young man in the portrait. “Why would you do that, Alistair? Were you trying to be quirky?”

The more I looked at it, the more the lowercase i’s looked like the slot where a key fit. The dot was where the cylinder of the key went, and the straight line was for the key’s teeth. It was roughly the size of a key, too.

I laughed out loud. “Wow, I’m drunk.” I pulled out the key in my pocket. It was Xander’s. “Too bad this painting isn’t what I need to unlock.”

I shoved the key at the first lowercase i.

The brass part of the letter suddenly sunk inward, allowing the key to slide in further. It wasn’t *roughly* the size of the key: it was *exactly* the size for it to fit. The key slid about halfway into the hidden slot before becoming jammed.

I blinked at the sight. Was I losing my mind? I removed the key, and the brass plate swung back into place, covering the lowercase letter. When I shoved the key forward, the plate depressed inward and the key got stuck halfway again.

I fished around in my pocket for the other keys. Since Brody’s and Chase’s keys were identical to Xander’s, I grabbed the unique key—*my* key—and tried it in the first slot instead.

Like a well-greased machine, the key slid into the slit all the way. And when I twisted it, there was a soft *click*.

“Four eyes,” I said out loud. It was what one of the clues had mentioned. “Except it’s not four *eyes*. He meant four i’s!”

I scrambled to insert the other keys, one into each letter. They fit perfectly, and made a *click* when I turned them, just like the first one. I took a deep breath, then slid the fourth and final key into the plaque. It was more difficult to turn, like it was moving a weighted gear inside. I had to use both hands to twist it.

The *click* it made was louder than the rest, and then there was a flurry of mechanical noise behind the wall. I imagined gears turning and pulleys being raised and lowered. The ornate frame of the painting did not move, but the interior canvas sank backwards into the wall. The unseen machinery continued grinding away deep within the wall as the painting slid sideways, disappearing behind the wood paneling. When it was fully out of sight, there was a loud *KA-CHUNK* noise that made the floor tremble.

When everything finally became still, I was staring into a black maw set within the wall. It looked like another secret passageway.

“Whelp,” I said to nobody in particular. “I’m *definitely* too drunk for this.”

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Chase

“I’m not too distracted for this,” I said on the phone while driving. “I can finish the project. I just need more time.”

“This is the third extension you’ve asked for,” my boss replied irritably. “Chase, we’ve never had a problem with you before...”

“I know, sir.”

“...but this entire project is a mess. There are a dozen other tasks on my Gantt chart waiting for your piece to be completed. It was supposed to take a week.”

“It was.”

“That was *three weeks ago*.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“And now you’re telling me you need another week. Which is what you said a week ago. And the week before that.”

“I don’t even need a week,” I insisted when I had an opening. “Three days. Give me until Monday morning and I’ll have the code uploaded to the share drive for Mandy to review. And if I’m wrong, you can fire me. Out of a cannon. Into the ocean.”

“Chase, why would I fire you into the ocean?”

“It’s just an expression,” I said, swerving back into my lane to avoid an accident. A car horn blared as I passed. “Point is, you can trust me this time.”

“Are you driving right now?”

“Trying to, sir,” I replied. “It’s been awhile since I got behind the wheel of a car.”

“Really? Why?”

“It’s a long story, sir. I’ve had a weird month.”

He sighed into the receiver. “Three days. Not a minute longer. And if you don’t meet the deadline, or if your code doesn’t compile, I’ll... what was it you said?”

“Fire me out of a cannon, into the ocean.”

“Yes. That. Don’t make me regret this, Chase.” He hung up.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I braked at a stop light. I had the time I needed. I had done more difficult coding on an even tougher time crunch before. I could get it done.

Especially now that I don’t have any distractions.

Was that all Robyn was to me? A distraction? I had been distracted these past weeks, both by her and by the other events surrounding the inheritance, but that didn’t necessarily have a negative context. Puppies were a distraction. Freshly-baked bread was a distraction. Parlor cocktails and sizzling threesomes were a distraction in the same kind of way.

I didn’t like leaving the house. If I had my way, I would have kept my laptop closed and focused entirely on the potential paranormal activity in the Schreiber estate. But I had already spent too much time on it. I gave it my best shot. It was time to move on.

What about Robyn? Should I move on from her?

I hated leaving her the way we did. She was so emphatic that our departure was wrong, so certain that we should have played the game to its natural conclusion. That was an easy thing for her to insist; she had nowhere else to go. She wasn’t sacrificing anything by staying.

I felt bad for thinking of her that way. But it was the truth. The rest of us couldn’t allow our lives to be hijacked any longer.

Then why do I feel like shit?

As the light changed and I continued driving, I realized it was because I thought I had ruined any shot with Robyn. She was taking the whole thing personally. And in a way, it *was* personal. While we were all living in Alistair’s mansion, drinking and having fun and carrying on, everything felt perfect. I wasn’t jealous about her sleeping with Brody or Xander; I even loved the threesome we’d had and wanted to do it again. That house, that game, was like living in a bubble where the troubles of the real world couldn’t reach us. In that bubble, the four of us were united by a common

goal, even though we were technically rivals.

By bursting the bubble and leaving, we were destroying what made all of us happy. What made Robyn happy most of all.

“She’s not just a distraction,” I said out loud as I pulled into my apartment. “She’s much more than that. But right now, she *is* a distraction, and I need to focus on my job.”

My phone rang as I was unlocking my apartment door. It was a number I didn’t recognize. “Hello?”

“Yo, dude. It’s me.”

“Brody? How did you get my number?”

“I feel like shit about how we left things. With Robyn.”

There was a smell in my apartment. Dust mixed with something foul. “I feel bad too. But it was the right decision.”

“Do you think you and her will... date, or whatever?”

“I don’t know why I would share that information with you.” I walked into the kitchen and found the source of the smell: a cup of coffee was sitting on the counter, next to an open carton of creamer. I had been making coffee the morning Alistair died, and rushed to get to the house for the reading of the will. “Ugh, fuck.”

“Hey, fuck you, too,” Brody shot back at me.

“No, I was cursing because my apartment smells like rancid milk. Why are you asking about me and Robyn?”

“I don’t know. First we were rivals for the inheritance, and I guess now we’re rivals for her heart. I was going to ask her out. After our heads clear, like we talked about.”

I never thought Robyn would be interested in a guy like Brody. The cocky surfer asshole who didn’t seem to care about Alistair’s death when we first met. But after getting to know him, I realized he was a good guy. I didn’t want him to steal Robyn away from me, but I didn’t hate him, either.

“Go for it,” I said. “Maybe she’ll date both of us for a while.”

“And Xander, too?” Brody asked. “He might be, like, a famous Jeopardy champion soon.”

“Maybe so. It’s fine.” I poured chunky, moldy creamer down the drain.

“Right now I seriously need to focus on my job. I don’t want to hear from you, Xander, or Robyn for a week. Okay?”

“Sure thing, bro,” he replied. “Catch you on the flip side.”

I laughed as I hung up. *Catch you on the flip side.* He sounded like a bad parody of Bart Simpson.

And he has feelings for the same woman you do.

Strangely enough, that thought didn’t freak me out. Not because he wasn’t my competition—he *was* competition, in every sense of the word. But because I genuinely thought the two of us could get along while both dating Robyn, if it came to that. Eskimo brothers were still brothers, after all.

That’s a problem for next week. For the next three days, the only thing on my mind is this coding project.

The Chinese place down the street was open for breakfast, so I ordered three days’ worth of chicken fried rice for delivery and sat down at my desk to work. Once the headphones went on and techno music was playing, I quickly fell into a groove. As my fingers flew over the keys, I felt my old life sliding back into place. The life I had before the inheritance game, and before I had slept with Robyn.

My thoughts drifted while I worked. I didn’t like my apartment, and it wasn’t because of the lingering smell. When I moved in two years ago, it felt like plenty of space. But now, it was oppressively small. I missed having an entire house to roam through, even if I was sharing it with three other people. Maybe I missed it *because* of that.

It was strange, when you thought about it. Most relationships progressed in one direction, a so-called *relationship escalator*. You dated, you kissed, you had sex. You gave each other a key to your place. Eventually, when the relationship had real promise, you moved in together.

Yet Robyn and I had done everything backwards. We basically moved in together the same day we had our first kiss in the library, right before listening to the reading of the will. For three weeks, we shared the house. All the living spaces and chores and food responsibilities.

And somehow, it just sort of *worked*.

Now, as I typed away at my computer, I felt very alone. Like I didn’t realize what I was missing until I was back in this apartment. Back in my old

life.

It's too late to go back, I thought. The bridge is already burned. She won the inheritance.

I worked for a bit before deciding ten o'clock wasn't too early for lunch. While heating up the fried rice in the microwave, I glanced at my phone. I'd had it on Do Not Disturb while I worked, and apparently I had missed a few calls and text messages. Two from my boss, and one from...

"Robyn," I breathed. I quickly opened the text, and gasped when I saw what she had sent.

Robyn: You need to get back to the house RIGHT NOW. I figured out Alistair's game. And I found your ghost.

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Robyn

The secret passage in the foyer stood open before me, a black maw full of possible answers. I took a reluctant step toward it, then gave myself a shake. I was definitely too drunk for this. I needed to sober up a bit before dealing with Alistair's shenanigans.

I chugged a mug of coffee in the kitchen, then poured myself a second cup. I sipped on that while sitting in a chair in the foyer, staring at the rectangular opening where the painting used to be.

The passage might not be important. After all, the first one we had found revealed nothing important about the game except for answering how Alistair had gotten downstairs that evening without any help. This passage might be a shortcut to the theater room on the third floor, so he could sneak up there and watch movies after I had left.

But it certainly *felt* important. Especially since it required the keys to open. I had the sense that I was at the end of the game *Clue*, and the murderer was about to reveal himself.

"It was the gardener, in the theater room, with the candlestick," I said. That sent me into a fit of giggles. Yep, I was still too drunk to go climbing around in the dark.

As I sobered up, I reviewed all the other clues and clauses we had discovered. Even in my inebriated state, three of them stood out to me.

The cassette tape in the attic said, "The key to advancing is to use four eyes instead of two."

"The phantom of the opera record said, "Make sure your eyes are open."

And at the end of the Departed clue Alistair said, "Keep your eyes open, all of you."

Three clues, all referencing eyes.

But there was another similarity between those clues: none of them were written. They were all audio. We had assumed Alistair was saying *eyes*, but he could have meant *i's*. As in, the letter that came after H.

He had given the clue to us in the will that very first day by using only lowercase *i's*, and we had brushed it off as a malfunction of his typewriter. I had passed by the portrait in the foyer countless times and didn't even notice that the plaque used lowercase *i's* too!

"If I figured that out, then I'm sober enough to see where this leads," I said. My voice echoed through the empty foyer.

I wanted to call the guys and tell them what I had discovered, so the four of us could share in the discovery together. I immediately shook off the impulse. Screw them. They left too early. I had found this clue on my own, so I was going to enjoy it on my own. If I decided to tell them about it, I would do so *afterward*.

I retrieved the stepladder from the parlor and used it to climb up into the passageway. I had to hunch forward; the ceiling was too low for me to stand upright. With my cell phone light held in front of me, I took a cautious step forward. Then another. The passageway continued for roughly five yards before ending at a ladder. I gazed upward; the ladder continued farther than my light could shine.

Next to the ladder was a mechanical chair, like the one installed in the other passageway. Except the rail it was on was vertical, following parallel to the ladder. Still not trusting my sobriety to take the ladder, I sat in the chair and pressed the button. There was a groan, and then the hum of machinery as it began rising up into the shaft.

It was slow. *Very* slow. It moved so slowly that I was able to touch the wall and time how long it took the chair to move. Two inches per second. After a full minute of crawling upward, I estimated that I was somewhere around the second floor. The chair continued following the ladder.

The vertical shaft ended somewhere between the second and third floor of the house. Another tunnel extended ahead of me, opening into a larger room that glowed with some sort of indirect light. I ducked my head and stepped inside.

It wasn't a room in the traditional sense. It was more like the liminal space between the rooms and hallways of the house. The space was the shape of a

box, ten feet to a side and ten feet tall. A work desk was positioned against one wall, with an array of small televisions arranged in a grid. Motes of dust hung suspended in the air, and cobweb strands swayed gently, disturbed by my breath. There was an eerie silence to the space that made my heart beat a little faster.

Connecting to the room were thin strips of hollow space half a foot wide that continued above and below. Electrical wires and metal pipes jutted out from them. I quickly realized these were the walls between rooms on the second and third floors. Duct tape written on with permanent marker acted as makeshift labels: the nursery was to the right, and next to it was bedroom #2. On the opposite wall was the laundry room, and next to it, bedroom #3. As I imagined my position in the house, I realized that was the unused bedroom that Annabelle used to sleep in. The one where Chase and I followed the ghost noises.

Suddenly, I realized it wasn't quiet in here at all. There was a soft whirring sound coming from the hollow wall between the laundry room and bedroom #3. I leaned closer, turning my head to listen. The sound grew louder, accompanied by a gentle scraping noise.

Fearing that it was a rat, I started to back away. That's when I noticed the light. It was faint, as if I was peering at something from a great distance. It reminded me of driving through the Eisenhower Tunnel when I was a little girl, and seeing the speck of light in the distance that marked the faraway exit into daylight. The light grew brighter, and with it the humming and scraping noise became louder. Fearing the unknown, I retreated until my back hit the work desk with the television sets...

An electric train burst into the room, running on tracks that were fastened to the water pipes. Humming along, it had four cars: an engine, two passenger cars, and a caboose. I spun in a circle as it followed the tracks around the exterior of the room.

The train set in the trash. This was where the train had gone!

I put my hand out to stop the train and get a closer look. Shoved into one of the passenger cars was a bluetooth speaker. Spooky Halloween noises drifted from it. The sound was loud in the cramped space, but would have been barely audible when muffled by the walls. The passenger car behind that one held a device that looked like a radio, with three different antennae sticking

out.

I let go of the train and let it continue on its track, where it disappeared into the hollow wall leading up to the parlor above. Now that I was looking closely, I could see dozens of tracks criss-crossing the room, a maze of them that wandered throughout the house before returning to this spot.

“That explains Chase’s ghost,” I muttered, “Alistair, you crazy old man.”

As the sound from the first train faded away into the wall, another one appeared from a different direction. It was only a single engine car, so I snatched it off the track. Fastened onto the top was a small metal sphere in a cage. The sphere had a trefoil symbol on it, the kind that was usually found at nuclear power plants or other sources of radiation.

I quickly put the car back on the track, where the wheels spun and carried it away into the darkness beneath the theater room.

“That had better not give me cancer,” I told the empty room.

I turned my attention to the desk with the television monitors. They looked like closed circuit televisions, showing black-and-white security feeds from around the Schreiber estate. One screen was aimed at the front gate. Another showed the inside of the greenhouse. There was even an external camera aimed at the vine lattice leading up to the nursery, the same lattice I had climbed every night for three months.

That explains how he knew what I was doing.

There was also a traditional computer monitor on the desk, with a keyboard in front of it. But it was the envelope stuck into the keyboard that attracted my attention. It was yellowed like all the others we had found, but thicker. Filled with more than just a single piece of paper.

And on the outside of the letter was a single name, written in Alistair’s flowing handwriting:

ROBYN

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Robyn

I sat down at the stool in front of the desk and plucked the letter off the keyboard. For a while, I turned it over in my hands while the two trains entered and exited the room with an industrial whirring of motors.

This was the last clause. I knew it in my soul. As soon as I read it, the game would end.

I tore open the envelope.

There were two letters inside, each folded into thirds and sealed with a smear of wax bearing what I assumed was Alistair's family crest. One letter had "OPEN ME FIRST" written on the outside, so I obeyed instructions and broke the seal to that one first. I held my breath as I unfolded the letter, expecting it to be a climactic end to the game.

Open the file rickroll.mov located in the My Documents folder.

"Oh," I said. "Maybe it's not so climactic after all."

The computer monitor lit up when I moved the mouse. I navigated to the appropriate folder, where two files were listed:

* rickroll.mov

* plot_to_ruin_robyns_life.txt

Instinctively, I clicked the second file first. It had my name in it, after all. It opened in Notepad.

How nosy of you! You were supposed to click on the other file. Please learn to follow directions better. Goodness me.

I laughed at the words, and realized a few tears were rolling down my cheeks. One last prank from Alistair, and one that was designed just for me. It felt like he was in the room with me again, smiling at the joke.

And then, all of a sudden, he was.

I clicked on the rickroll.mov file expecting it to be another prank, but Alistair's wrinkled, bearded face filled the computer monitor. He stared right at me and grinned widely, which made my heart soar.

"Hello, Robyn."

The video was filmed in this room, while he was seated at this desk. One of the trains was running across the tracks behind him. He was also wearing his burgundy evening robe, which he had been wearing when I saw him in the library the night he died.

"Or should I call you Robyn *Schumacher*?" Alistair said on the screen with a mischievous glare. "If you are watching this video, then you no doubt understand that I have known your true identity for quite some time. Ever since your agency called to perform a satisfaction survey about you a week after you began the job."

He knew that long? I had assumed he didn't discover my identity until more recently.

"I never considered turning you in. I am no rat. Or, as my dear great-grandson is fond of saying, snitches get stitches." He paused to chuckle at that. "Your generation is quite clever when you step away from your tick tocks and tide pods and other frivolities."

"Thanks, Alistair," I said with a laugh of my own.

"I am obviously operating under the assumption that you, Robyn, were the one to discover the final part of my game," he went on in his slight German accent. "You are a fiercely-intelligent young woman. But more than that, you're *stubborn*. Stubborn as a Danish mule, we used to say back in my homeland. I do not mean that in a pejorative sense. Stubbornness can be a virtue. The greatest people in history were stubborn. Stubborn individuals get things done.

“Robyn, I have been quite fond of you since you began working for me. You remind me of my youngest daughter, Sasha. She was stubborn, too. Sasha passed away in the seventies. It was a road rage incident in Texas. She was too stubborn to walk away from a fender bender, and some cowboy *hosenscheisser* with too many guns and not enough sense shot her for it. But I’m rambling, and time is precious right now. The truth I am trying to impress upon you is that you remind me of Sasha, and perhaps that is why I have cared about you from the beginning.”

His smile turned sympathetic.

“I am sorry for all that has happened to you, my dear. I am no stranger to a life of difficulties, especially when I was a young man. My people were hunted in Deutschland, forcing my family to hide our faith throughout the thirties and forties. Even after moving to America, there were those who saw my departure from Europe in the late forties as too coincidental, and accused me of being a disgraced Nazi myself.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said, cringing at the assumptions we had made about Alistair after his death.

“Such difficulties early in my life made it easy to recognize your own struggles, although they were of a monetary nature. I knew you were evicted from your apartment. I saw you on the security footage scrambling up the wall of my home like a spider monkey. I did a little digging, as they say, and discovered your voluminous credit card debt.” He shook his head in disgust. “Such a poisonous system, credit cards. Created to trap people in poverty forever. I am glad they were a rarity when I was a young man.

“After learning you were sneaking into my nursery late at night, I considered confronting you. Not to turn you away, but to welcome you into my home as a guest, without any subterfuge. It is such a large house, as you know, too much space for an old man like me.”

He wagged a gnarled finger at the camera.

“But again, that stubborn streak! I knew you would take my offer as an insult. You would refuse it, and call it *charity*. As if accepting help from a dear friend is some terrible personal fault one must overcome. Failing that, I even considered paying off your credit cards anonymously. But you surely would have known it was my doing, and you would have recoiled from the gesture.”

“You’re not wrong,” I said to the screen.

“So I have allowed you to stay here, and pretended not to know, so that you could keep your secrets, and your pride. I even washed the sheets for you on the rare occasion you took a Sunday evening off work. I hope you know that I wished I could have done more, and one of my fondest wishes is that you will not turn aside such offers of help in the future.”

He let out a long, belabored sigh.

“The evening of my death, which just so happens to be the very evening I am recording this message, was a wonderful send-off. I would remember it fondly, were I not dead and buried by now. The Malta Beef steak you cooked me for supper was astoundingly delicious. Worth every penny to have them imported. Unfortunately, I was so nervous about my plans for this evening that I couldn’t stomach more than a bite or two. I am glad you were able to enjoy yours.

“I am sorry for locking the window to the nursery this evening,” he went on. “I needed you out of the house so I could finalize my scheme. This home is filled with secret passageways from the prohibition era. The one you are sitting in now was a hideout for rum smugglers. The other passage was constructed to allow a swift getaway for whoever was sleeping in the master bedroom. Sadly, I do not know the full story; these smugglers died long before I purchased the house in the forties.

“This very night, I took that passage down to the library and ensured the curtains were open, so you would see me inside and know you could not sneak back through the front door. I feel terrible for this, but it was vital to give me the privacy I needed. I do hope you slept well this night. I take solace in the fact that it will likely be the last night of your life that you lack a bed to lay your head.

“Once you were gone, I put into action the final pieces of my inheritance game. I have been making preparations for quite some time! I hired a handyman for much of the work, most notably the train tracks that pass through the walls of my home. These trains are outfitted with special gadgets that create various signals and signs that ghost hunters look for. It was Chase’s own undoing; he once told me at great length all the different types of evidence given by the so-called *paranormal*, and the equipment he owns to search for them. I did so love his fascination with the supernatural. I could

not pass up the opportunity to have some fun with him from beyond the grave. When he discovers the truth, I hope it makes him smile.” Alistair grinned. “And perhaps curse my name a little bit.”

The smile faded and his expression became serious. “Now, the matter and manner of my death.”

I felt myself tense.

“Hiring a caretaker was a difficult decision for me one year ago. It was an admission that I could no longer take care of myself, that I was not fully independent anymore. Since then, I have felt my body beginning to fail me, bit by bit. I am incredibly lucky to have lived such a long and fulfilling life, but it has become clear to me in recent months that this life is nearing its inevitable conclusion. Rather than having it forced upon me, I wanted to choose my own ending. And so I procured this.”

He held up a small glass vial between his thumb and forefinger. I didn’t need to see the label to know it was hospital-grade morphine.

“When I am done filming this video, I will inject myself with a lethal dose. I should say I will *attempt* to do so, because my arthritis makes actions as simple as this difficult to perform.” He gave a brave smile. “I am ready to see my dear Annabelle again. My late wife believed fiercely in the idea of heaven, and although she never managed to convert me to the Christian faith, I hope her belief is true. I would give anything to look upon her face again, to hold her in my arms.” His blue eyes sparkled with humor. “And, more importantly, we still have a chess game to finish. I was beating her by a rook.”

Tears were streaming down my face by now, but I didn’t dare pause the video.

“After injecting myself with this morphine, I will leave the vial on the table behind the computer monitor. It will serve as evidence for the police, along with this video. Please do not touch it, Robyn; it would be quite unfortunate for you if the police discovered your fingerprints on it and wrongfully blamed you for my death.”

I quickly removed my hand from the edge of the monitor, where I had been reaching for the vial.

“Thank you for this past year, Robyn,” he said. “You have been a wonderful friend to an old man.”

“But why did you create the inheritance game in the first place!” I demanded of the man on the screen.

“Now, the final mystery,” he said. “You are undoubtedly wondering why I turned my death into an elaborate game for you and the others to participate in.”

I blinked at the screen. “Okay, that was creepy timing.”

“As I have said, you are a wonderful person, Robyn. You are truly special in every way. I was lucky to have you in my life, even if it was for a short glimmer at the very end. But it has caused me great pain to see you alone this past year. One evening, you confided in me that you have only had two serious boyfriends since graduating from high school. Two!”

I stared at the screen. “This is about my *love life*?”

“I was even beginning to wonder if...” Alistair leaned closer to the camera and lowered his voice. “...you were a *lesbian*. This is absolutely unacceptable! Your status as a single woman, that is, not your sexual orientation. My daughter Sasha was a lesbian, though she never had the courage to come out and use that terminology to her mother and me. Times were different back then, you must understand. Even in California, the land of fruits and nuts. Why...” He gave himself a shake. “I am getting off subject. Where was I?”

“My single life,” I replied, as if this were a conversation and not a recording.

“Humans are social creatures. All but the most misanthropic hermits long for a partner in life. Someone to love. Someone to rely on. You cannot go through this life alone, Robyn. You need someone to help you shoulder the burden. Take it from a man who nearly lived to be a hundred!

“The idea came to me while I was playing chess with Broderick,” he explained. “I loathed reality television, but he insisted on watching a program called *The Bachelor*. Have you seen this program? They put one man in a house full of women and force him to choose one with whom to spend the rest of his life. And so my inheritance game was concocted with that singular purpose in mind. Well, and to have a little fun! I wish I could watch the four of you trying to figure everything out. I considered faking my own death and watching the events unfold from within the house, but I decided that would be too cruel.”

“Thank God for that,” I said. “Alistair, you would have *seen* some things.”

“You and Chase have always been cute together, sharing coffee by the greenhouse and smiling at each other when you thought I wasn’t looking. I have known Chase several years, and I love him like my own kin. He is intelligent, caring, and would make a wonderful partner. Then there is my great-grandson Broderick. He is the best of the Schreibers: handsome, driven, and able to find satisfaction in life. He is absentminded at times, and lacks a fundamental knowledge of world history, but he is surprisingly selfless. In fact, I would bet every cent I own that he chose to give away most of the inheritance in the letters you were forced to write.

“Originally, I intended it to only be the two of you. Either would be a perfect match. But then my law firm sent a fine young man to handle the affairs of my estate. I did not know much about Xander Carlisle when I first met him, and know precious little still, but he looks quite sharp in a three-piece suit. Sometimes that is enough to create the spark of love.” He smiled. “Annabelle was first drawn to *me* when she saw me wearing my Sunday best. Perhaps you will think the same of him.

“I wish I could live long enough to know which of these three young men you choose. If you choose any at all! It would be quite unfortunate to go through all of this trouble and have you walk out of my house a single woman. But then again, the completion of my inheritance game required you to work together with the others. At least two keys are needed to open the passageway to where you are viewing this recording: your key, and at least one of theirs. So I am optimistically assuming you did find someone to work with in the game, and eventually became fond of.”

Alistair Schreiber took a deep breath. “There is another letter inside the envelope I have left for you. It contains the final clause of my will. I hope it will be satisfactory to you—and to whoever still remains. Goodbye, Robyn Winter, Robyn Schumacher, Robyn my caretaker, and Robyn my friend. My life was richer for having known you.”

The recording ended. I was bawling now, full-body sobs that made the stool wobble dangerously in the hidden room.

“All of this was about my *love life*?” I asked the black screen. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Laughter interrupted my sobs after a time. When the tears finally ceased, I

felt a deep sense of satisfaction. Alistair had died in the middle of the night, and I had never gotten to say goodbye. I had never gotten closure.

This video was the closure I so desperately needed.

I picked up the other letter from the envelope, using my fingernail to break the wax seal. As Alistair said, it contained the final clause.

But reading it felt like getting punched in the gut.

Clause 10: All eligible participants still remaining in the house upon the opening of this letter shall have my full fortune split evenly among them. This is the final clause, completing my last will and testament.

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Brody

“New generic versions of this medication and ones like it are being purchased by our company every month,” my supervisor was explaining to the room of pharmaceutical representatives. I was in the third row, listening without taking notes. I had a good memory for this kind of thing.

“Every month?” someone asked. “That seems like a lot.”

“Very much so. Which is why everyone in this room is important. You’re our boots on the ground, making sure doctors know about it. The sooner we undercut the big dogs on this, the sooner they will start lowering their own prices. Keep the pressure up, people.”

Everyone started collecting their things and leaving. I grabbed my bag and headed to the front of the room.

“Robert?” I asked. “You have a second?”

“Go on, but make it quick,” he replied. “I assigned you an extra couple of clients to make up for Janine’s absence.”

“Oh, did she have the baby already?”

“Nine days early,” he replied. “It’s a girl, healthy as can be.”

“Nice.” I adjusted my bag on my shoulder. “I wanted to apologize about being AWOL for the last month. It won’t happen again.”

“Ackerman covered your clients. We didn’t miss a beat.”

“Good, good.”

“I’m guessing you were chasing another girl?” He grinned widely.

Very slowly, I nodded. “Something like that.”

“Everyone missed you. But it’s good to take time off every now and then. I can’t remember the last time you took an extended vacation. You’ve been grinding pretty hard.”

“You’re not wrong. But it’s over. I’m excited to get to work on this new drug.”

“Over three million Americans are reliant on the retail version of this medication, Brody. Get after it.”

“Understood.” I bumped his fist, and he turned away.

Usually, that would have been the end of our conversation. I had my marching orders, and Robert and I weren’t *that* close. But I lingered a few seconds. There was something bothering me.

“Patricia, your wife. When you met her, did you know she was the one?”

My supervisor barked a laugh. “Hell no. We met at a bar, and she went home with my roommate instead. They dated for two months. I actually hated her at first, because she was always hanging around our place, eating our food. After they broke up, we started seeing each other casually. I don’t remember how it happened.”

“When did you know?” I pushed. “When did it go from being casual to something serious?”

He stared off. “Maybe a month or two? One day we realized she had been crashing at my place for a week straight. And it didn’t feel weird, or intrusive. I didn’t mind her taking up my personal space, and being around me all the time. It just felt...”

“Right?” I finished for him. “It felt right? Like she belonged?”

“Yeah, exactly. I guess that’s when I started to think she might have the *potential* for being the one.” He gave me a funny look. “Why? Is the notorious bachelor ready to settle down? You look downright smitten.”

“Nah, nothing like that,” I quickly said. “Just curious. You and Patricia are so good together.”

“We really are.” He tapped me on the chest. “When you *do* find someone who might be the one, don’t walk away from them. And don’t let them walk away from you. Not without a fight.”

“I’ll try.”

His advice stuck with me as I got in my car and plugged in the address to my first client visit. *Don’t walk away from them.* I didn’t know if Robyn was the one. Hell, I didn’t even know if she wanted to keep seeing me now that the inheritance game was over. But part of me, a very small part of me,

believed she had the potential to be the one.

But it was too late. I had left. Robyn was pissed off with our decision to leave the house, and probably didn't want to see me. Right now, the best thing I could do was give her some space and let her figure out her feelings.

I was nodding to myself at that thought when Robyn called me.

I stared at the name on my phone. "You've got to be kidding me." My first instinct was to ignore the call. She was probably still angry, and wanted to rant at me. I'd been on the receiving end of that call from an angry woman *plenty* of times. She would probably say some things she would later regret. I should let it go to voicemail.

But the phone was buzzing, and I couldn't make myself ignore it. I tapped the answer button.

"Brody speaking."

"Get back to the house," she said without preamble. "Now."

"Robyn, it's too late," I said in what I hoped was a calming tone. "We left the property. We've been disqualified. You won. The inheritance is yours, and nothing can change that."

"Shut up and listen," she snapped. Her voice sounded slurred—was she drunk? "I found the tenth clause. The game isn't over yet. But you have to get over here *right now*."

I tried to ask her why, but she hung up on me.

"That was mature," I muttered to myself. She wanted us back so badly that she was making stuff up. She probably hadn't found another clause to the will. And even if she had, it wouldn't change anything.

But what if she's telling the truth?

I glanced at my watch. I was going to arrive at my first client before they opened. I had a little time to kill. And the mansion was only a few minutes out of my way.

I swerved across two lanes of traffic to take the next exit.

My mind raced as I drew closer to the estate. What would she tell me when I arrived? If she tried to convince me to stay longer, what would I say? I had an easy excuse, a long list of doctor visits that needed to be completed before Sunday. But she might fight dirty. She might convince me to stay with sex

stuff. I didn't know if I had the willpower to say no.

Maybe just a quickie, I decided.

On the final road before Alistair's house, I got stuck behind two other cars. The one in front was going ten under the speed limit. I grumbled to myself, and considered passing them, but the turn-off to Alistair's driveway was coming up in less than a mile.

But when I reached it, the two cars in front of me turned there first.

The three of us drove up the driveway, through the open gate, and parked in front of the house. When I got out, I saw that Chase had been the one driving in the front car.

"You drive like my great-grandpa," I said.

He gave a start. "You mean Alistair? The one who's dead?"

"Exactly. That's how slow you are. A dead man could go faster."

"I wasn't going to say it," Xander muttered, "but I agree with his assessment. I am assuming you both received a call from Robyn?"

"She told me the game wasn't over," Chase said.

I nodded. "Me too."

The door to the mansion swung open and Robyn stepped outside. "Good, you're all here."

"I've got time for a quickie," I said. "But no foreplay."

She gave me a confused look. "What? I told you to get back here because I discovered the last clause."

"Uh." I scratched the back of my neck. "That wasn't a pretense to seduce me?"

"No!" she exclaimed. "Hurry up. It's in here."

"What's wrong with you?" Chase asked me.

"I thought she wanted one last goodbye bang! I expected her to be, like, begging for it."

"You'll be the one begging for it after I show you what I found. The game isn't over."

"As the arbiter of the will," Xander said, "I can assure you it *is* over."

"Wrong!" she called from the foyer.

I exchanged looks with the other guys, then walked inside. Immediately, it was obvious that she wasn't lying. The huge oil painting of a young Alistair Schreiber was gone, replaced by a rectangular opening that led into the wall. Robyn climbed a stepladder up into the tunnel and talked over her shoulder.

"It's all about the keys. We were looking at the wrong eyes! They open the eyes, not the eyes."

"Like, there was a key hole behind the eyes in the painting?" I asked while following her into the passage.

"No! Not those eyes. The eyes on the plaque below the painting."

Eyes? What the hell is she talking about?

We were already inside the tunnel, and I didn't want to backtrack to look at the plaque. But I knew what it said. "There aren't any eyes on the plaque, Robyn. Just text."

"Eyes!" she insisted. "Not eyes. You're not listening!"

"Sorry, but I'm agreeing with Brody," Chase said. "You're not making any sense, Robyn."

She stopped at the end of the tunnel and turned around. "Sorry. I got drunk after you all left."

"That explains a lot," I said.

"Then I chugged a week's worth of coffee to try to sober up. I'm literally vibrating from all the caffeine in my system."

"That explains even more," Xander muttered. He gazed up at the ladder next to Robyn. "Perhaps you should allow us to go first...?"

"Follow me!" She grabbed the first rung and raced up the ladder like it was a competition.

"Are you going to follow her?" I asked Chase.

"I'm preparing to catch her if she falls," he replied. "She's... not herself."

"She's excited," Xander said while gazing up into the vertical shaft. "I think she must have found something important."

After following her up, we discovered the truth to that assumption. There was an entire room up here in the space within the walls of the house, nestled between the pipes and wires that ran in every direction. There was even a computer desk and security monitors. And oddly enough, toy train tracks

were fastened to the pipes. I didn't recognize what they were until an electric train emerged from one of the outer walls and began circling the room on its track.

"Hey, a train!" Chase said. "There was a train set box in the trash the morning Alistair died."

"It's not just a train," Robyn said excitedly. "It's your ghost. There's a radio wave transmitter, and a speaker, and other stuff that your equipment might pick up. Careful with that one, Xander—it's radioactive."

Xander suddenly dropped the car he was holding like it was white hot. "I am not sure it is legal for Alistair to possess this."

"Forget about that." Robyn clicked the mouse on the desk. "There's a video!"

"Rickroll.mov?" Chase asked. "I don't want to get rickrolled."

"For once, it's *not* a rickroll."

"Robyn, can we slow down and talk about—"

I cut off as my great-grandfather's face appeared on the monitor. And as he spoke, I was totally transfixed. The video was addressed to Robyn, but it felt like Alistair was speaking to all of us. He talked about Robyn's financial troubles, and how he knew. He explained what happened the night of his death, and why he chose to end his life.

And then he told us why he had created the game. Not to find a winner for the inheritance, but to find a man for Robyn.

The video lasted a while. Ten minutes, or maybe fifteen. Robyn cried, which made Chase cry, too. Tears welled in my eyes, but I managed to keep it together.

It was the video I desperately needed to see. It gave me closure. It gave me *peace*.

"This was all an elaborate dating game?" Xander asked. He was the only one with dry eyes.

"Oh my God," I said. "What would Alistair say if he knew you chose to sleep with *all three of us*?"

The hidden room was filled with laughter as we considered that. Chase made a joke about Robyn sleeping with two of us at the same time.

“Vy would I be alarmed at that?” I said, mimicking Alistair’s slight German accent. “Zat is an efficient use of time!”

We laughed until we cried again, but this time they were tears of joy. Robyn leaned against me, and I put an arm around her waist to steady her. It all felt so natural, so *normal*. Like we hadn’t left.

Then Xander broke the reverie by saying, “This was nice to see, but you could have emailed it to us. We didn’t need to be here.”

“No! You had to be here because of the tenth clause. It’s the last one.”

She handed us the note to read.

Clause 10: All eligible participants still remaining in the house upon the opening of this letter shall have my full fortune split evenly among them. This is the final clause, completing my last will and testament.

There was a quiet moment as we processed the final clause.

“He wanted everyone to split the inheritance,” Robyn insisted. “This proves it. The rest of the clauses were all designed to make us work together.”

“Robyn,” Xander said slowly, “we weren’t here when you opened the letter.”

“Yes you were!” she insisted. “I just opened it right now. How will anyone know otherwise?”

“We left,” I said. “We’ve been gone for a few hours.”

“And there’s evidence to that effect right here.” Xander pointed to one of the screens. “This camera faces the gate. It would have seen our cars leave this morning.”

“You’re right, it would have...” She bent over the keyboard and switched to a different file window. “Except somehow the footage is gone! Everything between seven and eight o’clock this morning is missing. Wow, isn’t that crazy? Technology, am I right?”

“You want us to pretend we never left?” Xander asked.

“Sure! Who would know? I’m not going to tell anyone. All four of us can be winners.”

“Doesn’t that undermine Alistair’s game?” Chase asked. “You refused to use our loophole yesterday. You were *emphatic* that we play by the rules and not cheat.”

“Oh, fuck the rules!” she shouted. Her voice echoed throughout the empty space around us, and a curtain of dust cascaded down from the wall to her left. “Alistair wanted multiple people to win the inheritance. He knew the fortune was too much for any one person. Besides, we now know the inheritance was just a minor aspect of the game. The primary purpose of all of this was getting me laid!”

“Mission accomplished, Papa Alistair,” I said. “Robyn got laid a *lot*.”

“Is this a serious suggestion?” Xander asked. “I need to know you’re being serious right now, and not merely throwing random ideas out.”

“I’m deadly serious. You’re the lawyer. Can we make it work?”

Xander scratched his chin. “Hmm.”

“Whatever we do,” Chase said, “we need to do it fast. I have a project to finish by Monday morning, or I’m fired.”

“And I have a long list of doctor visits to make.” I glanced at my watch. “Honestly, I don’t need to be here at all. I was going to give most of the inheritance away. The three of you can—”

“No!” Robyn said emphatically. “It has to be all four of us.”

She gave me a hard look, then did the same to Chase and Xander.

“Alistair chose the four of us to be here. We’ve been living in this house nearly a month. It should be the four of us together when it’s over.”

“Alistair was right,” I said. “You’re one stubborn woman.”

She jabbed a finger at me. “Like Alistair said: stubborn people *get shit done*.”

“I believe he said, *get things done*,” Xander clarified.

“Shut up, lawyer. Are you going to help me make this work, or not?”

Xander smiled. “The first thing we need to do is ensure you haven’t touched the morphine. We’ve already disturbed this room enough, but we want to leave that as pristine for the police as possible...”

We huddled together in the secret room and discussed what to do. We schemed, and plotted, and planned. And we did it together.

It was like we had never left, in more ways than one.

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Robyn

Not until one in the afternoon did the police arrive. It was the same two officers that we had seen from the start.

“Every time I come here,” the female cop said, “I hate my job a little bit more.”

“Very funny,” Chase said.

“Except it wasn’t a joke,” she replied, deadpan. “Why am I here?”

Rather than try to explain it, I showed them each of the clauses we had discovered up to this point. Xander explained all of the details about the game, filling in the blanks from what he told them when I was nearly arrested two weeks ago.

“God almighty,” the male cop said when he saw the passageway in the foyer. “I wish I was rich enough to have a house with secret passages in it.”

“Only in California would someone do something like this,” she muttered.

“No kidding.”

Not wanting to get in their way in the secret room, I stayed downstairs in the foyer with the guys while the two officers went up the ladder and investigated everything. The house was insulated well; even with the passage open, I couldn’t hear the video playing, although I knew they were watching it.

Almost half an hour had passed before they came down the ladder. The female officer looked annoyed. Her partner was grinning.

“Let me get this straight,” he said. “Alistair Schreiber created an elaborate game to win his inheritance, but the true purpose was to play matchmaker for you?”

“Elaborate doesn’t begin to describe all of this,” she muttered.

“That’s right,” Xander said. “Alistair was quite intent on finding a man for Robyn.”

“You have to tell me,” the male cop said. A goofy grin was spread across his face. “Did it work? Did you fall in love with one of them?”

“Officer Banting,” his partner chastised. “You’re forgetting yourself.”

“Understood, uh, Officer Cohen,” he said formally. His eyes scanned from me, to Brody, to Xander, then to Chase. He was dying to know.

“Despite what my original instincts told me,” the woman, Officer Cohen, said, “the video Alistair Schreiber left is relatively straightforward. We have the bottle of morphine and will run some tests to verify it has an identical biomedical signature as what the autopsy discovered in his blood at the time of death, but I have no reason to believe otherwise.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’s good.”

“We didn’t find any other evidence of foul play. We even checked the timestamp on the video file. It was created the evening of Alistair’s death. I think we’re done here.”

“Nice,” Brody said. I felt the other guys relaxing around me, too.

“Once we’ve made our report, the will can be submitted to probate and the inheritance can be given out. Which, it appears, will be going to all four of you?”

“That’s correct,” Xander said. “The four of us were present when the video was played, and when the final clause was opened. Then we notified you.”

“Very good.” She started to step away, but then turned back. “There’s just one thing.”

All of us froze.

“It’s a funny little detail, really,” she said casually. “The video has a lot of metadata attached to it. Metadata is information about the video itself. Creation date, length, resolution.”

“Shit,” Chase whispered behind me.

“It also shows when the video was first accessed. When it was *played*, to be specific. Of course, it shows that it was played about twenty minutes ago when we reviewed it. It was played four hours ago, which was right before you called our office to notify us of the evidence.” Her eyes locked onto

mine. “But it was also played before *that*. At 7:35 this morning.”

“Huh,” I said. My heart was racing. “That’s interesting.”

“That is when we first discovered it,” Xander chimed in. He seemed totally calm, much calmer than I felt. “We watched the video. Then discussed what to do. We gave the house a final search, to make sure we didn’t miss any other clues or clauses. Then we watched it again and notified you.”

“Did you, now?” the male officer asked.

“What is even more interesting,” Officer Cohen continued, “is that there’s no evidence of any of you leaving the estate. Which means you are indeed still eligible for the inheritance based on the rules of the game.”

“Right,” Brody said. “We totally are still eligible.”

“But there *is* video footage showing three of you driving through the gate just before lunchtime,” she said. “There’s no evidence of you leaving, but there’s proof of you *returning* to the house.”

Oh no. I had forgotten about that footage. I shared a look with Xander. He appeared calm, but I could see the panic bubbling in his dark eyes. We had screwed up.

But then Officer Cohen let out a dramatic sigh. “Unfortunately, my partner accidentally hit the delete key on that footage. So there’s no way to corroborate what we saw.”

The other officer held up his hands and wiggled his fingers. “I’m a real klutz. My therapist says it’s another defense mechanism. A method of avoidance. Drives my wife crazy.”

“So we have nothing further to report, except that there was no foul play.”

“Thank you, Officer Cohen!” I said.

“There’s nothing to thank me for. Congratulations to you. To all *four* of you.” She grinned. “And maybe, if you want to repay the universe for giving you such an amazing stroke of luck, you could donate a thousand dollars to a worthwhile charity. Perhaps the California Jewish Endowment Fund.”

Brody threw up his hands. “Yeah! I totally won’t make the check out to *the Jews*, though.”

Officer Cohen blinked at him. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing,” I quickly said. “It’s an inside joke.”

“I’m totally Jewish, too,” Brody said, clapping the officer on the arm. “I guess I’ve been Jewish my whole life, but I didn’t find out about it until a few days ago. Did you know we don’t have a pope?”

Officer Cohen stared at him and said, “Maybe make that donation *two* thousand dollars.” She started to walk away.

“I’ll donate way more than that! I’ll call it a mitzvah. Or maybe it counts as a bunch of mitzvahs.” Brody followed her down the foyer. “You know what a mitzvah is, right?”

“I am fully aware of what a mitzvah is.”

“It means good deed,” Brody explained. “Like, a conscious act. I just looked it up this morning. I was going to buy coffee for this doctor I’m visiting later, but a donation is way better. Right?” His eyes got big. “Is there such a thing as a *super* mitzvah?”

“The sooner we get away from this house,” the officer told her partner, “the better.”

The four of us watched them get back in their police cruiser and drive away. When it disappeared from sight, Xander turned to the rest of us.

“I’ll submit the paperwork to the probate court. After that, we have to wait four months before submitting a petition for final distribution of the assets.”

“I’m not in a money crunch,” Brody said.

Chase nodded. “Me neither. Assuming I don’t lose my job, I mean.”

I grinned. “And even if you do, I know a place you can crash.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?” Xander asked. “Stay here?”

“I’m not sure what else to do. It will be months before the inheritance is given out.” I blinked. “Does that mean I’m not allowed to stay here? Since it’s not *technically* inherited until after the probate court stuff or whatever?”

Xander shrugged casually. “I promise not to tell anyone.”

“Me too.” Brody dragged his fingers across his mouth. “My lips are sealed.”

“And this time,” Chase added, “you can walk through the front door. You won’t have to climb up the lattice to get inside.”

“I kind of liked climbing inside,” she replied. “I might do it just to annoy you.”

Chase scowled. “Those vines take a *long* time to grow, and they’re very fragile.”

Brody glanced at his watch. “I’d love to stay, but...”

“Same here,” Chase said. “I’ve got an all-nighter to pull. Two all-nighters, maybe.”

“Wait!” I said.

They all turned toward me.

“Are we...” I struggled to find the words. It was tough enough asking it of one man. But three?

“Yes,” Xander said. “We are.”

“We’re good,” Brody agreed.

“Let me handle my business, and we’ll regroup after the weekend.” Chase elbowed Xander in the ribs. “And by then, Einstein here will have already gotten crushed on Jeopardy.”

“Crushed?” he asked. “You think I will get *crushed*?”

“You haven’t done much studying in the past two weeks,” Brody said. “You’ve been distracted.”

“Hey!” I said. “I wasn’t that much of a distraction.”

The three of them exchanged glances, then started chuckling.

“Okay,” I admitted. “Maybe I was a little distracting.”

Xander cupped my cheek and kissed me softly. “I will return. And then you can distract me a bit more.”

“Me too.” Brody pulled me away and kissed me harder, tongue sliding into my mouth and making me forget about all of my worries. “See you soon, babycakes.”

I turned to Chase. He took me in his arms tenderly, and first gave me a long hug. “We still have that dinner date to go on.”

“We do.”

“Be thinking of where you want to go.”

I pulled away and beamed at Chase. “I know just the place.”



Robyn

Nobody has ever seen me dress like this, I realized as I looked in the mirror. I was wearing the only fancy cocktail dress I owned, which had been folded in the back of my car with all my other clothes for months since I was evicted from my apartment. It had taken me an hour working on it on the ironing board to get the wrinkles out, but eventually I got it into presentable shape. And now I looked *good*.

“Evening, madam,” Chase said when he answered the door. “Ready for our date?”

“Very nice,” I said, whistling like a construction worker. I knew that Brody and Xander looked sharp in a suit, but I hadn’t had a chance to see Chase in one until now. Grey slacks, a black dress shirt, and a grey tie that somehow made his hazel eyes pop even though it wasn’t even close to the same color. “I’ve got a lady boner.”

“Excellent.” He stuck out his arm, and I took it. “Now will you tell me where you’re taking me?”

“Relax and get in the car. I’ll give you directions, and you’ll know when we arrive.”

“Great,” he muttered unhappily. “I feel like I’m being held hostage.”

“Oh, shut up. We’re going to have a *marvelous* time, darling.”

“Now you’re using a fancy rich-person accent.”

“No I’m not!” I replied, leaning into the posh accent harder. “This is how I always talk. Oh, you simply *must* visit us at our vineyard in Sonoma. The unseasonably-warm summer has produced the best vintage of wine ever.”

“Are you done?” he asked while opening the car door for me.

Raking my fingertips across his cheek, I said, “I’m just getting started.”

Usually, in my experience, first dates were all about making a good first impression. Taking your date somewhere nice, getting to know them, and seeing if there was a potential spark. But we had skipped all of that by living in the Schreiber mansion together for nearly a month. We already knew there was something special here. I had picked the location for our first date with that in mind.

“Next stoplight, turn left,” I said. “Then it’s the first building on the right.”

Arriving at our destination, I had a silly grin on my face. I tried to keep it together, but I couldn’t help glancing sideways at Chase to watch his expression. He pulled into the parking lot and started laughing.

“Really?” he asked. “You’re taking me to *Burger King*?”

“Of course. It’s where I promised to take you when I won the inheritance. A month later, here we are!” I reached over and squeezed his hand. “I know you’re probably concerned about how much this is going to cost. Expensive dinners are a luxury. But I want you to relax. We can afford it now that we’re millionaires.”

“Understatement of the year,” he said, grinning at me. “I love it.”

“Now we need to make our grand entrance,” I said, resuming the posh accent. “Lead the way, you dashing gentleman, you!”

Dinnertime at a Burger King on a Monday night was a pathetic sight. There were four other groups eating inside, all families with kids. Unsurprisingly, we were the only ones dressed in anything fancier than jeans and T-shirts. A few of them looked up at us as we strolled through the doors like movie stars at the red carpet, but they quickly returned to their meals. We walked up to the counter and placed our orders with a bored-looking teenager that seemed like he was ready for his shift to end.

“Add extra fries for ninety-nine cents?” he asked.

“Ninety-nine cents? Why, that’s how old our dear friend Alistair was,” Chase said. He was trying to sound haughty, but wasn’t as convincing as me.

“Darling, this surely is a sign,” I said, pulling out my credit card. “Don’t worry. Dinner is on me tonight.” I leaned toward the kid taking our order and whispered, “It’s a special occasion.”

“Drink machines are over there,” he said blandly while handing us two paper cups.

Everything about our date was perfect. The burgers were cheap, but filling. The fries were crispy and hot. And the whole thing cost twelve bucks.

“So you didn’t get fired?” I asked.

“Even better: my colleagues, who I handed the code off to, loved it. Everything worked perfectly, and I left plenty of documentation. I may have missed my original deliverable date by a few weeks, but I stuck the landing.”

“Really glad to hear that,” I said. “The last thing I wanted was for the house, and *me*, to have distracted you so much that you lost your job. But now that you’re still employed... are you going to *stay* that way? Once the inheritance is distributed, you won’t need to work.”

“To be honest?” Chase said. “I really love what I do. Hunkering down and focusing on this project for the past three days reminded me of that. So I think I’ll keep the job, and maybe try to cut back my billable hours. That will give me more free time.”

“You can always quit later, if you change your mind!” I said cheerfully. “Then you could spend all day gardening.”

“Of course.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “What about you?”

“Unlike you, I don’t like gardening.”

“I meant work. What are you going to do?”

I let out a long sigh. “The caretaker agency officially fired me this morning. They don’t have any hard evidence that I was the one to illegally access the computer and switch the assignments, so they can’t press charges. But they’re cutting me loose.”

Chase reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m going to spend all my time distracting you.”

He gave me that boyish grin of his. “You can distract me any time.”

A sparkle gleamed in his eyes. “How about right now?”

I looked around. “*Here?* But what will the burger monarchy think?”

“Tempting, but I don’t want to horrify that family of four,” he replied. “Let’s go home.”

“My place sounds perfect.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked casually while we cleaned up our trays. “Where are

you staying these days?”

“I’m in this little Victorian-style home just north of route one. It’s small, I must warn you. But it’s cozy.”

Chase slipped an arm around me. “I like cozy.”

The other customers stared as we giggled our way out of the restaurant.

*

Xander returned from Culver City, where he had been filming Jeopardy, on Tuesday. Chase and I weren’t expecting him back so soon, but it was a happy surprise to see his car drive through the iron gate and park next to ours.

Even though it had only been a few days, it felt like a lifetime after being trapped in the house together. I threw myself into his arms and wrapped my legs around his torso.

“How did you do?” I demanded when he lowered me to the ground.

“I actually signed a non-disclosure agreement,” he replied. “I’m not permitted to discuss the outcome of the game until it airs on television.”

“Oh, come on. You can tell me!”

He grinned evilly. “You’ll have to wait until it airs.”

“When will that be? Next week? Or the week after?”

“Four months.”

I gawked at him. “Four months! I can’t wait that long!”

His grin widened. “How sad for you.”

“You were only gone a day,” Chase said, walking outside to join us. “Which means you totally lost.”

The two of them embraced in a bro-hug, clapping each other on the back.

“They actually film five episodes per day,” Xander revealed. “An entire week’s worth of episodes in one long shoot.”

“Oh. Well, then you didn’t last more than five games.”

“I will admit to that,” he said, giving me a wink. “I did not last five games.”

Xander was in a great mood as we ordered dinner and stayed in. He told us about the sound stage down in Culver City, and what it was like to meet Ken Jennings, although Xander admitted he would have preferred competing a few years earlier so he could have met Alex Trebek.

Chase was gracious enough to leave after dinner to give me and Xander some alone time. After watching an episode of Jeopardy in the library with him, I went over to Xander's chair and crawled into his lap. I ground against his crotch while we made out for a while, savoring how *good* it felt after being apart.

And then I popped up, shimmied out of my sweatpants, and returned to his lap—this time impaling myself on his cock. Both of us sighed together, a sigh which became a joined moan as I ground myself in a circle.

"I've missed this," he crooned, hands squeezing my ass. "I've missed *you*."

"Four days felt like four *weeks*," I replied. "I've been dreaming of doing this with you."

"Yeah?"

I began moving up and down on his hard length. "Oh yes."

"What else have you been dreaming about?"

"Hmm." I gyrated steadily, taking my time. "The things I want to do with you, Chase, and Brody at the same time."

"What kind of things?"

"*Naughty* things." I began moving faster. "The kind of things that make me blush just thinking about."

"You didn't want Chase to stay?" he asked. "So we could do some of that tonight?"

My hair swayed as I shook my head. "Tonight, I just wanted you. There will be time for the others later."

"I'm not complaining in the slightest."

I brushed my lips against his while riding him for a little while. Soon, he was breathing heavily and jerking his hips up in time with my movements.

"You've been very smiley today," I purred.

"You have that effect on me."

“It’s not because of your *performance* today?” I asked, slamming myself down on his cock to emphasize the word.

“Maybe. Maybe not. You’ll have to wait to find out.”

“What if I don’t want to wait?”

He grinned. “That’s too bad for you.”

“Is it?” I asked, moving faster. I could sense him getting close.

“Mmm hmm.” He gripped my waist with both hands, urging me on. “Oh, just like that.”

“Are you going to come for me?”

“I’m going to *explode*,” he gritted out. “Oh my God. Robyn...”

“Yeah?”

“Just like that,” he breathed. “Don’t stop...”

And then, abruptly, I did stop.

“What are you doing?” he gasped.

“Oh, I’m just sitting here,” I said casually. “Wondering how you did on Jeopardy.”

“I’m not going to tell you.” He bit his lip. “Are you going to keep going?”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” I teased, mimicking what he had said moments before. “You’ll have to wait to find out.”

He gripped my waist tighter. “What if I don’t want to wait?”

“That’s too bad for you.”

Xander groaned. “You’re an evil woman.”

“And you’re a Jeopardy loser. I only sleep with *champions*.”

He narrowed his dark eyes. “I’m not going to tell you.”

I reached down between my legs and began rubbing my clit. “Then I’m in no hurry to make you come. I kind of like relaxing here, holding you inside of me.” I closed my eyes and moaned. “Oh, that feels so good...”

“Very evil.”

“I wonder how many times I can make myself come while you just sit there,” I said. I was enjoying torturing him. “Oh God, yes. Xander, yes.”

The orgasm shuddered through me while I clamped my pussy around his

shaft, squeezing him for dear life. My moans filled the library and I closed my eyes, and everything went numb and bright.

I was going to keep teasing him longer, but Xander could handle it no longer. Suddenly I was being lifted into the air, held in his arms as he spun me around. He dropped me into the chair where he had just been sitting, then began fucking me in long, deep strokes. The desperation in his movements kept my climax going, aftershock after aftershock, until it was tough to tell where one ended and the next one began.

And then Xander pulled out and roared with ecstasy, gripping his massive cock in a fist and shooting his seed all over my belly and chest, craning his head back as he moaned endlessly. I drank in the sight of him, lean and shirtless and beautiful, as he came all over me for what felt like eternity.

*

All that week, the guys came and went. Chase returned the next night, and stayed for two days while coding remotely on his laptop. Xander was putting in some long hours at his law firm to make up for lost time, but he still alternated evenings at the house, too. When their visits overlapped, the two of them took me to bed and had their way with me. I loved the way they passed me back and forth like their own personal sex toy, throwing all inhibition out the window. When the three of us were together, there was no hesitation or shame. They were more assertive, more commanding, more *alpha* in a way that they never were normally.

And me? I loved how I felt when I was wedged between them, sucking on Chase's cock while Xander pounded me from behind. I never thought I could be this person, this woman, who did things like that. It made me feel sexy and powerful in an intoxicating way.

I loved who I was when I was with them.

Living in the house was a pleasure. I still thought of it as the Schreiber Estate, even though it belonged to all four of us now—or *would* belong to us, once the assets were formally distributed. When I was working for Alistair, I was aware that much of the house was dated. But now that I was part-owner, a *lot* of issues jumped out at me. The appliances in the kitchen needed to be updated. The walls in the study and parlor had hideous wood planking from

the seventies that I wanted to rip out. Issues with the foundation had caused the house to shift over the years, creating cracks in the walls that needed to be plastered over. If we were going to sell the house so the proceeds could be divided by four, these problems needed to be fixed.

So with nothing else to do, I decided to get to work. I didn't know the first thing about home repair. I spent a few hours watching YouTube videos, then tried tackling the cracks in the walls. My first two attempts were horrible, and Chase had to help me fix it when he got home one night. But I brushed aside my mistakes and continued working the next day.

Over the next two weeks, I treated the house renovation like it was my full-time job. I tore out ugly wallpaper and added new coats of paint. I dragged the old stove all the way to the front door, then had a new one delivered from Home Depot. I nearly got myself into trouble replacing all the cracked covers on the electrical outlets, but fortunately only scared myself silly when an arc of electricity briefly sparked against my screwdriver. After that, Xander showed me how to turn off the appropriate breaker to avoid such an accident in the future. I even brought in an antiques expert to appraise most of the furniture in the house, then had the junk pieces removed and replaced with newer versions.

It cost a small fortune, but I didn't mind putting it on a credit card. After all, I was a millionaire now—even if it was only on paper. And the work was fulfilling in a way I hadn't experienced since taking care of Alistair.

Even though I could stay in any room in the house, I remained in the old nursery. It was plenty of space for me, and by now it really felt like *mine*. Besides, it was only temporary until the assets were distributed and we sold the house. Then I could live wherever I wanted in Santa Cruz. Or maybe somewhere else.

In the meantime, we kept having our fun.

Chase and I tried anal again one night, but ended up stopping because it hurt a little too much. Xander and I did the same thing two days later, and it worked out better—although it took a lot of foreplay and warming up before I could handle it. But once I could? Oh baby, it was the most intense orgasm I had ever had in my life. The naughty, taboo aspect of it was definitely a massive turn-on for me, in the same way having a threesome was.

It was immensely satisfying pushing our sexual boundaries. I felt

comfortable trying new things with them in a way I never had with anyone else. I trusted them completely, and that made all the difference.

But there was one thing we *hadn't* done, something I had been fantasizing about for weeks.

Brody's job was going well, although he was busy for several weeks after we discovered the tenth clause. His job required him to travel throughout California, and he was working long hours. But finally, he came back to the estate on a Friday and told us that he was here for a while.

"No traveling for at least a month," he explained. "Unless we acquire a new drug between now and then."

I wrapped my arms around him. "As long as you're here tonight, I'm a happy woman."

"Oh, I'll make you a happy woman all right," he said, nuzzling at my neck.

"We'll have plenty of time for that after dinner," I said, though I kind of wanted him to keep going. Two weeks away from Brody felt like two years. "I have something special planned."

Brody and the other guys spent time catching up while I prepared dinner. Now that the game was over, it felt like a high school reunion. There was less pressure, and the four of us were more comfortable around each other than before. I couldn't hear what they were talking about in the library, but Brody and Chase were roaring with laughter.

"Come on, tell us!" Brody was saying. "Did you win or not?"

"I kept the secret from Robyn, which means I'm keeping the secret from you two," Xander replied. "And she had very creative ways of trying to make me talk."

"Dinner's about to be served!" I called out the kitchen door. "Get it while it's hot!"

When I was cooking for the guys during the game, it felt like a chore that had fallen on my shoulders. But now, it felt like I was cooking for something closer to family. It could never come close to the feeling I had experienced when my parents were alive, but it was in the same vein.

The three of them are mine, I thought. At least, for now. Eventually, they probably won't want to compete with each other.

I still didn't know what I was going to do about that decision. I didn't want

to think about it.

“Smells amazing,” Brody said as they filed into the kitchen. “Steak?”

“Not just steak,” I said. “Malta Beef. Four filets.”

Brody made a squeal like a first grader learning that we were going to have class outside. “Oh baby. No way. I need to find a proper bottle of wine to pair with it...”

“Forget the wine,” I said. “We’re having four bottles of Alistair’s favorite drink. They’re in the fridge.”

Chase opened the fridge door and said, “Budweiser?”

“Just like Alistair would have wanted.”

“As much as I dislike Budweiser,” Xander said with a smile, “I will gladly drink it tonight.”

I removed the steaks from the oven and served them up. Unlike the first time I cooked them, this time they were nice and pink on the inside; a perfect medium-rare. Brody moaned after every single bite, to the point that Chase said that he and the steak should get a room. I joked that I had never heard Brody make noises like that in bed.

“As good as *you* taste,” he replied with a grin, “and as much as I enjoy devouring you, nothing can compete with Malta Beef.” He took another bite and almost melted back in his chair. “It’s like a thousand tiny orgasms in my mouth.”

“Was that your nickname in college?” Chase asked. “A thousand tiny orgasms?”

Xander and I busted out laughing. Brody only shook his head and said, “Make fun of me all you want. I’m in a state of nirvana right now. Nothing could make this evening more perfect.”

“You say that, but you haven’t seen what’s for dessert,” I replied.

Brody speared a piece of asparagus and froze. “Is it a sheet cake with maple-glaze icing from the bakery in town? The kind Alistair always requested for his birthday?”

“No...”

“Oh. I’ve got it. You found a way to get his favorite ice cream, Bluebell, shipped here.”

“Not quite,” I said.

“Dude, it’s sex,” Chase replied. “The special dessert she has planned for you—and us—is sex.”

“Oh,” Brody said, disappointed for a brief second. Then his eyes widened. “Oh!”

“If you’d rather have cake, I can go back out,” I suggested.

“Sex,” Brody said around a mouthful of vegetables. “I choose the sex.”

When the insanely-expensive steaks and cheap beer were gone, we found our way into the master bedroom. The four of us made out on the bed, me taking turns with each of them. I savored how different they each were—the way they kissed me, or held me in their arms. The slight differences in their body types, one bicep thicker than the next.

Then Brody pulled a device out from underneath the bed. “I got something for you when I was on the road,” he said with a grin.

I heard the hum of what sounded like a massage gun, but I quickly realized it was a device with more erotic intentions. The vibrator was long and black, with a round head that *whirred* with sexual motion. Brody pressed it against my skin, and I felt its wonderful vibrations on my inner thigh. He teased me by running it up my leg, going all the way up until it *almost* touched my pussy, but then going back down again.

When he eventually did relent and press it against my clit? I practically melted into the bed.

The three of them took me in every position imaginable. Brody fucked me on the edge of the bed while holding the massage gun against my clit. After bringing me to a screaming, shivering orgasm, Chase pulled me onto the bed and made love while wrapping his arms around me, holding me against his body like he never wanted to let go. After that, Xander bent me over the bed and fucked me from behind while I sucked on Brody’s cock. The two of them pumped me from both ends while Chase watched from the side with hungry eyes, stroking himself eagerly. I closed my eyes and moaned with pleasure.

Then they turned things up a notch.

“You ready?” Chase asked Brody.

Brody grinned while caressing my hair. “Fuck yeah I am.”

“What are you ready for—eek!” I yelped as Chase pulled me on top of him

on the bed. His cock slid into my drenched slit with ease, and he gripped my waist and moved me up and down, making me ride him.

“You want to fuck my ass?” I asked him while he maneuvered my body up and down. “The last time we tried, we weren’t successful, but I want it tonight.”

“No, I don’t.”

I gave a start. “Really?”

He grinned up at me. “I want Brody to.”

Brody knelt on the bed behind me. His hands caressed down my back until he reached my ass, and his fingers gripped my cheeks possessively. I moaned softly while Chase guided me up and down.

And then I felt the tip of Brody’s cock press against my rear entrance.

“Oh!” I said in surprise. Now I knew what they intended to do with me. My mind raced with possibilities.

Two cocks inside me.

At the *same time*.

“I don’t know if...”

“You can handle it,” Brody promised. “I know it. We’ll go slow, okay?”

Chase stopped moving me up and down, but he still gripped my waist tightly. Holding me down with his cock deep inside me. I bit my lip as Brody pushed into me from behind. I felt his breath across my back as he sighed.

We’d had anal sex before. The guys loved it as much as I did. Even Xander, although I couldn’t handle as much of him inside me as the others.

But this was different. This was *twice* as much inside me at the same time. It was one thing to have a dick in my mouth while someone fucked me, but this was a different game entirely. I was nervous.

“Go easy,” Xander said while watching from the side. His hand was gently rubbing my arm. “She can handle it if you go easy.”

The tip of Brody’s cock slid into me without a problem. He was still slick with my natural lubrication from fucking me earlier. But with Chase filling my pussy, there was resistance from that point on. Brody leaned against me, sliding deeper into my ass. I could feel him pushing against Chase’s cock, pressing against my inner walls. Fighting for room.

“Maybe if you slide out a little bit...” I said to Chase.

He shook his head. “You can handle it. Just relax and kiss me.”

Their confidence resonated within me. I *really* wanted to try this, even if I was doubtful it would work. Already what little amount of Brody was inside me felt intense and amazing. My body tingled with excitement.

Brody reached forward and gripped my shoulder, using it for leverage as he thrust his cock deeper into me from behind. I was tight, and he was big, but I was able to take it. Another thrust, then another, pushing deeper into me each time. Soon I began to moan.

“How does it feel?” Xander asked.

“Ohh,” was all I could say.

“I think she likes it,” Chase said with a grin.

“She’s not the only one,” Brody said in a tight voice. “This was worth the wait. *Fuck.*”

Brody pushed a little bit more, and then his cock was all the way inside my ass. I had taken every inch of him. Neither of them moved for a long moment, allowing me to get used to the feeling.

The incredible, wonderful, erotic feeling.

I never thought I would do anything like this. A month ago, I was just a single caretaker wondering where I was going to live after Alistair died. I had nobody in my life, nobody to rely on. Now I had not one, but *three* men in my life, men who were completely dedicated to my every sexual need.

Chase began moving first, pumping up into me from underneath. His cock slid against Brody’s, separated only by my inner wall, and the motion made me sigh with new pleasure. Slowly Brody began to join him. Tiny little thrusts, hardly moving more than an inch back and forth.

The way they were double-fucking me created pleasure I didn’t even know existed. It was like two meaty sticks were being rubbed together to start a fire inside of me, a fire of ecstasy that quickly turned into a raging inferno. I moved my hips up and down, urging them on. Demanding that they give me more.

Turned on by the scene, Xander climbed over to me and grabbed a handful of my hair in his fist. I parted my lips and accepted his hard length inside my mouth, immediately moaning around his thickness.

There was no more talking from that point on. There was no need to. The four of us lost ourselves in the sensual motions as our nude, sweaty bodies writhed together. The three of them filled me like a pincushion, a trio of thick cocks whose entire purpose was to fill me.

I can't believe this is happening, I thought while they gyrated and pumped me from all sides. *A cock in my mouth, my pussy, and my ass.*

We grunted, we groaned, we moaned, and we whimpered with pleasure. The noises were animalistic and primal. At one point, it sounded like Brody was dying—dying of pleasure while he buried his cock deep in my ass. Xander's fingers tightened in my hair as he fucked my mouth. Chase gazed up at me with love and lust and a thousand other emotions. When I turned and looked into Xander's eyes I saw a kaleidoscope of feelings there, feelings which I knew were mirrored by Brody behind me.

They're mine. And I'm theirs.

I don't remember how many times I came. It might have lasted ten minutes, and it might have lasted an hour; I lost all sense of time as they had their way with me. The world narrowed until the only things I was aware of were the three cocks inside me and the waves of pleasure crashing into me over and over.

And when Brody roared and his cock exploded in my ass, Chase moaned and cried out and blew his load into my pussy at the same time. I moaned around Xander's cock as they filled me with their come. That must have urged Xander on, because then he held my head down and his cock trembled between my lips and he came, shooting his sticky seed into the back of my throat and screaming with his own intense pleasure.

Xander gasped my name, and then Brody and Chase were doing the same. A chorus of cries, with me the focal point.

The three of them pushed as deep as they could inside me, giving me every drop of come they had, before we all finally passed out.

Yeah. Having three boyfriends was *way* better than just one.

We sprawled out in bed after, four nude bodies too exhausted to move. Too *satisfied* to move.

"I could fall asleep like this," I said, "but it's still early."

Chase glanced at his watch. "We have time to watch a movie or

something.”

“How about *The Departed*?” Brody suggested. “I’ve heard that’s a great movie.”

“Sorry, but someone taped over the beginning of my copy,” I said with a laugh.

“Wait a minute. *Your* copy?” Chase asked.

“Yep. I’m claiming it.” I held up a finger. “Dibs. Just like you called dibs on the master bedroom the first day you showed up.”

“That is some bullshit,” Brody insisted. He rolled over to face me. “I want the DVD.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Too bad!”

“Cut it into fourths,” he said. “Like King Solomon and the baby.”

Xander twitched in surprise. “You know about King Solomon?”

“I’ve been studying while on the road,” Brody replied. “I wanted to learn more about the Old Testament and the Hebrew faith. Did you know the Jewish holy day is Saturday, not Sunday?”

“Aw, he’s growing as a person.” Chase reached over and patted him on the head. “Good Brody.”

“So, a movie then?” I asked. “Before we cut the DVD into four pieces?”

“Actually, I don’t want to watch a movie,” Chase replied. “There’s something the four of us need to do first.”

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Robyn

The sun was beginning to set as we got to the cemetery, casting each of the tombstones in a reddish hue. I was wearing a simple black dress, while the men were all wearing suits. The grave we were looking for was surprisingly difficult to find; it was small, simple, and unassuming. A plain rectangle of stone.

ALiSTAIR FRITZ SCHREiBER

BORN: JUNE 20, 1923

DiED: MAY 21, 2023

“He even used lowercase i’s on the tombstone,” Brody said with a chuckle. “Smug bastard.”

“I’m surprised it’s so small,” Chase said. “I expected something... larger. More befitting his status.”

Shaking his head, Xander said, “This was all he wanted. He made that very clear in the will.”

“I can see why. He’s with Annabelle,” Brody said, gesturing to the headstone next to Alistair’s. “That’s all that mattered to him.”

“So close to his hundredth birthday,” I said. “Too bad he didn’t wait until after that to launch his inheritance game.”

“That’s... holy shit,” Brody suddenly said. “It’s *today*.”

“Hey! You’re right!” I realized. “Today is his birthday!”

Each of us wrapped an arm around the person next to us and stood in a semicircle around the grave. A sense of peace fell over us while the setting sun dipped beneath the distant trees, which swayed gently in the summer

wind.

“Even though we missed the funeral, I’m glad this happened today,” Brody said.

Nodding, I said, “Happy hundredth birthday, Alistair.”

Dusk settled as we stood around the grave, telling stories about Alistair. Brody had the most to share, since he had known him the longest, but Chase had some good ones, too.

“The Sears catalog,” he explained, “was like a holiday in the mansion.”

“Heaven help that man,” I said. “He had a thing for underwear models.”

“Absolutely. Who doesn’t?” Brody asked.

“Not me,” I replied. “A woman in her bra and panties doesn’t do much for me.”

“Keep talking, and I’ll find a copy of the *men’s* underwear catalog,” Chase said. “I bet that will get your blood pumping.”

“Sorry, but I’m all sexed out for one day.” I winced. “And a little sore, too.”

Frowning, Xander said, “I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention to wear you out so much.”

“Oh, don’t apologize!” I insisted. “It’s the good kind of sore. The kind that makes me want to do it again. After an appropriate amount of time.”

“Remind me to buy some proper lube when we get home,” Brody said with a grin. His face grew serious, and he added, “Do you guys, uh, mind giving me a moment alone with him? So I can. You know. Say something to him.”

Realizing that Brody was here to say goodbye, we all backed away a respectable distance. We watched him crouch down next to the grave, speaking too softly for us to hear. It took longer than I expected, but then again, Alistair was his blood. His last remaining relative. With tears squeezing from his eyes, Brody stood up and joined us. I hugged him while Chase went next to say goodbye to Alistair, and then Xander.

Eventually, it was my turn.

“Alistair,” I whispered, tracing my fingers along the chiseled letters of the tombstone. The ground was cool, but the stone was warm from the sun that had been shining on it all day. “I owe you for so much. You were more than

just my employer. You were a friend. You were the closest thing I have to family. You helped me during a time in my life when I needed it the most. I want you to know that I've taken your advice to heart. I won't be stubborn anymore. At least, not *as* stubborn. I might have to work on it for a while." I laughed softly, and glanced back at my three men. They were watching me.

"Despite my worst instincts, I will always remember what you said: that I can rely on other people. That accepting help from a good friend isn't charity—it's *life*. We all need help sometimes, and I should never be afraid to ask for it. Especially when I have someone I can rely on. Or, in some cases, *three* someones." I patted the soft dirt, which was already bristling with new blades of grass. Life beginning where life had ended. Before I could cry again, I hopped up and rejoined my three men. They wrapped their arms around me in a group hug.

"I just realized something," Brody said, breaking the silence. "We had our first, like, *group* sex today. All four of us. On Alistair's birthday. And he's kind of the reason it happened. He caused the entire thing. Happy birthday, Papa Alistair!"

"Not going to lie: it feels kind of weird when you put it that way," I said with a laugh.

"Good job, Alistair," Xander said. "Your scheming led to the sexual depravity of everyone gathered here. And no doubt much more sin to come."

"Cheers to that!" Chase said. "Let's go have a toast to the old man."

"But *not* Budweiser," I said. "I want something good."

"I'm sure our dear friend Broderick can find us a suitable bottle of wine for the occasion," Xander said.

"Actually, yeah! There's a 1952 merlot that caught my eye..."

Hand-in-hand, the four of us walked back to the car.

Epilogue



Robyn

Four Months Later

Dawn's sunlight spread across the undulating surface of the Pacific Ocean, painting the foam at the crest of each wave in shades of red and orange.

"All right," Brody said, bobbing in the water next to me. The water was deep enough that neither of us could touch the bottom. "This is the one. I know you're going to get it this time."

"Very funny," I muttered. My wetsuit had done a good job of keeping me warm up to this point, but I was starting to get cold.

"I'm serious!" he insisted. "You're *so close*. You just have to believe in yourself."

"Doubtful. I've fallen off every time."

Before I could say anything more, he gave me a wet, salty kiss. "Give it one more try. For me. Then we can go home."

Even though I was exhausted and discouraged, his smile pushed me to try again. I took hold of the surfboard with both hands and watched the waves rolling into us. I allowed two to pass by, raising us up a few feet higher and then dropping us down again. The next wave looked promising. I leaned on the surfboard and began paddling my arms, swimming forward to try to catch the wave at the perfect moment.

"Atta girl!" Brody called behind me. "Here it comes..."

The board was slick, but my feet found purchase as I climbed onto the surface. Right foot on the back, left foot forward. For a few nervous seconds, I struggled to maintain my balance now that I was standing. I was going to fall again.

And then the wave began to crest, propelling the surfboard—and me—along with it. I began picking up speed, and as I did, it became easier to

remain balanced on the board.

Cheers behind me confirmed my success: I was surfing! The wave crashed, but I was out ahead of it now, surging along at a speed that frightened and excited me. I was moving with the wave, diagonal toward the shore. If my hair wasn't soaked, the wind would have blown it out behind me, that's how fast I was going.

Each time Brody had explained what to do, he focused on the first part: *beginning* to surf. He hadn't told me how I was supposed to stop. The board continued carrying me along, losing speed as it neared the beach.

And then, when I was too slow to continue forward, I fell over into the water with a splash.

"That was amazing!" I shouted when I came up for air. "Did you see me?"

Brody was swimming in steady strokes to catch up to me; we were sharing one surfboard. But when he finally reached me, he let out a manic laugh. "You totally did it! Didn't I tell you? Huh? Who's skeptical about their surfing skills now?"

After we splashed and cheered and celebrated in the water, we swam back to shore and dried off. Brody gave me another kiss, longer this time, and I didn't even mind that he tasted like the Pacific Ocean. We enjoyed the sunrise for as long as we could stand in the chilly November wind and then drove home, stopping for McDonald's breakfast along the way.

"Not a bad start to our Thanksgiving weekend," he said while biting into a hashbrown.

Despite a lot of uncertainty about our futures, the last four months had been pretty darn amazing. I spent most of my time fixing up the house, which took a long time for one woman by herself, even with the guys occasionally helping when they had free time. The house wasn't *perfect*, and there were a few small things I wished I could have continued working on, but it was otherwise ready to be listed for sale.

Even though today wasn't Thanksgiving on the nose—Brody had been traveling for the prior week, and didn't get back until last night—we were excited to spend the holiday together on Friday. And not just Brody and me: Xander and Chase, too. All four of us spending it together, like we had done with Halloween three weeks earlier. I had gone as Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus*, to Chase's delight. We seemed to do everything together

at the former Schreiber Estate.

“Robyn totally caught a wave!” Brody shouted as soon as we got out of the car. “You should’ve seen her!”

“Are you serious?” Chase asked from his spot by the rose bushes. He was on his hands and knees in the dirt, a place where he seemed most at peace. “That’s amazing, babe!”

“For about eight seconds,” I clarified while gazing up at the mansion. After weeks of painting, the exterior looked beautiful with its crisp white brick and dark trim. More modern, while still maintaining the historic look that gave it so much charm.

“Uh, eight seconds sounds impressive to me,” Chase said. “That’s approximately seven-point-nine seconds longer than I could surf if I tried.”

“Chase is a wise man,” Brody said, fist-bumping him in passing. “I don’t care if Xander has been on Jeopardy. Chase might be the smartest one here.”

“Keep the flattery up and Chase might sleep with you tonight instead of me,” I teased Brody. “But yes, I did fine. And I’m quite proud of myself.”

Even though it was barely eight in the morning, I felt like having a celebratory drink. That was the third time Brody had taken me out to surf, and I had finally done it. It gave me hope for the next time.

I was looking for hobbies to throw myself into. The house was ready to be listed for sale, and then I wouldn’t have anything to do. After working on it for months, I wasn’t sure *what* I wanted to do next.

Caretaking was still an option, despite my history at the previous agency. I sent my resume out and got a few bites from competing caretaker agencies in the area, most dealing with palliative care. But after receiving a formal offer letter three days ago, I didn’t think I was going to accept. Alistair was such a kind, caring man, and I knew I would never get that lucky with a patient again. I wanted to go out on a high note.

House remodeling and renovation actually felt like something I could see myself doing long-term. Modernizing the former Schreiber mansion had been incredibly fulfilling, and I was ready for another project. On a smaller house, preferably. One that was only a single story, so I didn’t have to haul junk down three flights of stairs.

“Lotta older homes in the area that need renovating,” Brody said when I

told the guys about it at dinner. “You should totally do it.”

“And if you get bored of that, you should start a catering business,” Chase added around a mouthful of turkey. “This meal is incredible.”

“No arguments here,” Xander agreed. “This makes up for eating leftover Chinese food last night, on the *actual* Thanksgiving day.”

“Don’t give me all the credit! All I made was the turkey. The mashed potatoes and stuffing was all Brody.”

“He’s surprisingly good at cooking, for a surfer-bro asshole,” Chase said.

Almost spitting out his food, Brody started cough-laughing. “You asshole,” he replied with a middle finger and a grin.

“I have a surprise after dinner,” Xander suddenly announced.

“Let me guess. It’s sex related,” I asked.

“*Kinky* sex?” Brody asked.

“It is not sex related, kinky or otherwise,” Xander replied. “But I think you will be quite happy with it. In roughly ten minutes, a certain episode of Jeopardy will air...”

“REALLY?” I shouted. “Tonight’s the night?”

“Bullshit. You’re pulling our leg,” Chase said.

“I will be upstairs in the theater room,” Xander said, wiping his mouth with his napkin and pushing back his chair. “If any of you want to join me.”

Scrambling to wolf down the remainder of our Thanksgiving meal, the rest of us hurried upstairs to the third floor. Brody darted into the parlor and returned with a case of beer, a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue, and four tumblers.

“This is the drinking game I’ve been thinking about,” he said in a rush. “Every time he gets a question right, we take a sip of beer. When he buzzes in and gets a question *wrong*, we take two sips. And if he gets one of the Daily Doubles, we take a shot of scotch.”

“And if he gets Final Jeopardy right?” I asked. “We take *two* shots?”

“No,” he replied while handing beers out. “If he gets Final Jeopardy right and wins the game, we spend the rest of the night *finishing this bottle*.” He hefted the Johnnie Walker Blue, which hadn’t been opened yet.

“The three of you are going to have alcohol poisoning by the end of the game,” Xander said with a chuckle.

“The four of us, you mean,” Brody said, shoving a beer at him. “You’re playing, too.”

The commercials ended and the game began playing. When they announced the contestants, Xander was listed first: “An estate attorney from Santa Cruz, California. Xander Carlisle.”

We hooted and hollered in the theater room.

Ken Jennings came out on stage, said a few words, and then the categories were announced. Xander struggled in the first round, to our dismay. Since we were taking two sips for every wrong answer, we were rapidly heading towards inebriation by the time Double Jeopardy started.

And then one of the categories was US VICE PRESIDENTS.

“You had better get these right!” I yelled at Xander. “After all the practicing we did!”

Xander only smiled at me.

Sure enough, he ran the category—he got every one correct. One of them was a Daily Double, and he wagered all of his money. Fortunately, it was a question about Harry Truman, and Xander’s total winnings doubled, putting him neck-and-neck with the leader.

“It’s a close race going into Final Jeopardy,” Ken said. “And the category is: Children’s Television. We’ll be right back after the break.”

“Oh no!” I said. “Pop culture is your weakness. You don’t watch very much TV.”

“I don’t,” he admitted. “But I had a good run and made it competitive, at least.”

The commercial ended, and Final Jeopardy began. The category disappeared, and then Ken read out the clue:

“Lily Tomlin voiced the eccentric teacher on this iconic children’s television show, which emphasized learning with the help of a special transportation vehicle that could transform into a plane, submarine, and even a spaceship.”

I gasped. Brody muttered, “No way.” All three of us gazed over at Xander,

who had a huge smile on his face.

“Huh, that’s lucky,” he said.

The contestants revealed their answers and wagers. Everyone got it right, but Xander had the most money: \$24,600. The camera zoomed in on him and said, “Our new one-day champion, Xander Carlisle!”

We screamed and cheered and jumped up and down. Brody spilled half of the bottle of scotch trying to pour shots, and ended up pouring it directly into Xander’s mouth.

“I can’t wait to see how you do tomorrow!” I said. “Keep the streak going!”

“Oh, I get absolutely trounced in the next game,” he replied. “I had *negative* money at the end, so I didn’t even get to compete in Final Jeopardy.”

“Oh no! I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He took me in his arms and smiled. “Tonight, I’m a Jeopardy champion. And I have you to thank for it.” He glanced past me. “And Chase’s childhood crush on Ms. Frizzle.”

“You’re welcome,” Chase said.

We were all good and drunk at this point, so our celebration shifted to kissing and groping. When Brody started removing my shirt, I quickly pushed him away and stood up.

“I have to get something. I’ll be right back.”

I hurried down to my bedroom closet and changed clothes. It took a little while because I struggled to get the wig *just right*. When I was satisfied with how I looked in the mirror, I returned upstairs to the theater room.

All three of them froze when they saw me in the doorway. I was wearing a blue dress with stars and planets on it. A stuffed toy lizard was perched on my shoulder, next to my wig of curly orange hair.

“Why are you wearing your Halloween costume?” Brody asked.

“Because I wanted to have some fun.” I lifted up half the dress, revealing the hose and garters I was wearing underneath. “The kind of fun that would give The Magic School Bus an X-rating.”

“I have the weirdest boner right now,” Brody said.

Chase grunted. “There’s nothing weird about my boner.”

Chase was like an animal as he took hold of me. His tongue found its way into my mouth, rolling eagerly against my own. Brody dropped to his knees behind me, hiked up my dress, and began eating me out from behind. I tilted my head back and moaned loudly as they had their way with me, bending me over the theater chairs and taking turns fucking me from behind. It was a drunken, erotic blur, just me and my three chiseled men, losing ourselves in the mindless drive of our bodies.

We were spread out on the theater room carpet afterwards, a tangle of nude and semi-nude bodies. Brody’s thigh was next to my head, tan and strong. Xander’s arm was draped across my chest and gently cupping a breast, the dark hairs on his arm moving gently every time I breathed. Chase was using my thigh as a pillow, and was giving me a light foot massage without saying anything.

“I’m going to miss this place,” Brody said. “The inheritance is officially distributed next week, right?”

“First thing Monday morning,” Xander replied. “I think I will miss it here, too. I have spent more nights here lately than at my own apartment.”

We were all silent for a little while, too comfortable to move or speak.

“My lease is up next month,” Brody suddenly said. “I was kind of, maybe, thinking of staying here. Keeping the mansion in the family, rather than selling it to some random person who probably won’t appreciate it.”

I felt Xander and Chase both shift.

“This is a lot of house for one guy,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s way too much for me alone,” he admitted. “I’d probably need to find some roommates.”

I felt myself grinning. Was he suggesting what I thought he was?

“It’s tough to find roommates you can trust,” Chase said. “You might get stuck with a surfer bro.”

“Or a jackass gardener who believes in the Loch Ness Monster.”

Chase sat upright. “Nessy hasn’t been found because she’s able to dive lower than traditional boat-mounted radar can penetrate!”

“I’m sure you’re correct,” Xander said dryly.

“I don’t mind crashing here,” Chase said after calming down. “You probably need someone to tend to all the plants.”

“That might be nice, sure,” Brody replied.

“My commute into the office is five minutes shorter from here than my house,” Xander chimed in. “That’s ten minutes per day. Nearly an hour per week.”

“About fifty hours a year in saved time. Think of what you could do with all that free time!” Brody said.

All three of them twisted to look at me.

“I never wanted to sell the house in the first place!” I replied. “Especially now that I spent months modernizing and renovating it.”

Chase sat up to face me directly. “What about us? Not just you and me, but you and Brody, and Xander.”

“What about us?”

“Moving in together is a large step,” Xander said. “One normally reserved for when a couple is *serious* about each other.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing we’ve already lived together, isn’t it?” I replied. “First during the inheritance game, and then on-and-off since then. You all spend more time here than your own homes.”

“All I know is that I love you,” Chase said, leaning across the pile of bodies to kiss me. “The rest is just details.”

“You know how much I love you as well,” Xander added.

“Hey, I said *I love you* two months ago,” Brody suddenly said. “That was way before either of you.”

“It’s not a competition,” Xander said.

“Yeah, chill out, *bro*,” Chase insisted.

“I love each of you,” I said, turning to face them one at a time. “It doesn’t make sense, and nobody else could possibly understand it, but I want to stay in this house with all of you. At least, until I get bored.”

“Bored?” Chase asked.

“Well, yeah,” I replied. “Three boyfriends isn’t nearly enough for one woman. I should probably find two or three more, and fill all the other

bedrooms.”

Brody laughed when he realized I was joking, then the others joined in. They fell onto me, cuddling and hugging and laughing, a pile of men who somehow each loved *me* for who I was.

Forget the inheritance, I thought. This is the real prize that came out of Alistair’s game.

“I want to turn the study into a gym,” Brody suddenly said.

Xander frowned. “Why the study? There are several unused bedrooms on the third floor.”

“Rooms reserved for my future boyfriends,” I teased.

“I don’t want to haul everything up another flight of stairs,” Brody insisted. “Also, I want to be able to do deadlifts. If I drop the weight upstairs, I might crash through two sets of floors.”

“I don’t care where you put the gym,” Chase said, “as long as you don’t touch the library. Or the greenhouse.”

“I like the study,” Xander complained. “I work in there occasionally.”

“Work in the library,” Brody suggested. “It has a window.”

“I prefer the study.”

As I listened to them argue, I realized something profound: I was happy. Happy in a way I never thought was possible four months ago. Each of them, Brody and Xander and Chase, contributed to that happiness in an irreplaceable way. Like the wheels of a tricycle, I needed all three of them.

I wasn’t sure how long all of this could last, letting the three men share me. Most relationships eventually ended, and this one was more complex than most. But I was certain of one thing: I wanted it to continue forever. I never wanted this feeling to end.

As I rolled over and began tickling Xander to stop their playful arguing, a portrait of Alistair Fritz Schreiber looked down on us and smiled.

Bonus Scene



Interested in how the four inheritors are doing in the future? Click the link below (or type it into a browser) to receive a special deleted scene that takes place nine years in the future. This link also reveals all the secret easter eggs I hid throughout the book! Did you find them all?

<https://bit.ly/3Kso9Nm>

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Cassie Cole is a Reverse Harem Romance writer living in Branson, Missouri. A sappy lover at heart, she thinks romance is best with a kick-butt plot!

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