

WHO'S YOUR

Daddy

Jacqueline Francis

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Who's Your Daddy

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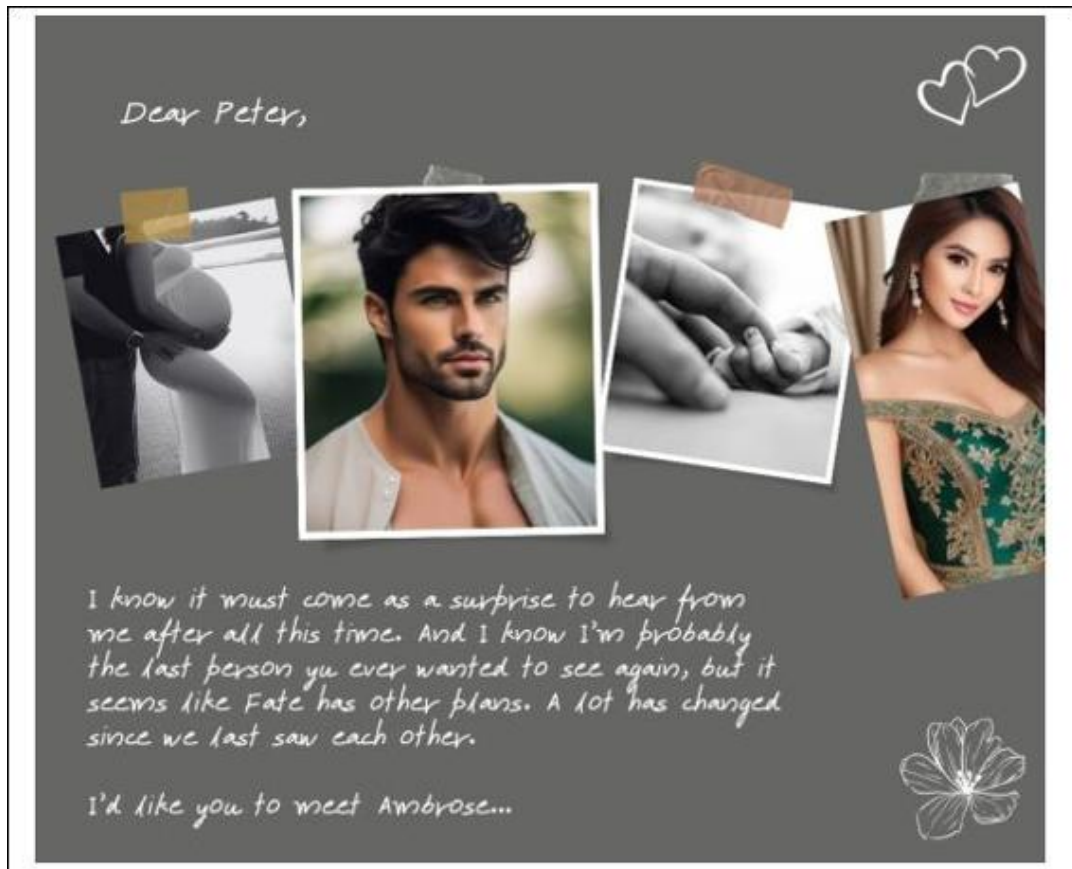
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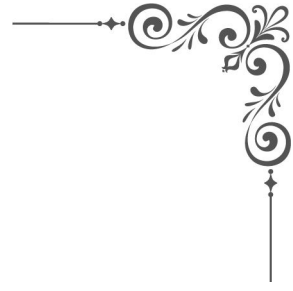
To all the readers who have been following this series, I'm so sorry it took me so long to get Peter and Lia's story out. I hope you enjoy it and let's hope it was worth the wait.



IT HURTS MY HEAD TO think of how many things had to happen for our paths to intersect. Of all those numberless little fortunes that led me to you. A broken alarm clock, a delayed train, a sudden downpour, and there we were. You and I, sharing a coffee, our whole lives ahead of us.

- Beau Taplin // **The Chance Meeting**





1. Peter

“Honey, I’m home.”

The hard slam of my front door jolts me from sleep. I groan. That’s Dylan. Why he thinks I’d want to be awake at 5 a.m. is beyond me, but that’s his wake-up call every morning. This is a fairly new routine. Ever since he proposed three months ago, he’s spent every night at his fiancé’s place. She co-hosts a breakfast show and has to be at the station by 4:30.

After she leaves, Dylan drives all the way back to my place to have an hour-long session with his punching bag. Why he can’t just do that at a nearby gym is beyond me. He insisted bag time was something he had to do alone, so when he moved in, I converted the spare bedroom downstairs into a small workout area for him. And what did I get for this courtesy? Nothing!

Instead of sneaking in like a normal person and quietly going about his business, he slams the door shut, then starts speaking to me like I’ve been awake the whole time, just waiting for him to come home.

He drives me crazy sometimes. We’ve been friends since high school, so one would think I’d be used to him being a pain in the ass. But no. It’s impossible to build a tolerance level that high.

He’s been my roommate for a while now. Roommate is maybe the wrong way to look at it. My house is effectively a pit-stop between marriages. He moved in with me after he got divorced about eighteen months ago, and in two and a half weeks, he’s going to get married *again*.

I can barely maintain a relationship for more than a week, and here he is getting married for the *second* time. But that’s Dylan. He’s the sensitive, sentimental one in our trio of friends. He’s all about love and soul mates and commitment. All the things I actively try to avoid. Just the thought gives me a headache. Women are more trouble than they’re worth. I’ve

been trying to instill this very basic principle into Dylan since we were teenagers, but he's a brick wall when it comes to matters of the heart.

Actually, he's downright foolish where the opposite sex is concerned, which is why his ex-wife now has his house and his *current* fiancé unleashed all her fury on his brand-new Lamborghini. And I'm not talking about your run-of-the-mill tire-slashing rage. Nah, this woman went ape-shit crazy with a goddamn garden spade and totally fucked up his car. Now, if it were me, I would've packed it in and given up on the love game, but not Dyl. He's a sucker for punishment.

And I get it. Women use their feminine wiles to bend men to their will. Hips and legs and tits and lips. It's impossible to resist them. I, too, have fallen victim to their alluring charms on many occasions. We get tangled in their web...and then they screw us over. Thankfully, I've been sensible enough to not develop any emotional attachments. The key thing is to keep all interactions to a minimum. From my experience, the drama only starts after about three weeks, so I have a rule. If I ever want to indulge in anything more than a one-night stand, I tap out at around two weeks.

"You want breakfast, sweetheart?" he yells from the kitchen.

This is another annoying habit of his. He speaks to me like I'm his intermediate wife. Dylan has never been very reliable, and sometimes if he gets into a funk, he just switches his phone off and disappears for days at a time. When he moved in with me, I asked him to just check in with me so that I'd know if he was okay. That minor act of concern led to this bullshit.

Most days, I just ignore him, toss over, and go back to sleep, but I'm starving this morning, and I'm not going to pass up a gourmet breakfast. He's an incredible chef, and he's moving out in two and a half weeks, so I might as well take advantage of it. I drag myself out of bed and walk downstairs to the kitchen.

I have a modest-sized condo. It's a two-story, four-bedroom home with French oak hardwood flooring and lightwood cabinetry in all the living areas. The large modern kitchen comes complete with quartz countertops and stainless-steel appliances. The whole west side is basically glass from ceiling to floor, which opens up to a large balcony from my bedroom upstairs and a spacious patio from the living room downstairs. Simple yet sophisticated, that's what I like.

I own many properties, but I chose to live here because this particular project took so much time and effort that I developed a personal connection to it. Three years ago, I purchased this plot of land and contracted multiple companies to develop it into a gated community. On the west side of the complex, we built three two-bedroom apartment buildings, and on the east side, we built twenty uniquely designed luxury homes. I wanted prestige. I wanted exclusive living, so this place is equipped with everything: a swimming pool, a fitness center, a bar and clubhouse, a park with different hiking trails, a tennis court, even a day spa.

This is now prime real estate. While I sold the free-standing houses and turned a good profit, I earn a more stable income from renting the apartments. I've had an average occupancy rate of about ninety percent since I started leasing them out.

The smell of sizzling bacon greets me as I enter the kitchen. "Make mine extra crispy," I grumble.

"Wow!" His eyes widen in surprise before his focus returns to the pan. He tosses mushrooms, green pepper, and a mild amount of seasoning. "You're out of bed before eleven? The end of the world must be coming. I should've lit an extra candle when I went to church last Sunday." His lips quirk up in a smile when I drop onto the stool on the opposite side of the island stove. He seems proud that he's managed to annoy me this early. "What time are we going to the gym today?"

I run a hand over my face in an attempt to wipe the sleep away before I look up at him. "About two-thirty. Scott and I are going to the country club to have lunch with his dad first

and then we can meet you at the gym...or do you wanna join us for lunch?"

"Bella wants me to go to some cake place to do a taste test of our wedding cake, but I'm sure I'll be done before lunch, so yeah, I'll meet you guys at the country club."

He plates my omelet and slides it across to me. One bite and I forgive him for all the wrongs he has ever done to me. "This is great, Dyl."

"Mmm." He nods his agreement as he scarfs down his breakfast. "So, I was thinking," he says between bites. "Why don't you ask Chelsea to be your date for my wedding?"

"Dyl, I haven't even spoken to Chelsea in over a month?"

"What? Why? I thought you liked her."

"I mean...she was alright, but..." I don't know how to say this without sounding like a dick. "I just...got bored. There are only so many times you can have sex with the same woman before it becomes monotonous."

His jaw tightens. If there's one way to piss Dylan off, that would be it. He hates any kind of derogatory comments about women. And I'm not trying to be derogatory. I'm just stating facts, plain and simple. Chelsea was great on all four occasions that we saw each other. It was a fun week, but eventually, the time came for us to part ways. Four dates are three more than usual for me, so I think he misconstrued it as something more.

He shakes his head, sighing his disappointment. "You're gonna die alone, Pete."

"Don't you think it's a little too early for you to be so bleak?"

He knows his statement didn't impact me in the slightest, and I can already sense that he's on the brink of a lecture. We've had these discussions a million times, so I know all the signs. The look of condescension on his face. The inkling of hope in his brown eyes because he genuinely believes that one day I'll change.

“I’m serious, man. Your friendship with me and Scott is the only relationship you want to maintain on a long-term basis.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is!”

“No, it’s not. I’ve been trying to get rid of you for *years*. I hate to break it to you, Dyl, but...I don’t really like you.”

He rolls his eyes. “Pete, the way you live your life is very unhealthy. You don’t date. You just meet these random women at bars and clubs, have sex with them a few times, and then you end it before anything meaningful happens.”

“The sex part is very meaningful to me. I’d probably avoid women entirely if it weren’t for the sex. It gets me out of the house. That means something.”

“You won’t even have a friends-with-benefits type of relationship because just being friends with a female requires too much emotional commitment from you.”

“Friends-with-benefits arrangements generally don’t work. Women complicate things because they start catching feelings, and that ruins the entire concept. And at the end of it, you’re left with no friend and no benefits.”

“Why are you so resistant to making a connection with someone? You don’t even invite women over to the house because you don’t want to share your personal life with anyone.”

It really is too early for this. I just want to eat my omelet and go back to bed. My audible groan lets him know how disinterested I am. “Dyl, there’s no point in letting someone get cozy in my personal space when it’s never going to last beyond a week.”

That inkling of hope fades from his eyes like it always does, but Dylan is persistent. He never gives up without a fight. “You’re almost twenty-seven. What are you doing with your life, Pete? You’re unemployed.”

“I’m rich, so I don’t need to work.”

“You don’t have any productive hobbies.”

“Again, not true. I love playing the stock market, and that makes me a lot of money. I would say that’s a *very* productive hobby.”

He runs an aggravated hand through his short brown hair because he’s clearly losing this argument. “All I’m saying is that you don’t have a genuine passion for anything or anyone. That’s not a life. That’s a...sad existence.”

I give a somber nod. “You’re right. I’m gonna take your advice and be more like you. That way, I can be truly *happy*. Remember how happy you were back in high school when you found out Isabella fucked you over and then she dumped you right after that?” *Game*. “And remember how overjoyed you were when you and Francesca got divorced, and she took your house, and you had to move in with me?” *Set*. “And remember that time when you were just bursting with elation because Isabella went psycho on you and wrecked your car.” *Match*. I take another bite of my omelet and chew slowly as I pretend to marvel at these memories when, in actual fact, I’m basking in my victory. “Wow, Dyl, you’re an inspiration to us all. You just convinced me to put myself out there more so I can find a good woman and be happy...just like you.”

“Alright, Pete.” He accepts defeat with a heavy sigh. “Guess it’s just going to be me and Scott at your funeral, then.”

“Hopefully, just Scott. It’s still my long-term plan to get rid of you.”

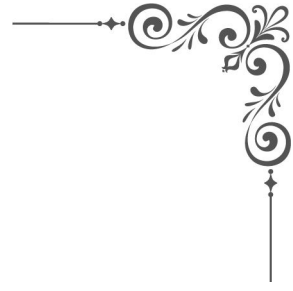
He laughs. “Well, that was another great chat. Completely pointless, but great nonetheless.” He takes his empty plate to the sink. “Sadly, though, some of us have jobs and responsibilities, so I’m gonna have my hour with the boxing bag, then shower and head to the restaurant.”

“I’m gonna check my stock portfolio, see how rich I am from doing nothing with my life, then...go back to bed.”

That gets me another eye roll before he walks away. He only takes a few steps, then stops to face me again. “And just

for the record, I am bursting with elation. In a couple weeks, I'm going to marry the woman I'm madly in love with. Every bit of hell Bella put me through was absolutely worth it, and if given the choice, I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat." His shoulders rise in a dismissive shrug. "But save yourself the trouble and complications, Pete. I'm sure meaningless sex with women who mean nothing to you is just as fulfilling as what I have with Bella."

He leaves me with that statement, and it's yet another reason why he's one of my best friends. He's a sentimental fool, which is both a good and a bad quality. Those sentimental views sometimes make me pause and question things. For instance, right now I'm questioning who really won that argument.



2. Lia

That's it. I'm no longer living like this. Today is the day I reclaim my life! I'm not going to live in this *squalor* anymore, like some hobo. Opening one eye, I peep at the disgusting, roach-infested motel I've been living in for the last two weeks. It's so detestable that I squeeze it shut a second later. I can't even bring myself to face reality. How did it come to this? From a penthouse apartment to this dingy motel room. From Egyptian cotton sheets to dust-mite-riddled rags.

I thought he loved me. How could he dump me so callously, knowing I would end up like this? He was the one who told me not to get a job. He said he would take care of me. And he did. Teddy was the perfect boyfriend. For the fourteen months we were together, he set me up in a fancy penthouse and bought me anything I wanted. He even paid for regular spa treatments to make sure I was always pampered and looked my best.

I want all those things back. Today I'm going to demand that he restore my privileges because that's what he promised me. He offered me the world, told me he would give me the life of a princess. Well, newsflash, Teddy. Princesses don't room with roaches and dust mites!

Even in my head, I acknowledge that I sound like an entitled, spoiled brat, but I blame that on him, too. I grew up having a lot of perks, but it was nowhere near the type of luxury Teddy introduced me to. He got me hooked on this lifestyle.

I was just going through the motions, trying to make ends meet and get my life together. A rough patch, some would call it. A train wreck is what I think is more adequate.

In my senior year of high school, the counselor and a police officer called me out of class one day. With a solemn voice, the police officer delivered the devastating news that the plane carrying both my parents back from their second honeymoon had crashed. There were no survivors.

Just like that, my life was turned upside down. I lost my home and family all in one day. I remember the sinking feeling in my stomach, like a hollow cavity had cracked up inside me and sucked my entire essence into it. I was never the same after that. Left a mere shell of a person, walking around like a shadow of my former self.

Right after it happened, I was engulfed by a whirlwind of emotions - grief, despair, and uncertainty. But practical matters soon loomed over me like a dark cloud. Although my parents were well off, they weren't financially savvy. They left no will and marginal savings that were eaten by outstanding debt. Our house still had a mortgage, and the bank foreclosed on it after a few months of non-payment. I was evicted from my childhood home. They sold the few things of value and tossed the rest of our belongings out in the street like it was garbage.

All the little things I had taken for granted growing up, like my mom's recipe books and my dad's ties, were strewn across the sidewalk, waiting for garbage day to be collected. All of a sudden, those little things became treasures of infinite value. But I couldn't hold on to any of them. I was forced to let everything go because I had no place to keep them. I no longer had a home.

My parents died twelve days before my eighteenth birthday, so I was an adult by the time I got evicted. The only family I have is an estranged aunt and grandmother on my dad's side who both live in Ohio. I haven't seen either of them since I was twelve, so with no relatives to take me in, I was forced to drop out of high school and try to make it on my own. I had this dream of going to college one day and getting a degree in bioengineering, but that dream died a painful death, too.

They say time is a relative concept, an ever-shifting, elusive wisp of existence. During times of happiness, months and years can seem so short. They can be condensed into a mere moment, a simple memory of a smile, a hug, a kiss. Sometimes, if you're lucky, that perfect moment of bliss can be captured in a photograph.

That's all I have of my parents now, a single photograph of us at Lake Tahoe when I was fifteen years old. I rummaged through trash for two days, desperately trying to find one other picture, a photo album, anything. But in the end, all I'm left with is this one photo. That's the relativity of time. My entire childhood has been condensed into that single photo, yet on the flip side, my grief and pain expand over every microsecond, lengthening them into infinite years.

My parents have been gone for just over two years now, but it feels like I've spent decades wading through the vastness of my loneliness and despair. But those are feelings I generally keep hidden. I've learned to suppress them and put on a brave face because life was giving me a beating that I couldn't just take lying down.

I had to learn how to survive. I worked two, sometimes three, jobs just to scrape by. Life was bad. No, scratch that. Life was straight-up brutal. I was scrounging at the bottom of the barrel.

But then, not even a year after the worst tragedy of my life, Teddy breezed in and changed all that. Sure, the circumstances that brought us together were all based on lies, but our love for each other was very real. Aren't the most memorable love stories those that begin unconventionally? My unconventional beginning with Teddy blossomed from a misunderstanding.

I was down to my last dime, and even though this is not something I would proudly admit out loud, I lied about my age and applied for a job as a *'dancer'* at a nightclub. I didn't know this at the time, but I'm actually the doppelgänger of Ivana Alawi. I was quite flattered when I Googled her and found out that she's a gorgeous model from the Philippines. In fact, she's ranked number four on the "*Top 10 Most Beautiful Filipino Women*" list.

She's part Filipino, part Moroccan. I'm part Filipino, part Caucasian. Somehow, the mixed heritage from our respective parents has resulted in almost the exact same physical attributes – thick chestnut brown hair, lightly tanned skin, and dark hazel eyes. Even our bow-shaped lips are the same. The

only difference is she's five-foot-six while I'm five-nine. Other than that, anyone would swear we were identical twins.

When I showed up wearing a very provocative little number for my *ahem* *dance*, the bouncer mistook me for Ivana and escorted me to the VIP section of the club. Apparently, there was some celebrity after-party happening, and I got sucked into it because I reminded him of a model he saw online. He just assumed that I was invited, even though I don't think mine or Ivana's names were even on the guest list.

But I'm not complaining because that's where I met Robert Teddrick, the handsome entrepreneur and business mogul.

Despite our age difference, we hit it off. He was so wise and worldly with the added bonus of being rich. He was also funny and kind and caring. Yet even with all these pros stacked in his favor, I was still skeptical to take it further. He pursued me and wooed me for almost a month before I finally caved to his charms.

I fell for him, gave myself to him in every way. I wouldn't necessarily call this part a con. The sex was...good. He was slightly out of shape and sometimes had trouble getting or sustaining an erection. But that was a minor inconvenience, not a con. It didn't happen *all* the time, so it was something I easily overlooked because he took such good care of me.

He swept me off my feet, told me all the things I wanted to hear, gave me everything I needed, and turned my life around. He wrapped me up in his comforting arms, and that earned all my affection as well as the nickname – Teddy Bear.

Now, did I keep up the façade that I was a beautiful, sophisticated model? Yes, but only for the first week. After that, I came clean, and he was surprisingly fine with it. More than fine because once he found out that I didn't have a glamorous job, he rescued me from my broke-ass existence and allowed me to live in his penthouse.

I wasn't so forthcoming about other information, though. I lied about my age. He told me he was forty-six, so I told him I was twenty-four because I was only nineteen at the time. Admitting my true age would've made him think I was

jailbait, and I didn't want to ruin what we'd built. I kept that secret for the entire duration of our relationship. Am I ashamed about that? Yes, but it's not like he was completely open and honest with me, either.

I found out two weeks ago that he's married! Right after spending the most amazing 4th of July weekend together, a text came in from a woman named Jessica while he was in the shower. And I read it. And I confronted him about it only to find out that Jessica is his wife. I was shocked. I was devastated because he had just told me how much he loved me while we were having *sex* fifteen minutes before that.

The level of deception still makes my mind reel every time I think about it. He told me he loved me, and then fifteen minutes later, confessed that he, his wife, and their *four* sons were all living happily in some posh mansion in the suburbs. I'm sorry, but his lie is worse than mine. I threw a hissy fit. He told me not to overreact. He assured me he wasn't in love with her anymore, and I was the one he wanted.

Naturally, my follow-up question was whether he was going to divorce his wife so we could be together. I thought it was a valid question, considering he was coming over to *screw* me at least three times a week. He got mad and then the heartless bastard chucked up all my stuff into fricken garbage bags and kicked me out of the penthouse. He did that to me, knowing about my parents and the eviction, which made his actions even more sinister and cruel. He cut off all ties after that argument, and I've been living in this dingy motel room ever since.

I know I have to get my life in order. I've been trying to get a job, but the very thought is disheartening. I'm a young high school dropout with no talents, so I don't qualify for many jobs, and the ones I qualify for don't pay much.

If I tried to get the same kind of life on my own, I would have to work myself to the bone. According to my calculations, I would have to work at least twelve hours every day for the next thirty-two years to even afford the penthouse I was living in. And that's if I saved every penny and only ate one meal a day.

I don't want to wait thirty-two years. I need to get my old life back, and in order to do that, I need to get Teddy back. He promised he'd take care of me, so I'm going to hold him to that promise. I gave him things that I can't take back, like my *virginity*. He shouldn't be able to take back that promise. He told me he loves me, so I'm going to ask him to prove it.

Teddy owns the Bayview Country Club, and he usually plays golf with some of his clients there on Wednesdays. So, today I'm going to go there and ask him to reinstate my penthouse with all my princess privileges. He doesn't even have to leave his wife. I'll just pretend that I never found out about it and go back to living a blissful life completely oblivious to this fact. It's obviously not a long-term solution, but if I compromise until his kids are old enough, maybe he'll reevaluate the situation in the future.

With my mind made up, I finally find the strength to open my eyes. It still horrifies me every time I think about how my life flew off the rails with no warning. I still can't believe I'm living in this dirty motel. Maybe I could've gone to a slightly better one, but I have to spend as little money as possible. I've been putting all my expenses on his credit card, and I'm low-key panicking that one big purchase will alert him to the fact that I still have it. I haven't been able to find a decent job yet, and I'd probably starve to death if he canceled it. The plan is to fly under the radar and only use his card to buy the absolute basic necessities until he takes me back.

And he will take me back. He has to. He knows that I have no family. And he also knows that I'm ill-equipped to handle the big bad world all on my own.

As I roll out of bed, the photo on my nightstand catches my eye. I lift it up and take in the details for the millionth time. The excited smile on my dad's face, the love in my mom's eyes. We were so happy. I trace my finger around the arm she has around my neck, down to her wrist. Once again, time expands and the seconds I spend staring at the bracelet on her wrist feel like hours.

She wore that bracelet every day, never taking it off even when she showered. The two ends of the bracelet were joined

together by a butterfly-shaped clasp. She always believed that butterflies were our ancestors' way of communicating with us. Seeing a butterfly was their way of saying hi. After she died, I went crazy trying to get that bracelet. I begged the cops. I begged the coroners. No one could find it. I wanted it so desperately because having it with me would mean that *she* was with me.

But she's not with me. I have to face this world alone, and right now, asking Teddy for another chance is the only viable plan I've got.

After brushing my teeth, I rummage through the trash bags that contain all the designer labels he bought me. I'm bringing out the big guns today and going for the *sexy-without-trying-to-be* look, exposing all my assets with just the right amount of modesty. I match a pair of Daisy Duke denim shorts with a pink, white, and blue checkered shirt (from the Burberry Spring collection). It's tight enough to accentuate the contours of my breasts. I leave the top two buttons undone to show off an enticing amount of cleavage and leave the last two buttons undone to make sure he catches a flash of my belly ring. I know his weaknesses, and I'm not above exploiting them to get what I want.

Next, I do my makeup, keeping it natural because Teddy hates caked faces. For the finishing touches, I apply a slight dusting of pink to my high cheekbones, a tiny bit of mascara to add more length to my already long lashes and top it off with just a hint of gloss. I scoop my hair up into a high ponytail and add a pair of hoop earrings. I initially complete the look with a pair of heels, but that looks like I'm trying too hard, so I swap it for a pair of Versace sneakers instead, the pair he bought me for my birthday back in May.

One last look in the mirror and...yes! That's perfect. Casual yet smoking hot. He's going to be salivating, begging me to come back.



THE WIDE FOYER NARROWS to a lightwood, semi-circular reception desk. To the left is a bar, which opens up to

a restaurant and extends out further to an outdoor dining area. On the right are large glass doors that lead out to the golf course. Teddy always has a beer with his clients after a round of golf, so this is the ideal spot to wait for him because he can't get to the bar without passing me.

I thrum my nails on the reception desk, not sure if I'm impatient or nervous. I've asked the receptionist fifteen times when he'll be back, and she keeps telling me *probably in the next ten minutes*. She's a liar because I've been waiting here for forty-five minutes already.

My eyes move idly across the foyer, taking in every detail as I try to pass the time. From the beige stone cladding and contemporary paintings on the wall to the sleek hardwood floors. I wonder how much he paid for this place or how much it rakes in each month. What takes some people thirty-two years to earn comes to him so easily. People say money can't buy happiness, but I vehemently disagree. I was infinitely happier when I was wrapped in the safe cocoon of money. You can't put a price on how much mental distress you endure when your basic needs are not met. Money provides stability, which in turn translates to some degree of happiness.

The sound of his voice behind me makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I freeze, too nervous to even breathe. I turn and his steps falter when he sees me. Somehow, seeing him again does weird things to me. He looks familiar, yet I don't recognize him at all. Those soft brown eyes used to look at me with longing and adoration, and now they're filled with disdain. Those supple lips used to kiss me for hours and now they're pressed into a hard line. The sharp features and distinct eyebrows that once made him so handsome now only show his irritation.

He looks away, pretending as if he didn't see me as he walks with a group of men toward the bar. That stung me more than I could've ever imagined, but I keep a brave face as they stroll past me.

I'm still trying to compose myself when he stops and glances back at me. "I'm just gonna run to the gents. I'll meet you guys at the bar," he says to the other men.

He waits for them to be out of earshot before he charges toward me and catches my arm in a firm grasp. He's seething when he lowers his lips to my ear. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Aren't you happy to see me, *Daddy*?" I use my sultriest voice to ask the question, not really knowing what the outcome will be.

The pet name used to turn him on, but today it only serves to spike his anger. His nostrils flare and his jaw clenches. He casts a glance at the receptionist to make sure she didn't hear that before his fingers tighten around my arm, and he all but drags me to the exit.

Once we're outside, he abruptly releases me. "What are you doing here?" he asks again.

"I miss you, Teddy bear." That's another term of endearment he used to love, so I try my best to ignore the agitated breath he lets out when he hears it. "I know you were mad the last time we spoke. I realize now that I was asking for too much too soon, but let's just forget about that stupid misunderstanding..." *Misunderstanding* is more euphemistic than *your wife and kids*. "...and find a way to make it work."

His eyebrows draw together, and he looks at me as if he thinks my brain is made of sawdust. "Lia, what are you talking about? I thought I made myself clear the last time. We're not going to make it work. I have a wife, a family. I had to end it because the whole situation was getting out of hand. You were just supposed to be the side chick, and side chicks are supposed to remain on the *side*."

"I can remain on the side." I sound pathetically desperate, but that's because I am.

"You showing up here is not remaining on the side. This is my business. My friends, my clients, my employees – they're all here. You need to get the hell out of here before anyone sees me talking to you."

The words are sharp and jagged, slashing right through me. "This is not you. You've never treated me like this. Why are

you speaking to me this way?”

“Because you and I are over, but something in your young, naïve brain just doesn’t seem to get that.”

Well, that’s because right now my young, naïve brain is having a really hard time trying to reconcile this information with the affection and sweet talk he was smothering me with just a few weeks ago. “You told me you love me, Daddy.”

Again, the name makes him cringe. “Yeah, I love you. I love you like I love golf or going on a cruise...or having a night out with the boys. It’s a fun escape from reality, and it makes me feel young and invigorated again, but do I love those things more than my family? No.”

That cut so deep, I feel like my insides just spilled out and dropped onto the gravel. I stand there flabbergasted for a few moments, rapidly blinking as I try to absorb the shock. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“If you didn’t love me, why...why would you buy me a penthouse or pay for□”

“I already owned the penthouse. It cost me nothing. Besides, I wasn’t going to fuck you in a hotel and risk leaving a paper trail. It was just more...” He takes a moment to find the right word. “...*convenient* to let you live there.”

“Con-convenient?” The question is barely audible because it had to claw its way past the constricted knot in my throat, and it lost all sound by the time it reached my lips.

For a fraction of a second, I see the Teddy I used to know. His eyes soften and he reaches out to rub my arm. “Look, Lia. You’re great. I don’t want you leaving here thinking that I don’t care about you. I do. You made me feel things my wife hasn’t made me feel in *years*. You never made me feel inadequate when I...you know, when I...”

“Couldn’t get it up?” I fill in, my tone scathing and hostile, but he ignores the comment altogether.

“You need to leave now, and I know you’re disheartened, but you’re gonna be fine. You’re not...smart, but you’ve got your looks and your body working overtime for you, so you’re gonna bounce right back from this, you’ll see. Keep your head up, champ.”

He taps a light fist against my jaw, a gesture that seems more appropriate for his teenage sons than the mistress he’s been fucking for the last fourteen months. He leaves me standing there like an idiot, and I’m too stunned to even speak as I watch him jog back inside.

It takes a solid five minutes before I’m able to move my legs, and they feel as heavy as lead when I walk back toward the reception desk. I should leave. I know I should, but I just can’t seem to let this go. I don’t know if the end was too abrupt, or the rejection was too harsh, but I must’ve trauma-bonded with this establishment because I can’t bring myself to leave it all behind just yet.

I sneak past the bar without Teddy noticing me and make my way to the outdoor dining area. A table behind a large pot plant gives me just enough coverage to discreetly spy on him, so I take a seat there. He’s drinking whiskey, laughing with his friends as if he didn’t just dump me like a sack of hot manure.

“Can I have a beer?”

The deep male voice behind me intrigues me enough to find out who it belongs to. I half-turn and see three men, two younger guys and an older gentleman. Well, one has his back to me, so I’m assuming his young based on his voice and jet-black hair. He’s broad, so broad that I can barely see the other two men.

“Pete,” one of the other guys complains, “we’re hitting the gym in an hour. Beer makes you sluggish, man.”

“Chill, Scott. I’m starting the weekend early. Our boy is getting married soon. We only have two more weeks to enjoy his freedom before he ties the knot.”

“He’s not here yet,” the one named Scott replies. “And we’re not even close to the weekend. It’s only Wednesday.”

“Can you just relax and enjoy it with me?”

“Where is Dylan, anyway? He’s supposed to be here already. He could at least call.”

I try not to eavesdrop and focus on Teddy, but listening to them is a great distraction from the tight ball twisting in the pit of my stomach. It’s just brain-dead chit-chat, so far removed from the crisis unfolding in my life right now, and there’s a weird form of comfort in being a bystander to the conversation.

I find out that the older gentleman is Scott’s father, and he’s been trying to get Scott back into the dating game by setting him up on various blind dates. Scott, on the other hand, prefers being single, and I get the feeling that he doesn’t want to date again because he may still be hung up on his ex-girlfriend.

“I’m *happy*,” Scott assures his father, and the hint of irritation in his voice makes me think this is not the first time he’s had this conversation. “I’m doing what I love, working my way up the ranks. I’m the youngest member of the academic committee at one of the largest universities in California. Why do I need to be in a relationship to prove that? And by the way, Pete’s single, too. I don’t see you ragging on him to get a girlfriend.”

“There’s a fundamental difference between your single and my single, Scott,” Peter retorts swiftly. “I’m single out of choice. I’m still playing the field because I don’t want to settle down. Ever. You’re single because you want to be...alone.”

I roll my eyes just hearing that. *Playing the field?* Ugh! I hate guys like that. The arrogant assholes who think they’re God’s gift to women, the Chads of the world who just use women for sex, then discard them when they get bored.

For the longest time, I considered myself lucky because I thought Teddy was different. But my chat with him outside earlier proves that he’s right about one thing. I’m not smart because I believed every bullshit lie he told me.

A ringing phone pulls me out of my thoughts. It's their other friend (Dylan, if I remember correctly), calling to tell them he can't join them this afternoon. After a brief exchange, Scott dashes out of there faster than Husain Bolt, though I'm not sure why because my attention is unequally divided right now.

A few minutes later, Scott's father stands to leave as well, but he doesn't walk to the exit. Instead, he heads toward the group of men at the bar and taps Teddy on the back before shaking his hand. I half-stand, craning my neck to get a better look at them.

Part of me wants to march right up to him and expose him for being a cheating scum in front of all his friends. Actually...maybe I should do just that. I want to hurt him, humiliate him the same way he humiliated me. Teddy gets up, walking with Scott's father to the exit, and I decide to just bite the bullet and do it. What do I have to lose? Not only did he take away all my material comforts, he stripped me of my dignity and self-respect as well. I'm going to pay that forward and do the same to him.

I shove my chair back and stand up. My feet shuffle forward, but my haste blinds me to my surroundings. I crash into someone. The next few seconds go by in a blur. All I hear is a "Watch it, lady!" before an arm catches me around the waist. That does nothing to stabilize either of us.

The sudden impact causes my legs to give in from beneath me. We're both plummeting to the floor, but he wildly twists around so that he hits the ground first. His back slams against the floor with a hard thud, and he groans when I land on top of him. A strained gasp follows, probably because I've just knocked the wind out of him.

It takes a moment for me to come out of my confused daze, and as I recover from the shock, my eyes focus on the stranger beneath me. I blink a few times to make sure I'm not hallucinating, and the second my brain fully registers his face, I fall in love. Right then. Right that second. Head over heels in love. He's *gorgeous*. I'm speechless, motionless, just taking in

the sight of him. No doubt this is the most beautiful man I've ever laid eyes on.

His bone structure was hand-crafted by the Gods themselves. Flawless features that are sharp and striking. My eyes move from his high, sculpted cheekbones down to his fleshy lips, and the three-day stubble along his jawline is just the right amount of scruff without being unkempt. That Dean Winchester kind of scruff. His jet-black hair is a stark contrast to his eyes.

Good Lord. Those eyes...

Deep green orbs, bedazzled with gray flecks, appearing more like jade crystals than actual irises.

Alexa...add to cart.

He shifts beneath me, and the hard, muscular wall of his chest presses against me. That draws my attention to the arm still firmly clasped around me. Just the strength of him further convinces me that I've just fallen in love. But then he opens his mouth...and I take all my love right back.

"You know, usually I have to buy a woman dinner before I get her into this position...but I guess this could work, too."

"Ew!" Disgust scrunches my face as I try to suppress a gag. I recognize his voice. It's that Peter dude who was sitting behind me. The epitome of arrogance. The player of fields. "What is wrong with you?" I wriggle against his hold, scraping my knee as I scramble to get off him. "Disgusting creep!"

"Jesus, relax. I was just kidding."

I mentally scoop my love off the floor and shove it into my back pocket. I was keeping it there, readily available so I could give it back to Teddy, and after my love received a colossal stamp of rejection, I guess I was a little too impulsive to distribute it again. But I've learned my lesson. Don't fall for alluring green eyes.

I quickly stand up, dusting off the tiny stones from my shins and knees. I look toward the exit and Teddy is already gone. Dammit! Maybe I can still catch him outside. A waitress

rushes to me to see if I'm okay, but I quickly brush her off and move toward the foyer. I'm forced to stop when I feel the sharp pain sear across my left knee. I wince, then grit my teeth and soldier on.

"You're limping."

I glance back to see Peter walking behind me. "How incredibly astute of you."

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"No need to be hostile. *You* crashed into me."

I try to hobble a little faster to get away from him. "It was an accident that you turned into an uncomfortable encounter by being a pervert."

"Fuck, you can't even make a lighthearted joke these days," he says, more to himself than to me. "Look, I'm sorry for what I said. It was just a stupid joke. Now, are you alright, or would you like me to get someone to look at that cut?"

As I near the reception desk, I spin around to face him. "I'm fine, okay? I'm sure you just heard me tell the waitress that a few seconds ago. I don't need□"

At the corner of my eye, I spot Teddy walking back in. This is my chance to do something drastic. He's alone, so my plan to humiliate him in front of his friends is no longer an option, but I'm sure I can think of a way to get under his skin. Should I just call him out right here? Should I yell out all our dirty laundry in front of everyone? Should I—

Yes! That'll work.

"You know what?" I tell Peter. "Let's just put this whole incident behind us. I'm fine. No hard feelings. Let's just wipe the slate clean."

"Great. Feelings no longer hard. Slate officially wiped." He confirms this with a nod. "Have a good day."

I notice he's about to walk away and grab his wrist to stop him. "Wait! Uh...in my country, we..." *What the fuck am I*

doing? “...we wipe the slate clean with, um, with...a kiss.” I swallow to push down the bile rising in my throat. The disbelief on his face makes me want to retract that statement, but I’m in too deep now. “It’s...it’s bad luck if we part ways with a stranger on less than...um, like, amicable terms. So, we believe the kiss is a gesture of good faith.”

He’s skeptical. “So...the people in your country just go around kissing each other to resolve their issues?”

“Yeah. Uh-huh. We’re a peaceful nation. We hate...acrimony.”

A mixture of confusion and intrigue plays with his expression. “Okay, which country are you from? And...are all the women there as hot as you?”

God, he’s a pig. I chastise myself for this thought because I’m the one who just asked *him* for a kiss. I don’t even know why I’m going through with this. Maybe I want Teddy to fly into a jealous fit of rage. Maybe I want him to doubt whether I was cheating the whole time too and make him feel like he was actually *my* side piece. Maybe I’m secretly hoping that if he sees me with another man, he’ll realize that he still wants me, and he’ll take me back. It’s unclear why I’m asking a random stranger to kiss me, but I’ll figure out my true motivations later. Right now, I just want to execute this very stupid plan, and I want Teddy’s reaction to be explosive.

“Are you going to do it or not?” I snap irritably.

“You’re very highly strung and also...kinda rude.”

Can he just stop talking? My heart pounds rapidly, anxiety throwing every cell in my body into overdrive. Teddy is getting closer, and with each step, my window of opportunity gets smaller. Even though my eyes are bouncing frantically between these two men, I fake a smile. “We’re gonna add my rudeness onto the slate so that it’s no longer an issue when we wipe it clean, okay?”

“Uh...Okay.” Uncertainty is etched on his face, and his movements are awkward when he steps closer. “This is so

weird, especially because you just called me a pervert. I don't think□"

"Don't think! Just kiss me so we can both go on our merry way."

His annoyance is heightened by my snappy tone. "Listen, lady, I've had about□"

Shit! He's bailing. "I'm sorry for my abrasive tone," I blurt. "Can we please proceed with the...customary kiss...of resolution?"

"I don't even understand how this custom works. What am I supposed to do? Just give you a quick peck on the cheek?"

"No, it's..." I swallow hard, trying to squelch my nervousness. "It's customary for it to be on the lips."

His eyebrows furrow together. "What country are you from?"

I'm not sure if it's the question or the approaching footsteps that make me lose my cool, but I throw my arms around his neck, putting on more of a show when I slide one hand into his silky black hair. I try not to get distracted by how good he smells and focus on what I need to do. But it's an impossible task because his cologne is an alluring blend of leather and spice, intertwining with a subtle undertone of smoky vanilla.

He leans closer, dipping his head toward mine, and I take that as a green light. I go the rest of the way and smash my lips against his.

He's stunned for a few seconds. I can tell by the way his breath stops. My breath stops too because I wasn't expecting his mouth to feel quite like that. I've always considered myself a tall girl, but I have to lift onto my toes to keep my lips pressed against his.

Doing this backfires on me almost instantly because he takes that as *his* green light. His hands slip around my waist, pulling me closer until I'm flush against him. Something about the way his arms coil tighter around me extracts an involuntary moan out of me. I'm convinced that there must be

a switch on my lower back that's intrinsically linked to my mouth. I was unaware of its existence until now. It makes its presence known when his fingers lightly caress that spot, and my lips automatically part in response.

It's another invitation that he does not decline, and I feel his tongue lightly skim the seam of my lips. I should be repulsed. I'm not. I should push him away. I don't. Instead, I angle my head so he can deepen the kiss. What is wrong with me? It's like I've lost autonomy over my body. I don't get much time to question my insanity because I'm ripped away from him a second later.

Teddy is snarling, staring at me with murder in his eyes. "What the fuck are you doing?" he hisses through gritted teeth.

Excellent question, Ted. I should be asking myself the same thing. As soon as I get my hormones to stop raging, I'm sure I'll be utterly disappointed in my behavior. Man, am I going to give myself a good talking to later.

Peter remains silent, looking warily between the two of us as he tries to assess the situation. He's not the only witness to this spectacle. Teddy's reaction has drawn the attention of curious eyes. Patrons have stopped to watch the drama while a few people in the restaurant have put their utensils down to see how all this unfolds. I wanted his friends to see this confrontation, but an audience is an audience, I guess. And if they want a show, I'm going to deliver.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" I force myself to hold back a smile when he cringes at the name. "You seem a little upset."

He cautiously looks around, very aware that people may be close enough to eavesdrop. He lowers his voice to barely a whisper. "I thought I told you to leave."

"And why would I listen to you?"

"I gave you everything. Anything your heart desired, I provided with no hesitation. And this is how you repay me?" His nostrils flare and his voice rises. He no longer seems to care about the people around us and launches into a full-scale attack. "You're traipsing around here dressed like that,

behaving like a slut, and throwing yourself at the first man you see. This is my *business*, and I pride myself on its good reputation. My customers don't come here to watch porn shows. Now leave before I have you forcibly removed from the premises." He sneers, then spins on his heel and stalks off.

Well, that didn't go according to plan. Not that I had much of a plan, but I at least expected some overpowering jealousy. I wanted him to say that I was his and no one else could have me. And that was supposed to be followed by a healthy amount of groveling. To say that his reaction was underwhelming is an understatement.

And not only was I whacked with another slap of rejection, he called me a slut in front of everyone. I see the judgment in their eyes as they go back to their meals. Embarrassment and sheer self-loathing collect in the pit of my stomach, and I just want to curl up into a ball and cry myself to sleep.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that the tradition of using a kiss to wipe the slate clean is a bullshit lie, and not the customary tradition of some faraway land."

I groan inwardly when I hear his voice. I forgot that the player of fields was still standing beside me.

And he heard the entire embarrassing exchange.

I scour the depths of myself, rounding up the last fragments of my pride before I face him again. "No, I'm from...right here...born and bred in California. What gave it away?"

"The accent. The attitude. Pretty much everything. It's a pity, though. I was hoping there was an exotic island somewhere full of women as hot as you."

I just met this guy, and yet I'm not at all surprised by that comment. I don't bother to dignify that with a response, and he continues as if he doesn't see the chagrin on my face.

"So, I take it you just *used* me in that very public act of rebellion against your father?"

My father? How could he possibly think Teddy is my □ Oh! Well, I suppose I'd rather have some stranger thinking Teddy

is my father. He doesn't need to know that I was screwing a married man more than twice my age. It's none of his business, and I'm sure he'd make this situation even more awkward if he knew that tidbit of information.

He waits for a response, and when I remain silent, he probes further. "Did your plan at least work? Did you get the reaction you were hoping for?"

"No. Not really, but thank you for your...contribution."

"Glad to be of service." The crushing disappointment I feel must be showing through the cracks of my very flimsy armor because his amusement is short-lived. "Hey, are you alright? Your dad was kinda brutal earlier. Looks like he struck a nerve."

"I'm fine." Once again, I sidestep the truth because I don't owe him any explanations. "Look, I know I was rude earlier. You absolutely deserved it, but...I'm sorry for dragging you into my mess. Let's just call it even, okay?"

He nods. "Okay."

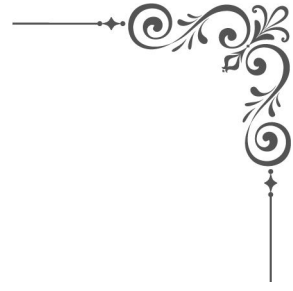
"I'd like to say it was nice to meet you...but we both know that I'd be lying."

"Maybe you should say that you didn't enjoy kissing me, but...oh, yeah, we both know you'd be lying about that, too."

A wink accompanies that statement to drive the point home. And it works. As much as it pains me to admit it, I deserved that. I honestly want to smack that smug look off his face, but he's right.

I can't even argue that point, so I don't. Instead, I let out an annoyed humph to bring the conversation to an end. "Goodbye."

I turn and walk toward the exit.



3. Lia

Gravel crunches beneath my sneakers as I make my way through the parking lot. The thought of returning to my dingy motel room fills me with dread. I summon all my strength to keep the tears of hurt and humiliation at bay.

It's okay, I tell myself. You don't need him. You're gonna be just fine. You're gonna get a job and make a success of yourself. Even with all the odds stacked against you, you will persevere. There will be no more tears shed for Robert Teddrick. You're gonna forget about that asshole and □

“Hey, do you wanna grab a coffee or something, dollface?”

This is the second time the player of fields has interrupted my internal ramblings. I glance to my right to see him walking beside me. It makes me wonder if he'd been there the whole time.

“What? No! Why would I want to go for coffee with you?”

“Because you look like a person whose world has just been crushed, and I think you could use a pick-me-up.”

That sounds like a tiny shred of human decency, a small sign that I may have misjudged him. I stop and turn to face him. “Why do you care? You met me not even ten minutes ago.”

“Woah. Let's not throw around loaded words like that. I don't...*care*. I was supposed to be at the gym right now, but my friends bailed on me. You seem like you're going to spend the rest of the afternoon analyzing all your bad decisions. Both of us have nothing better to do, so let's just go grab a cup of coffee. There's a café across the street.”

He's right. My plan was to go back to my motel room and wallow in despair and regret. I was just going to lie there on my dust-mite-riddled covers, staring at the ceiling as I ponder all the poor life choices I've made to get me to this point. Compared to that, a coffee with Creepazoid over here doesn't seem so bad.

“Will you behave?” I ask.

“Will you?” He winks at me again, and I give him an eye roll. We only take a few steps before he steps in front of me, blocking my path. “Before we leave, I need to ask you something. Don’t take offense, but you look kinda young, and I just want to make sure I’m not doing anything illegal when we leave here. How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-four.” The lie comes out naturally. I’ve said it so many times, I think a part of me believes it. “I mean, I’m twenty...” After a nanosecond of internal debate, I backtrack on the truth because it’s easier than explaining why I’m in the habit of lying about my age in the first place. “Uh...four. Yeah, twenty-four.”

His eyebrows draw together, and a puzzled expression wrinkles his forehead. “That’s what you said the first time.”

“I know.”

I don’t leave an opening for him to ask a follow-up question and continue walking. Bayview Country Club is massive, so it takes almost fifteen minutes for us to trek through the parking lot and across the street to the café. It seems like we missed the lunch crowd because it’s relatively empty. It’s a lot less posh than the country club, but still gives off that elite sort of feel with its vintage furnishings and nautical décor. I shouldn’t be surprised, though. This is an extremely upmarket area, which is why Teddy set up a golf course here.

We request a table outside and the waitress leads us out onto the wooden deck to a semi-shady spot. She leaves us with menus, and Peter opens one up as soon as we sit down.

“So, what are you having, dollface?”

“A vanilla latte. And why do you keep calling me dollface?”

He sits back in his chair and allows the sun to beat down on his face. “Well, for one, you haven’t told me your name yet. And two, you have the face of a porcelain doll. Smooth skin.

Rosy cheeks. Perfect symmetry. Your features are flawless... like a doll.”

I’m not sure why, but I find anything that comes out of his mouth offensive. Maybe that was supposed to be a compliment, but I just can’t take it as one. “Is that your way of trying to hit on me? Because my interest level is below zero.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I was simply making statements that are obvious and observable. If I were *hitting on you*, you’d know it.”

For some reason, that statement intrigues me. I sit back as well, crossing my arms over my chest. “You sound so cocky, but I bet your definition of *hitting* on someone is just feeding them sleazy pickup lines. And with the sheer lack of judgment women have these days, they probably work too.”

The waitress comes to the table to take our order, and after requesting a vanilla latte and a plain black coffee, he resumes the conversation. “Oddly enough, sleazy pickup lines are not in my arsenal, but yes. I have some tried and trusted methods that...*work*.”

“Ballpark percentage...what’s your success rate?”

“Maybe between ninety and ninety-two percent.”

He’s drop-dead gorgeous, so that percentage doesn’t shock me. “Okay, talk me through your *modus operandi*.”

He laughs as if my request is outrageous. “You make it sound so clinical and strategic. I’m not trying to manipulate the woman or the situation, so I don’t have a *modus operandi*. If someone captures my interest, I just walk up to them and strike up a conversation.”

“And it’s that easy for you?” The waitress returns with our order, and I take a sip of my latte. “You don’t have a game plan? First, compliment her eyes, then mention an interesting fact about yourself, and once she’s hooked, you—”

“That’s the kind of shit you find in men’s magazines that help the shy guys come out of their shells, but if you’ve been in the game long enough, you know that stuff like that doesn’t always work. That’s a generic plan meant to encompass all

women, but it doesn't take into account how beautifully unique each one is. A woman who's reserved and shy has to be approached differently to someone who's an extrovert."

He explains these various approaches, and it's amazing how much thought and effort he's put into analyzing different women and how they would react in a situation. Somewhere in the middle of this discussion, we order another round of coffee, and by the time the waitress brings it to our table, I'm confused at my reaction to him. Part of me is appalled and enraged by how flippant he is about being a womanizer. But the other part of me is disturbingly fascinated by every word that leaves his mouth.

"Wow! You are the Chad of all Chads. An absolute Giga Chad."

"Why, thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment."

I scrape the foam off the top of my mug and lick it off my spoon. I only realize how sexually suggestive that gesture is when his eyes zone in on my mouth. There's no subtlety. He makes it known that he's staring at me, and his lips quirk up with amusement when he notices my discomfort.

That smile is so cute, so sexy that it actually flusters me. My cheeks heat up and a bolt of heat runs right through me. I shift in my chair, crossing my legs to ease the tingle that just zapped me there.

"Uh..." I ignore the sudden spike in my hormones and continue as if my face isn't on fire. "So, tell me how you would do it with me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...if we hadn't met the way we did, and you saw me at some bar...hypothetically...how would you approach me?"

He raises an eyebrow. "And what makes you think that you're even my type?"

“You’ve literally told me in four different ways that you find me attractive. I think I’m your type.”

“Can’t argue with that.” He grins, and I have to clamp down my back pocket so my love doesn’t spill over again. How is it possible that he is so good-looking, yet so obnoxious? “How would I approach you? Hm?” He taps his finger against his lips as he thinks it over. “It would depend.”

“On what?”

“Well, it depends on whether I wanted to sleep with you today...or tomorrow...hypothetically, of course.”

Blatant shock causes my mouth to drop open. Is this guy for real? Did he just say that? My lips part to throw back a scathing retaliation, but my brain seems to be malfunctioning because I can’t formulate a response. I take a few seconds to collect myself. Just when I thought he wasn’t that bad. Just when I thought maybe I’d judged him too soon, he goes and says something like that.

I look around to make sure no one eavesdropped on his last sentence and lower my voice so only he can hear my response. “I...I wouldn’t...I wouldn’t *sleep* with you.” My mortification is carried in every stammered syllable. “Not today or tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you would.”

A mixture of astonishment and indignation instantly spikes my heart rate. He’s got some nerve. If I had pearls, I’d be clutching onto them for dear life right now. “I *wouldn’t!* I find you repulsive.”

“Yet equally intriguing.” He says it with the confidence of a man who has never experienced rejection before.

“Listen, I’m sure a guy like you, who holds incredibly high stature in the world of degenerate fuckboys, probably thinks that every woman is going to fall at your feet and cater to your every whim. But I’m different. I’m not like every other girl you screw.”

“You saying that makes you *exactly* like every other girl I screw. It all starts off the same. I hear things like...” He

increases the pitch of his voice to sound more feminine. “I’m demure. I’m sweet. I’m not the type to have a one-night stand.” He takes a sip of his coffee and switches back to his normal voice. “But that’s not how the night ends. The night ends with her on top of me doing things that are neither sweet nor demure.”

The temperature of my blood is reaching boiling point. My face contorts with disgust, and once again, I have to swallow my shock. I don’t have much experience with men, but I’m pretty sure that even if I lived a thousand lifetimes, I would never meet anyone as offensive as him. And this is coming from someone who just got dumped by a married man that was essentially using me as a high-class hooker.

“Are you purposely trying to rile me up, or are you genuinely this misogynistic?”

“I’m not misogynistic. I *love* women.”

That statement is met with a disapproving snort from me. “Whatever. You are definitely the type of guy who just uses women for sex, then dumps them the next day. I don’t think you respect women at all.”

“*Use* is such a harsh word. Using someone is like...it’s like when you kiss a total stranger just to enrage your father. *That’s* using someone.” A haughty smile quirks his lips up because he just effortlessly highlighted my hypocrisy. “What I do is mutually beneficial for both parties. And of course, I respect women. They’re deities, perfect beings with cosmic beauty, far superior to men in every way...but they’re full of shit, and I have a low tolerance for drama, which is why I keep all interactions to a minimum. One night is more than enough.”

I take a long sip of my latte and let out a slow breath, simultaneously releasing the hope that he might actually be a decent human being. “You sound like you studied at Andrew Tate’s Hustler’s University for three years.”

“I graduated top of my class,” he quips. “I’m a renowned professor there now.”

“I bet. I’m sure you majored in whoreographics and aced fuckboyology.”

“I feel like you’re making very disparaging assumptions about me.” He places his hand over his chest as if my comment offended him. “You’re labeling me without even really knowing me.”

“I’m not making assumptions. You’re an open book. Here, let me prove it to you.” I finish my latte, then lean back in my chair. “Do you avoid commitment at all costs?”

“Yes.”

“Do you often hook up with women you barely know?”

“Yes, but□”

“Do you often tell those women that you’ll call them the next day when you have no intention of calling them...*ever*?”

“That may be a slight mischaracterization of□”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” My shoulders lift in an arrogant shrug because my point was so easy to prove. “And there you have it. That’s classic fuckboy behavior. And you look the part, too. Your clothes are pressed and pristine, yet you still look approachable and casual. You’re well-groomed. You’re super good-looking. You’re arrogant and egotistical. You’re basically the textbook definition of a fuckboy.”

“Textbook definition? Then it must be true. And after all that solid scientific evidence you just presented, I’m very inclined to agree with you.” He leans forward to cross his arms over the table. After staring at me for a moment too long, that haughty smile quirks his lips up once more. “But I want to circle back to the part about you thinking I’m super good-looking.”

Shit, did I admit that out loud? “You misinterpreted. I meant *you* think you’re super good-looking.” *Nice save.*

“I don’t, actually. If I had to be honest, all this fuckboy behavior stems from deep-rooted insecurities.”

“And what, pray-tell, could you possibly be insecure about?”

He sighs, his shoulders slumping as if he's carrying the full weight of all his teenage trauma on them. "Well, my jaw is just...not chiseled enough."

A laugh almost pops out of me, but I hold it back. To his credit, he's kinda funny, and I decide to indulge these fabricated insecurities simply because it's a free ticket to fling insults at him. "True. Your jawline is pathetically weak. I don't even know how you chew. What else?"

"I know you really enjoyed them, but I think my lips could be fleshier." He pulls those sexy lips in to stop a smile when he notices me squirm.

I maintain my composure and keep a straight face. "They are too thin, but it's nothing a little collagen can't fix."

"I also have a lazy eye."

Rubbish! His eyes are perfect just like everything else on his stupid, perfect face.

"You're right!" I shift forward, leaning over the table to pretend as if I'm trying to get a better look. "That is one lazy eye. It's probably taking strain just working on your peripheral vision."

He snickers.

"Shit, that eye is so lazy I just wanna yell at it to stop watching Netflix and get a damn job!"

He cracks up, and the sound of his heartfelt laughter makes me crack up, too. His eyes light up, and I hate the fact that the amused expression on his face just made him ten times hotter. I honestly don't understand his appeal. I shouldn't find him as attractive as I do.

He leans closer, gently brushing his thumb over my chin. "Has anyone ever told you that you're really cute, dollface?"

"It's Mahalia. But if that's too tough for you, you can call me Lia."

"Dollface suits you better."

My eyes narrow with vexation. “Is that the best you got? Here I thought you came top of your class in fuckboyology, and you try to hit on me with lines like ‘you’re really cute, *dollface?*’” I snort. “That attempt isn’t getting anything more than a two. I expected more from you.”

“You know, I’m not sure if it’s your overactive imagination or your over-inflated ego that’s causing you to misread the entire situation. I told you earlier. If I were hitting on you, you’d know it.” He says this even as his thumb continues to caress my chin.

I should move away. I should stop getting lost in the intricate gray flecks floating around in the deep green sea of his eyes and shift back. But something about the way he’s looking at me keeps me entranced. He’s not merely looking. He’s studying my every feature. Staring into my eyes with awe. Focusing on my mouth with intent.

Maybe it’s because Teddy just dumped me so brutally, but the appreciation of his gaze is very disarming. I swear, he’s looking at me like I’m the most beautiful woman on Earth. And I know that can’t be true, because supermodels and pageant queens probably account for most of the notches on his bedpost. But that look is overriding all logic and exploiting all my insecurities. That look is exactly the kind of band-aid my shattered self-esteem needs right now.

“So, I’m misreading the way you’re touching me right now?” I ask, sounding slightly breathless.

His thumb gently traces my lower lip. “Yep.”

“And I’m just imagining that you keep moving closer?”

“All in your head.”

I’m starting to see why he aced fuckboyology. The rizz this man possesses is off the charts. He shifts a fraction closer and my breath hitches. Warning bells go off in the pit of my stomach. They feel a lot like butterflies, but I’m sure they’re warning bells, desperately trying to deter me from the trouble sitting right in front of me.

It's hard to listen to the deafening alarms because it wasn't that long ago that his lips were pressed against mine. My mouth definitely remembers that because it begins to tingle, as if it's craving that feeling again. I catch my lower lip between my teeth to suppress the urge, and he smiles. That smile is a clear sign he knows exactly the effect he has on me.

It's enough to snap me out of it. "I still rate it a two."

Another laugh tumbles out of him.

"Whatever that whole act was, it was pathetic. Please ask Mr. Tate for your money back."

He drops his head, using one hand to hide the embarrassment on his face, but light chuckles continue to spurt through his fingers.

"I honestly wish I was more impressed. But you know what? A for effort. You just hang in there and keep trying, and I promise one day, that borderline sleazy cockiness might just come off as charming."

He's still snickering when he finally lowers his hand to look at me again. That playful bickering sets the tone for the rest of the afternoon. It almost shocks me how much I enjoy the verbal jabs that fly back and forth between us. He's fun to talk to and a great distraction from my inner turmoil.

He gives off rich kid vibes, and after some probing, I find out that his dad is a movie producer, so he is unsurprisingly unemployed. That's probably why he has so much time to seduce all these unsuspecting women. He doesn't have any dreams or goals or desire to work, so it seems like he just intends to live off his parent's money for the rest of his life.

He's a bum. A rich bum, but still a bum. And the thing is, he assumes I'm the same. I'm also currently unemployed, and it only reinforces his incorrect assumption that I'm the spoiled daughter of a country club owner. I still can't bring myself to admit the truth. I've been judging him so harshly based on his relationships (or lack thereof).

Imagine what he'd say if he found out about my relationship with Teddy. Or rather my affair, because I was

technically the mistress. He'd never believe that I was genuinely in love with a man who is more than twice my age, and I doubt he'd believe that I was completely unaware of his wife and kids. The only logical conclusion he could draw is that I'm a gold-digging home-wrecker, and I'm too emotionally exhausted to convince him otherwise.

I only realize that we've been talking for four hours when the waitress asks if we're ready to order dinner. I decline because it's getting late. It's time for me to put on my big girl panties, go back to that dreary motel room, and come to terms with the fact that my very cushy life is now lost to me forever.

Peter pays the bill, and I walk with him back to the country club parking lot to get his car. I can't say that I'm surprised when he stops in front of the passenger door of an electric blue Bugatti Chiron, but I have to make a conscious effort to not let my mouth drop open. Dayum! His parents hooked him up good.

"Hey, where are you parked?" he asks as he unlocks the car.

I used to drive a Porsche convertible, but Teddy took that back, too. "I'm just gonna get a taxi."

"Do you want me to give you a ride?"

There's no way I'm going to let him see the dump I currently live in. "No, thanks. I'm good."

"Oh...okay." He shifts uncomfortably on the balls of his feet, and it seems like he's stalling. "Well, I had a great time."

"It was sort of an average experience for me." I lie, stretching my hand out to shake his. "But thanks for the coffee."

He chuckles, looking down at my hand, and after a brief pause, he reaches out to shake it. "You know...I'm not ready to let the night end just yet. Are you?"

"It's getting late. I really should—"

He subtly tightens his hand on mine, so I don't pull away. "I have a beach house not too far from here. You wanna hang

out for a little longer? We can get some pizza, watch the sunset. What do you say?"

What he means is his parents own a beach house close by, but the question still makes me reconsider my options. Dingy motel? Pizza? Dingy motel? Sunset on the beach? Dingy motel? Big, broad overly sexualized male?

That's where my brain pauses to think about whether I want to jump into a car with a virtual stranger and let him take me to an undisclosed location. Then again, he isn't the creep I initially thought he was, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy his company.

"If I agree," I begin cautiously, "I want to make sure you don't have any...*expectations*."

His eyebrows furrow together. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...I already told you I won't sleep with you, and I want to make sure you fully understand what *no* means before I get in the car."

For the first time today, he looks genuinely offended. He releases my hand and is silent for a long time before he responds. "Take a good look at me," he says, purposely keeping his voice low to hide his anger. He steps closer, encroaching on my personal space, and my heart rate kicks up a notch. "Do I look like the kind of guy who would *ever* need to force himself on a woman?"

As much as that bout of arrogance annoys me, I answer honestly. "No, but you look like the kind of guy who's never heard *no* before. I'm not sure your brain can even process rejection. What if it explodes?"

That earns me a small smirk, and the tension dissipates. "Well, I've already accepted your rejection without any injury to my brain." He steps back and opens the passenger door. "Now, are you gonna get in the car, dollface? Promise I won't bite...unless you want me to."

I roll my eyes as I push past him to get into the car. "I want extra cheese."

He smiles. "Sure."

We drive to a pizza place a few blocks away and order a large pizza with extra cheese. It's not even a five-minute drive from the pizza place to his beach house, and I'm rendered speechless when he parks his car in front of an immaculate double-story home. It's gorgeous, but because I'm supposed to be a spoiled, rich brat too, I pretend I'm only mildly impressed.

"Nice place you have here," I say, stepping out of the car.

"Thanks." He picks up a rock from the floor, but it's actually a case disguised as a rock. He takes out a key and unlocks the door.

"You just hide the key there?"

He shrugs. "Yeah. I don't always remember to carry the key around with me, so it's just easier like this."

He leads me inside and it's even more beautiful than the outside. All the furniture is white or a blend of neutral colors, making the whole place look pristine and sophisticated. Yet the light wood of the floors and walls gives it a cozy, homely feel. There are very few exterior walls. Most of the house is enclosed in glass sliding doors, so there's a view of the beach from almost every room.

He enters the kitchen and heads straight for the fridge. "Do you want a beer? I think I may even have wine. I need to check, though."

I'm not even the legal age to drink yet. "Soda's good for me."

He takes out two sodas and elbows the fridge door shut, then walks past me to the staircase. "Let's go upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"Yeah. To my bedroom."

"Your what?"

It must be my flabbergasted expression that pulls a laugh out of him. "Relax. There's just a better view from up there."

I nod and follow him upstairs. He wasn't lying. The view that greets me when I enter his bedroom takes my breath away. He opens the glass sliding door that leads out to his balcony. It's like nothing I've ever seen before. The clean, sophisticated style I saw downstairs carries over to the outdoor area, complemented by the light gray stone and white furniture.

A mini-garden and a small roof-top pool are on the left. On the right is a plush white, round rattan outdoor sofa bed in front of a gas fireplace. The setting sun eases the oppressive July heat and transforms the sky into a vast canvas of cotton candy clouds, streaked with bursts of peach and lavender.

"Wow." I inhale a deep breath as I take in the beauty in front of me. "You must watch the sunset from up here every day."

"Nah. I actually live in Pasadena. This is more of a leisure home. I come here when I want to surf...or getaway to relax."

I have to bite my tongue to not make a comment about that. He's *unemployed*! He has no business living like this. Life is so unfair.

"This smells amazing." Peter sits down on the sofa bed, stretching his long legs across the cushions as he opens the pizza box. "Have a seat."

The sofa bed is large enough to accommodate about four people, so there's still sufficient space between us when I sit down. I make myself comfortable leaning against the backrest and stretching my legs out as well. We chat as we eat our pizza and watch the waves crash against the shore. The topics change effortlessly, without any stilted pauses, though there's still a moderate amount of verbal jabs between us.

"Sometimes I think I would've been amazing in a boy band," he says.

"Nope," I reply, still chewing. "Members of boy bands are usually sweet and...loveable."

"Not all of them. The band needs variety. I would be the broody one with the sexy smolder."

"Let me see the smolder."

He pouts his lips and lifts an eyebrow. “Sexy, right?”

I’ll admit, it’s pretty damn cute, but I’m not going to stroke his already inflated ego. “Meh. It’s okay. And I guess you need the smolder to compensate for your lack of talent. I bet you can’t even sing.”

“Of course I can. And I can play, like, three musical instruments.”

“Oh, crap!” I look down at my shirt. “What a mess.”

“What’s wrong? Cheese grease?”

“No, you just got your bullshit all over me.” I pretend as if I’m trying to wipe it off. “That’s gonna leave a stain.”

“Some baking soda and vinegar will lift that right out,” he fires back. “But fine. If you want the truth. I can’t play any instruments, and my singing voice is mediocre at best, but that’s all you really need to be in a boy band.”

The conversation takes a weird turn from there, and we end up debating whether real talent even exists in a world when everything is so fake. He believes AI has made us lose respect and appreciation for natural ability. As the evening progresses, I realize that he’s not just fun to talk to, he’s fascinating. Being unemployed has afforded him time to learn a lot about a wide range of random things. He seems to have the memory of an elephant because he’s stored all this information and is able to regurgitate facts and statistics on a whim.

We speak about movies, and he tells me about which year it was produced, the actors who won Oscars, and how much it made at the box office. We speak about art, and he tells me which pieces came from the Renaissance era and how much they would sell for now. He’s just a treasure trove of fun facts, and he sprouts these out in such a natural way that he never dominates the conversation, nor does he come across as a know-it-all. If anything, he downplays his intelligence by throwing in silly jokes. It’s kind of charming.

He’s also earning points by being a perfect gentleman. There’s some occasional touching, and I’m not totally

convinced they're accidental. But apart from a light brush against my thigh or the caress of my forearm, he's maintaining a respectable distance.

Somehow, this makes me feel more comfortable around him. I get so engrossed in the conversation that I lose track of time. Every twenty minutes, I tell myself that it's enough and I need to leave, but then I just sit there and continue talking.

The sun disappeared some time ago. Stars are twinkling overhead, and the dark navy sky is a reminder that I've been here way too long, yet I still make no attempt to stand up.

"The 1933 version of *Little Women* was perfect the way it was," Peter complains. "There was no need for another three adaptations after that."

"Another *three*?"

If he says there were three adaptations, I believe him. I don't need verification. I only ask as a prompt because I really like listening to him. His voice is a rich, velvety rumble, deep yet mellow and perfectly pitched. I find it so soothing, and when mixed with the sound of the waves in the background, I reach a state of relaxation I didn't think was possible today.

"Yeah," he replies. "If we ignore the two silent movies and the smaller TV adaptations, they did a remake in 1949, 1994, and 2019. No one can replace Katharine Hepburn, so all efforts to do so were futile. It's an absolute travesty that she didn't win an Oscar for that movie."

I smile to myself because he didn't even pause to think of those dates. It's all there, right at his fingertips. I drop my head back against the cushy backrest and look up at the stars. "It sounds like you have a crush on her."

"Of course. Who wouldn't? I disagree with the entire concept of marriage, but if I met her back in the thirties, I would've wifed her up so fast."

I roll my head to look at him. "What do you have against marriage? I would love nothing more than to settle down with a good, faithful man who loves me and cherishes me and... looks after me. And I would look after him, too. My mom was

a housewife, and it was amazing to have her at home all the time. If I have kids one day, I want at least four—”

His eyes almost pop out of his head. “*Four?*”

“Yeah, four...as a minimum. I’m an only child, so I don’t want my child to grow up without siblings. And I want to give my kids and my husband the same life that my mom gave me and my dad.”

“And what kind of life is that?”

“She was a GP, but she gave it up when I was born. She started practicing again when I started high school, but only in the mornings, so she could still pick me up from school. She’d take me to martial arts—”

He’s impressed by this. “You do martial arts?”

“Yeah, Eskrima. But I only made it to blue belt before...” My whole world came crashing down around me “...I stopped. But yeah, she took me to all my lessons, helped me with my homework. We cooked together every afternoon. Dinner was ready when my dad got home from work, and we’d eat together and talk about our day. That’s the kind of life I want to give my husband and kids one day.”

His eyebrows pinch together. “You sound like *you’re* from the thirties, dollface. Are you sure you’re not some mystic time traveler? No one talks like that these days.”

I shrug. “Well, I really want to have a family.” Because I miss being part of one. “And I want to find someone who loves me unconditionally...the way my dad loved my mom.” Memories of them cuddling on the couch and washing dishes together float through my mind, and the images feel distant, almost abstract. I miss them so much. I swallow the lump in my throat and force myself to continue. “I want someone who won’t treat me like...a side chick. I want him to be totally committed to me, and I would be one hundred percent committed to him.”

Even as the words leave my mouth, I know it’s just an elaborate fantasy. In reality, the guy would probably use me for sex because his *real* wife made him feel inadequate.

“You’re kidding me, right?” He stares at me for a long time, a mixture of shock and annoyance playing on his face. “You’re only twenty-four. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. Why would you even think about settling down at this age? This is your prime. You need to...fuck around and enjoy life. Marriage and commitment can wait ‘til you’re thirty.”

“So, what? Are you suggesting that I waste the best years of my life on guys like you?”

“Yes! I can assure you, I’m the best mistake some women have ever made.”

It’s his exasperation that instantly lifts my mood. “I’m sure you are,” I reply with a giggle. “But I’m not one of them. I have no interest in making *any* mistakes with you.”

“Well, that makes two of us. I have no intention of making any mistakes with you either. Like, I’ve been dying to kiss you for the last seven and a half hours, but I’ve had to fight this crazy urge because acting on it would be a *huge* mistake. You’re so full of yourself, you’d probably misinterpret that and think that I’m into you or something.”

I pause for a moment, my mind doing the mental gymnastics necessary to comprehend that statement. Oh, this guy is smooth. A playful smirk twitches at the corners of his lips, but he keeps a straight face, only throwing a naughty side glance in my direction.

“Are you...” I hesitate. “Are you into me?”

“No.” He shifts his arm, absentmindedly caressing my thigh with the back of his hand before his eyes meet mine. “But I really wanna be.”

The corniness of that statement rips laughter straight from my chest. It’s a guttural sound, loud enough to echo, and that cracks him up too. “One!” I shout through spurts of giggles. “That line gets a one from me. Did you take that straight from the pervanomics playbook?”

“It was a direct quote from chapter three.”

“Please ask Mr. Tate for your money back.”

His body quakes, and he drops his forehead against my shoulder. Just like before, it's a way of hiding his embarrassment. "I really thought that one would work."

"No, you didn't."

"I didn't." He lifts his head to look at me. "I just like hearing your laugh."

His eyes collide with mine, those jade orbs stripping away all my defenses. He shifts closer, which is my cue to shift back, but I don't move a muscle when he raises his hand to cup my face.

"I wasn't lying, though," he whispers. "I really wanna kiss you again. And the way you keep looking at me is making it almost impossible to control this urge. So, I'm gonna lean in... and leave it up to you to stop me."

I'm not surprised by my body's reaction to him because it's already happened a few times today. He dips his head toward mine, moving closer millimeter by millimeter. My heart rate picks up when his warm breath tickles my lips. "I should stop you."

"But you won't."

I don't. His lips touch mine, and I can't even muster a feeble protest. I still think he's somehow wired my body to respond to him because the satisfied groan he lets out entices my lips to part beneath his. He accepts the invitation, but he's neither hesitant nor overly eager when he slips his tongue into my mouth.

He kisses me slowly, leisurely, casting a spell over me. That spell turns my mouth into an insatiable void. I can't seem to get enough of him, of the magic passing between our lips. His hand drops from my face, and he lightly traces his fingertips over my knee. His touch is electric, and I feel the current spread through my veins.

He grasps my thigh, and in one swift motion, he pulls me on top of him, straddling my legs over his hips. I gasp, the sturdiness of his frame catching me off-guard. I blame my lack of experience for being so unprepared. Teddy didn't feel like

this. Where he was a little flabby, a bit pudgy around his midriff, Peter is just solid muscle. The arms looped around me are strong. The hands now cupping my ass are firm. And the cock pulsing between my legs is so very hard. Again, I'm going to blame my inexperience because I thought I had to... *work* to get him to this state of arousal.

The grip on my ass tightens, and he rocks my hips against him. A moan staggers out of me when his mouth moves lower, closing over that sweet spot at the base of my neck. I don't know how or when he did it, but the buttons on my shirt are undone. He takes a second to strip off his T-shirt, and the sight of him is just...spectacular. I barely get a chance to admire the beauty of every sculpted muscle before his hand slips beneath my bra to cup my breast. My moans grow louder as my body writhes against him.

My fingers slide into his silky black hair, pressing his mouth harder against my neck until he gives me what I'm silently begging for. He sucks hard before his teeth sink into my tender skin.

"Peter," I moan, and it's the ardency in my voice that makes me stop.

That didn't sound anything like me...because this isn't *me*. I don't do things like this. What is wrong with me? I rip away from him, scrambling to get off the sofa bed as quickly as I can.

"We...we..." I'm panting, struggling to get the words out. "We need to stop."

He stares at me wide-eyed, surprise and confusion playing with his expression. "Yeah. Okay. Sure."

"I don't know what came over me, but this can't continue."

He nods, still looking shell-shocked. "Okay."

"This isn't me. I mean...I'm not the type to do stuff like this. I don't go home with random guys I just met." The light breeze on my skin reminds me that my shirt is undone, and I quickly grip the front to cover myself. "I certainly don't *sleep*

with random guys I just met. I'm not the kind of girl who would even consider having a one-night stand."

His ravenous gaze sweeps over me from top to bottom, and he swallows hard, as if he's trying to compose himself. "Maybe..." He sounds as breathless as me. "Maybe you can make an exception just this once. No one will ever know."

"I'll know!"

"Yeah." He throws his head back, groaning like he's in physical pain. "You're right." He runs both hands down his face, then looks at me again. "But what if...what if we didn't have sex? What if...you just let me...strip you naked and...you know...I could..." His hands curl into tight fists, and it looks like it's taking every ounce of his self-control to keep them restrained. "And...uh...Sorry...Now I'm picturing you naked and...ah, fuck, I'm so horny right now I can't even... Where was I? Oh, yeah...no sex. Just...just be naked...and then my hands and...my mouth...all over your body. I mean... that would work, wouldn't it?"

My brain didn't make a lick of sense of any of that, but my body understood every word. Images of him touching me race through my mind, igniting a spark of desire I've never felt before. An explosion detonates a moment later, the heat of it rippling over every inch of my skin. I want him so bad, but I shouldn't fall into temptation. I'm in a weird space today, and I'm letting that cloud my judgment. I need to leave before I do something I regret. If Teddy changes his mind in a few days and wants to give us another try, I don't want this night to taint our relationship.

"I should go," I say, buttoning up my shirt as I walk back into his bedroom.

"Shit," he curses, shuffling off the sofa bed to follow me inside. "Look, I'm sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. I shouldn't have—"

"It's not you." I spin around to face him, colliding with the hard contours of his pecs, and I step back so I don't throw myself at him. That bulge is still jutting out of his jeans, and it's making me want the very thing I'm actively trying to avoid

tonight. I force my eyes back up to look at him. “It’s me. See, the thing is, I’m sort of coming out of a...complicated relationship. It ended badly. Very, *very* badly. He made me feel stupid and worthless...and he was basically just using me for sex.”

“I’m sorry. He sounds like a jerk. You deserve better.” He takes a step toward me, and I place my hand on his chest to stop him.

“Just stay right there, okay? Because every time you get near me, it seems like I lose my ability to formulate rational, coherent thoughts.”

He smirks, those green eyes dancing playfully. “Okay.”

“So, what I’m trying to say is...uh...” My eyes drop to his crotch again, and I keep imagining— *No!* “I’m in a vulnerable space right now...”

He places his hand over mine. “Uh-huh.”

“And that makes me *very* susceptible to the charms of...of a guy like you.”

He slowly pushes my hand down, and I watch as he drags my fingers over the hard bumps of his abs. “A guy like me is definitely going to exploit those vulnerabilities.”

The bulge in his pants seems to be getting bigger. My eyes stay focused on it for a second too long before springing back up to meet his. “Exactly!” *Oh, God. How good would he feel inside me? Snap out of it, woman! Just walk away.* “And while I would ordinarily be able to stave off the advances of the average fuckboy, my self-esteem is at an all-time low today. I am in no way equipped to handle a manwhore of your caliber. I’m in the minor league. I can’t go up against a major league player.”

“I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

“I’m saying that I’m blurring the lines here. All these urges I’m feeling aren’t *real* lust because that comes from an emotional connection, which we don’t have. And yeah, I find you attractive, but I don’t *want* to. That’s just poor judgment from my side. Maybe...maybe I enjoyed your company today

because a part of me is just seeking validation. And the problem is, the way you're looking at me is *so*...validating. You look at me like...like..."

"Like you're the hottest woman I've ever seen?" he fills in. "Yeah, that's pretty accurate."

"Shut up! Just shut your stupid, perfect mouth. I don't wanna hear any form of praise from you. What you're telling me is the opposite of what I need right now."

His strong arms slip around my waist to pull me closer. "You're flushed. Your breaths are heavy. And you keep looking down at my dick. If I'm reading your body language correctly, I think I can give you *exactly* what you need right now."

I try not to be tempted by those words, shutting my eyes to the sight of his face and his chest and his—

My thoughts come to a screeching halt when I feel his mouth on mine. My willpower has obviously reached the end of its lifespan because I don't even hesitate. I kiss him with all the fire burning within me. It takes about thirty seconds before I come to my senses and push him away.

"What are you doing? I have to go."

His jaw clenches, and he releases a slow breath. "Okay. I'll take you home."

I head toward the door, but I am so flustered, so high on lust that my body is point-blank refusing to accept that this is how the night is going to end. After five steps, I reverse course, spin around, and slam my lips on his. Although surprised, he dives right in and kisses me again.

This time it lasts longer, but the second his hands move up to unbutton my shirt, I shove him away again. "I can't," I say, exhaling as if I've just run a marathon. "I can't have a one-night stand. I just met you. I don't even know your last name."

He grits his teeth and forces a smile. "Don't get me wrong. This internal conflict that you're playing out *externally* is really cute, super adorable...but I'm fucking hard as granite right now, and I need you to make a decision."

I weigh up all the pros and cons, and even though I may regret not having incredible sex with this amazing specimen of a man, I'll probably regret it more if I go through with it. I subdue my raging hormones and exhale a slow breath to release the tension in my body.

"I think...I think I should go."

The disappointment shows on his face, but he nods. "Yeah."

"I had a really good time tonight."

He smiles and nods again. "Me too."

I walk to the door, but as I open it, he comes up behind me and slams it shut. His chest presses against my back and the hard ridge of his cock rubs against my ass. A big hand slides around my waist, stretching across my abdomen before he slowly undoes the button of my denim shorts. I let him. No, I encourage him by grinding my ass against his pelvis. My breath catches when his fingers slip beneath the waistband and into my panties.

He groans when he reaches my entrance and feels how wet I am. My head falls back against his chest when his fingers slide inside me.

"What if..." His voice is strained with desire. Fevered breaths tickle my ear, heating my skin as they cascade down my neck and over my shoulders. "What if I fuck you again tomorrow? Then it wouldn't be just one night."

Sold!

Logic has left the chat.

I stop resisting. I stop overthinking, turn around, and launch myself into the abyss of poor life choices. Cupping my head in his hand, I feel the ravenous lust raging through him when his mouth covers mine. He lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around him as he carries me over to his king-size bed.

We collapse in the middle with a thud. His rough stubble scrapes my skin as his teeth sink into my neck. Despite his impatience, he doesn't rush. His hands are attentive, leisurely

moving from one erogenous zone to the next. His touch is all-encompassing, and I can't keep track of which part of my body is sending pleasure waves to my brain.

He strips off my shirt and proves that he's bilingual by undoing the clasp in the front with one hand. He stops then, shifting back onto his knees to look at me. With aching slowness, he brushes one cup aside and then the other, sucking in a breath as he slowly reveals my breasts. For a moment, he just stares at them. His eyes flick to mine, then drop back to my chest.

"Take off your shorts," he says without making eye contact.

His penetrative stare makes me self-conscious, but I shirk away my nervousness, lift my hips off the bed, and shimmy out of my shorts.

"And your panties."

This is something I'm not used to. He's watching me so intently, razor-focused on my every movement. His gaze is palpable. I can feel it searing my skin as it skims over me. I hook my thumbs into the seams of my panties, and my hands are clumsy as I drag them down my legs.

He groans, biting down on his lower lip to stifle the sound. His hand moves lower, rubbing the bulge in his jeans. "Now, spread your legs for me."

The timbre of his voice holds a smoky rasp, so thick with lust, my core clenches at the sound. It wraps around my senses, leaving me tingling all over. My breathing elevates in time with his, and I'm rigid when I move my knees about an inch apart.

He leers at me, seemingly amused by my discomfort. "A little more than that."

I spread my legs another inch, and his grin widens. Damn, he's got a sexy grin. It's doing terrible things to me. I'm flushed on the outside and a scorching hot mess on the inside.

He waits a few seconds, and when I remain still, he chuckles softly to himself. "Let me help you with that." He

places a hand on each of my knees, spreading them further apart until I'm on full display to him. His breath hitches. "You're so wet."

It wasn't necessary to state that observation out loud because it makes me acutely aware of my body's reaction to him. And my body's reaction inadvertently fuels his body's reaction to me. He rubs himself harder as his eyes rove over every inch of my bare skin.

Leaning forward, he kisses the inside of my left thigh, and I stiffen. He lifts his head to look up at me. "Have you never done this before, dollface?"

I'm no virgin, but I've never experienced anything like this before. It's not like Teddy didn't go down on me. It just wasn't something he did often. We were both always more focused on *his* pleasure, so I thought this would be the same. A quick three-minute endeavor where I hopefully orgasmed at the end. It's always a gamble with that, so I was keeping my expectations low. But I was certainly not prepared for this kind of lingering intensity.

My ignorance is obvious, but I try to cover it up. "I have... I just... This is different. No one has ever...*studied* me this way before. It's...unsettling."

This admission intrigues him. Pressing a fist into the mattress, his large body comes over me. His lips ghost across my cheek before moving down my neck. "Do I make you nervous?" he whispers against the hollow of my ear.

I swallow, trying to gulp down more air. "Very."

He lowers his head to take one swollen nipple into his mouth, and he lightly grazes it with his teeth. "Do I make your heart race?"

"Yes," I reply breathlessly.

"Do I make you wet?"

Why is he asking this question when he already knows the answer? I shut my eyes, my face flushing with embarrassment. "Yes."

“I think you should accept the fact that I can make your body do a lot of things.” Inch by inch, his mouth creeps lower down my stomach, circling around my belly ring. “I’m gonna make you scream. I’m gonna make you cum. And when I’m done...” His eyes flick up to meet mine. “...I’m gonna make you wanna do it all over again.” That sexy grin curves on his lips once more. “Are you ready?”

Somehow, he replaces my uneasiness with exigency. At this point, my body is a ball of crackling nerve endings. My heart is beating erratically. My pulse is skittering all over the place. Every cell feels like it’s carrying an electric charge. I’m so turned on I can’t even speak. All I can do is nod.

With a satisfied smirk, he dips his head between my legs. His tongue strokes over my core, the heat of his mouth making me dizzy. Pleasure surges through my body. Cupping my ass, he lifts my hips off the bed and my back arches when he leisurely massages my clit. With languid dexterity, his tongue snakes down, moving between my folds before probing inside me.

“*Ohhh...Peter...*” I cry out.

My moans are high-pitched and needy, so loud I don’t even recognize my own voice. My hands twist in his hair as my hips rock against his mouth. He sets my body on fire. I’m engulfed in the flames of passion, becoming increasingly impatient for more.

I’m not sure if he senses it, but he reaches into his pocket for a condom. It should make me reconsider my decision because the fact that he casually carries condoms around with him speaks volumes about his character. But it doesn’t deter me at all. My body is tingling with anticipation as I watch him strip off his jeans and slip on the condom.

Once it’s on, he crawls over me again, the thin film of perspiration on his chest moistening my skin. The thick head of his cock presses against my entrance, and my breathing elevates. A mixture of anxiousness and excitement pumps fiercely through my veins. What I’m about to do scares me, but at the same time, it thrills me to my very soul.

He stops, keeping his eyes on mine. “You’re nervous again.”

I like that he notices even the smallest changes in my body. “Just a little.”

“Okay. I won’t rush.” He brushes my hair off my forehead before lightly kissing my lips. “And my last name is Danahay.”

Those two short sentences turn me to mush inside. “I needed to know that.”

“I know.” A small smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “Now, take a deep breath.”

His voice is soft, but it’s the authority in his tone that compels me to listen. I inhale, and as I exhale, he pushes inside me. The pressure is so intense that the tail-end of that single exhale turns into a drawn-out moan. He’s so tantalizingly thick that I clamp around him, my body desperate to keep his cock right where it is.

“Fuck.” The guttural sound rumbles against my ear, his teeth grating my tender skin as he bites into my shoulder. “I wasn’t ready for that.”

His voice is strained, and his shoulders are tense, but he maintains a slow, steady pace. Somehow, that allows me to experience every sensation. I feel the depth of each thrust, the searing heat of his mouth as it claims mine. I hear the hoarseness of his groans, the raggedness of every breath he draws as his hips hit against mine. I taste the saltiness of his skin, and when those jade eyes lock on mine, I see him lost in ecstasy. I see how much pleasure he takes in my body. And I want to indulge in that feeling to the fullest.

“More,” I beg. “*Please...* give me more.”

He snaps, his control disintegrating almost instantly. He presses my thigh down toward the mattress, spreading me wider so I can take the full force of him.

“Is this what you want?” he rasps.

My response is an aching whimper.

Oh, God. This man definitely understood the assignment. He pumps harder, his thrusts becoming more rapid, and my nails rake down his back. The sensations compound, escalating minute by minute until they explode, rippling through my body as an orgasm takes over. It doesn't take long before he drops his forehead against mine, his fingers tightly clutching my thigh as he climaxes.

But the night doesn't end there. He told me he would make me want to do it all over again. And I do. I want more of him. All of him.

We're insatiable, and there's a common goal between us. We're trying to extract every drop of pleasure out of this one night, and we don't stop until our bodies collapse with exhaustion. He falls asleep first, and I lie there, stroking my fingers across his chest as I listen to his deep, rhythmic breathing.

After my breakup with Teddy earlier, I didn't think my night would play out like this. I was supposed to be in a dingy motel room, and yet here I am, lying naked on a king-sized bed next to...

Next to some guy I met just a few hours ago. The thought jolts me out of my lust-induced stupor. What the hell am I doing?

No, not *doing*.

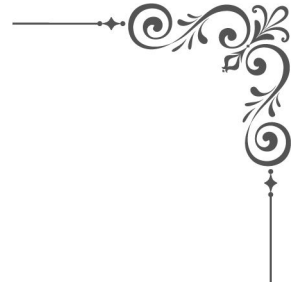
What have I *done*?

The last time I had sex with Teddy was 4th of July weekend. That was just two weeks ago. The sheets aren't even cold yet, and I'm already in bed with another man. What is wrong with me? If my parents were alive, they'd be so disappointed with the woman I'm becoming.

Guilt and shame well up inside me. I can't say I regret it, but this is definitely not something I would *ever* do again. I'm going to take his suggestion, jot this down as the best mistake I've ever made, and leave it at that.

Very carefully, I pull away from him and scooch off the bed without waking him. I move quietly around the room,

gathering my discarded clothes, and after re-dressing, I sneak out.



4. Peter

I'm not annoyed. I'm confused. Maybe my confusion is causing my annoyance, but I'm not going to misplace that. I'm more annoyed with myself than with her. I was surprised when I woke up on Thursday morning in an empty bed. It kinda feels like she played me. She was the one who insisted that she didn't want a one-night stand, so to *not* find her in my bed the next morning was...well, it was a shock. I thought we sort of had a spark.

A spark? What the hell am I even thinking? There was no *spark*. I had a nice evening with a woman who's kinda cute... hella cute...Shit, who am I trying to fool? She's fucking stunning. Like, out of this world stunning. Like stops the air in my lungs kind of stunning.

But that in itself is not a unique quality. I've seen a lot of hot women in my life. They're not hard to find, especially in California. This place is crawling with them. Every model or wannabe actress passes through here, so it's not a rarity to turn *any* corner and bump into a beautiful woman.

Lia is just another one of those women. No biggie. Dime a dozen, right? Granted, there aren't dozens of women walking around with big, beautiful, striking hazel-brown eyes like that. And I certainly haven't met a dozen women — or even *one* other woman — who has a body quite like that.

Long, lean legs...

Round, perky tits...

Smooth, supple skin...

Full, luscious lips...

She's got a sweet, girl-next-door kind of face, but those lips...

Fuck me. Those lips have no business being on a face like that. That face creates the illusion of innocence and wholesomeness, but those lips are an instant trigger of lascivious thoughts. They're plump, kissable, and ineffably

softer than they look. Those are the kind of lips that get teenage boys hooked on porn. The kind of lips that play on your mind all day until the constant fantasy of how good they would feel around your cock becomes so painful and severe that you end up jerking off in the shower.

Not saying I did that...

Fine. I just did that.

I'm not proud.

And then, to top it all off, she's witty and has a laugh I could listen to for hours. That laugh is accompanied by a tiny dimple on the apple of her left cheek just below the corner of her eye. It's the oddest place for a dimple, but damn, is it cute.

Maybe that's a little unique. Maybe all those things combined make her stand out a tiny bit. I don't know. All I know is that I've had a constant boner since Thursday morning because I haven't been able to stop thinking about her. I'm sure it's not even *her* that's got me reeling like this.

I hate to admit it, but she was right. My brain has trouble processing rejection. Waking up alone was an obvious blow to my ego, and I have to be man enough to admit that *that's* what's bothering me. Not her.

I turn off the shower and step out, wrapping a towel around my waist. Dylan's bachelor party is tonight, so I'm just going to push her out of my mind and enjoy a Saturday night out with my friends. Some booze. Some dancing. Some women. She'll be forgotten by morning.

After drying myself off, I pull on a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and a slim-fit mahogany leather jacket. Dylan is in the kitchen waiting for me when I walk downstairs. It's embarrassing how excited he is, considering that this is a *joint* party for him and Isabella. Who does that? A bachelor party is supposed to be a night filled with filth and depravity. I wanted strippers and cigars and copious amounts of alcohol. But Dylan believes that his fiancé's tits are the only tits he should ever see, so we have to settle for wholesome PG13 fun.

“Where’s Scott?” I ask, tugging up the sleeves of my jacket.

“Outside. I asked him to call Bella and tell her we were leaving to make sure she’s ready by the time we get there.”

“We could just ditch her and have a real party tonight.”

He doesn’t even respond to that and heads out the front door. Scott is already seated in the limousine parked in my driveway and hangs up the phone when we get in.

“How you doin’ over there, Scott?” Dylan asks as he shuts the door. “You’re looking a little pale...like the ghost of girlfriend’s past has come back to haunt you.”

Scott narrows his eyes at him as if he’s strangling Dylan in his mind. Although Scott is a math teacher, his buzz cut and broad shoulders make him look like a marine. That alone makes his threatening stare look more dangerous than it is. “Fuck off, Dyl.”

Scott’s tone is one I’ve used on Dylan many times before. His annoying habits have a way of pulling those kinds of retorts out of us. It’s not necessary for him to rag on Scott right now. The night is going to be awkward as all hell without any help from him. Scott dated Isabella’s sister, Catalina, back in high school, and she’s coming along on our PG13 adventure tonight. He hasn’t seen her since they broke up five years ago, and Dylan, being the jerk that he is, is not making the situation any easier.

Look, on the upside, I’m glad he’s feeling better. We were playing basketball earlier today, as we do every second Saturday. But Dylan was out of it today. When we pressed him, he said he found out that he can’t have kids. A confession like that just out of the blue totally killed his usual happy vibe, and he was still a little depressed when we left the court. These jabs at Scott prove that he’s back in high spirits, but are they really necessary?

“No need to be a dick,” I say, and Dylan’s eyebrows rise at the comment.

“Dick behavior begets dick behavior. Just ask him about the voice note he sent to me after I got divorced.”

Scott drops his head and snickers. “If that’s the standard... I deserve everything he throws at me, Pete.”

He changes the topic before Dylan adds more fuel to the fire, and we talk about sports until we stop outside Isabella’s house fifteen minutes later. The widest grin takes over Dylan’s face the second he sees his fiancé. She is wearing a skimpy red number, and he can’t keep his eyes off her as she climbs into the limo and sits down beside him.

Catalina and Isabella’s best friend, Tommy, come in after her and seat themselves between me and Scott. Although there is a slight sizzle of tension between Cat and Scott, they don’t say much to each other.

“Oh, my God!” Dylan shouts. “I am the luckiest guy in the world. My fiancé is so hot! I can’t wait to marry you.”

It takes an insane amount of effort to not roll my eyes. I don’t know if what he said is corny, pathetic or...kinda sweet. “I’m sure you’re counting down the number of sleeps like a child before Christmas.” Grabbing a bottle of champagne from the small bar fridge next to me, I unwrap the top and pop it open. I pour everyone a glass, then raise mine to the happy couple. “To the future Mr. and Mrs. De Lorenzo.”

“How about we start the night off with a drinking game?” Tommy suggests after gulping down his champagne. He’s boisterous and eccentric, so I already know how this game is going to go. “Pete, did you bring the tequila?”

“Got it right here.” I hand him the bottle he asked me to bring, along with a saltshaker and a plate of sliced lime.

“Alright,” Tommy begins with a wide smirk. “So, I’m going to ask both of you a few questions. You get it wrong; you take a shot. You get it right, the rest of us take a shot.” He takes out a piece of paper from his pocket. “Dylan, you’ll go first. Okay, what is Isabella’s weirdest sex kink?”

Scott almost chokes on his laughter. “Diving right in there, Tommy. You’re not gonna even ease them into it? That’s going

hard-core with no lube.”

“Lube is for sissies, Scotty.” He turns back to Isabella. “And you better bite the pillow, bitch, because I am going in *dry!*” His eyes return to Dylan. “I’m waiting.”

“Um...I don’t know how to answer that. Isabella and I haven’t had sex yet because...we’re waiting for marriage.”

Tommy rolls his eyes. “Dylan, nobody in this car believes that bullshit, and I would like to inform you that refusal to answer results in two shots.”

“Fine. It’s, uh...” He gives a nervous laugh before clearing his throat. “It’s, uh, Brock...from... from Lawng Island. I’m not explaining that to anyone, but that’s her kink. Nothing turns her on more than that.” He gives Isa a nod with the kind of dorky suave that only Dylan possesses. “Ain’t that right, sweetheart?”

Tommy slaps me on the back when she erupts with giggles. “Pete, pour us all a round. Dylan is absolutely right! It’s fucking Brock from Long Island.”

All of us knock back a shot of tequila before Tommy continues with the game. “IzzyB, who is Dylan’s hall pass?”

“Oh! I know this one. Anna Kendrick.”

“Correct! Another round, Pete.”

Tommy continues firing questions at them, and they know each other so well that it doesn’t take long for me to feel the effects of the tequila.

“Alright, Izzy,” Tommy says, “what is the biggest heartbreak that Dylan still hasn’t gotten over?”

“Hmm...” She looks at Dylan, trying to figure out what it could be. “Well, we’ve worked through a lot of our issues in therapy, so I don’t think it’s the heartbreak I caused...right?”

I’m surprised that he nods because this chick has put him through the absolute worst back in high school. There’s a reason they were in therapy.

“So, if it’s not me...then I’m going to take a wild guess and say...it’s Justin and Selena’s break up.”

“No!” I stare at him in disbelief even though I actually believe that. “Dyl, please tell me that’s not true.”

“Pete, it hurts me to this day,” he replies, sounding somber. “A part of me still wishes that they’d get back together.”

I turn to Scott, and our collective disappointment seems insurmountable at this moment. “How are we friends with this guy?”

“Fuck, if I know, Pete.”

We must be about six shots down by the time we arrive at *Grit*. This place is more suited to Isabella’s and Tommy’s tastes. They like the raw, raunchy setup of this club. The low red lighting makes it seem more like a strip club than a nightclub, but they love the music, so they come here at least once a month. It’s only my second time here, but the amount of eye candy floating around me as I enter makes me wonder why I haven’t joined them more often.

My vision is assaulted (in the best way) with short skirts and high heels. It’s just a sea of smooth skin and cleavage. We pass the VIP section on our way to the bar, and I catch a glimpse of what’s going on behind the thick red velvet curtains. Women are showing a lot more skin in there. Maybe there’s a reason it looks like a strip club. I peer closer and spot a hot blonde swirling around a pole. Yeah, that’s the kind of party I want to have tonight.

“Wow!” I curl my arm around Scott’s neck, pulling him closer so he can hear me over the music. “Did you see the women here tonight? Why don’t we get some drinks, then see if we can get into that VIP section? I need to see some tits tonight because Dylan doesn’t know what a proper bachelor party is supposed to be like.”

Scott merely chuckles but doesn’t give me a concrete response. After another round of drinks, we attempt to burn off some of our drunken energy on the dance floor. Despite all my complaining earlier, I gotta admit, I’m still having a lot of fun.

Then again, my friends can make any situation fun. It actually feels just like it did in high school.

Scott and Cat have put aside their differences for the night and are dancing together like they used to. Dylan and Isabella are staring adoringly at each other as they sway to the beat just like they used to do, too. And Tommy has disappeared to make friends with random strangers. He was always my plus one for any and all group activities when we were younger, my wingman, the buffer that made going out with couples slightly less unbearable. But now he's gone and I'm beginning to feel like the fifth wheel, the same way I used to feel in high school. It's at that point that I decide it's time to explore the VIP section.

I tap Scott on the shoulder to let him know that I'll be back in an hour, then move through the crowd back to the entrance where the VIP lounge is located. Because I'm not on the guest list, I have to pay to get in, but it's worth every penny for the lewd, filthy acts happening behind the curtain.

I'm greeted by a topless waitress who hands me a whiskey as I enter. She grabs me by the belt and leads me to a secluded area on the side of the room. Two blondes surround me before I even sit down. One starts dancing on the pole directly in front of me, while the other sits down beside me, stroking her nails seductively up my thigh. She introduces herself as Imogen, and I wonder if that's her real name or her stripper name.

"What kind of entertainment are you looking for tonight, sir?"

"I'm just here to watch."

"Hmm." She catches her lower lip between her teeth, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. "Can I interest you in something...a little more fun?"

Her suggestive tone tells me exactly what she means by fun. I didn't know Grit was that kind of club. Usually, customers aren't even allowed to touch the dancers, yet there seems to be a full menu here.

I've only ever paid for sex once. It was the night Scott and I turned over our V-cards to two escorts. We didn't want to embarrass ourselves with a girl we liked for our first time, so we chose women we would never have to see again. Not my proudest moment, but we were young at the time.

"I don't pay for sex," I say.

"Who said anything about paying?" She winks at me. "We can give you a show now, but if you want some real action... we get off at one."

I smile at her not-so-subtle suggestion. "We?"

Her fingertips trace up my thigh again. "You look like you could handle both of us."

It's not like I've never been propositioned by a woman before. I just don't think it's ever been this direct or this...fast. It makes me question their motives and whether that lustful smirk on her face is genuine. I don't overanalyze it, though. I simply tell her that I'll take the lap dance for now, and we'll leave the possibilities open for later.

She stands up and walks over to her friend. They share a kiss, tongue and everything, before they begin a slow, erotic dance. They gyrate on each other and touch each other in very intimate places. It's dirty and sexy and salacious, yet I'm still kinda bored. This is everything I wanted to see tonight...but it does absolutely nothing for me because my mind is somewhere else.

"Do I make you nervous?"

"Very."

It was the eager innocence in her voice, the way her body trembled beneath my touch, the way her breath caught when I dipped my head between her legs – it was all those things that made me insatiable.

"Do I make your heart race?"

"Yes."

My thoughts have all been transported back to my beach house. These memories have been playing on my mind for

almost three full days now. She left me with this nagging, irrepressible craving for more.

“Do I make you wet?”

“Yes.”

And, fuck, she was so wet. The way she felt when I slipped inside her. The—

Imogen straddles my hips, yanking me right out of my daydream and power-slamming me right back into the present. I must be tripping. Two sexy women are dancing in front of me, both in the process of undressing, and I’m fantasizing about someone else. She grinds against me, and my body stiffens, rejecting the feeling entirely.

“Uh...” How do I break this to them? “Sorry...I need to... go to the bathroom.”

I shift forward, urging her off me. She seems surprised but doesn’t argue. I pay them double because it’s not their fault. They’re just trying to do their jobs. It’s my body that’s being... uncooperative.

I leave in haste and stop right outside the thick velvet curtain to recalibrate. I take one breath...then two...then stop breathing altogether when something silver at the corner of my eye catches my attention.

No.

It can’t be.

I squint, trying to get a better look in this light to make sure I’m not seeing things.

I’m not.

It’s her.

The woman who gave me the most sensual sex of my life then left me high and dry the next morning. The one who sentenced me to restless nights that inevitably end with wet dreams. The one who sent my brain into a death spiral trying to figure out why she disappeared.

Right now, she's got my brain doing double back flips because the dress she's wearing is fucking with my head in the worst way. It's a silver single-strap cocktail dress bedazzled with rhinestones, and it flaunts all her assets. The V in the front accentuates the perkiness of her tits. The slit going up her left thigh shows off the leanness of her long legs. Her hair's up, exposing the soft contours of her neck and shoulders. Overall, there is just way too much skin on display.

I want to march over there and cover her up, but at the same time, I want to march over there and strip her naked. My feet involuntarily start moving, closing the gap between us, and it's unclear which one of those options I'll settle on when I reach her.

The hulking bouncer unclips the thick red rope so she can enter. "Well, if it isn't our favorite model, strolling back into town," he greets with a wide smile. "Welcome back."

The comment makes her uncomfortable, and she gives him an awkward smile. "Thank you. It's nice to see you again. It's Lenny, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I reach her just as she reaches the velvet curtains shielding us from the depravities occurring in the VIP section. "We meet again."

She's startled to see me, her eyes wide, her lips parting. She wants to say something but seems to be struggling to put words into sentences. "Uh...hi!" She takes a moment to swallow her shock. "What a...surprise...Peter. I wasn't expecting to see you today...or...ever again."

"Well, stealthily creeping out of someone's house in the middle of the night is only ever done under the assumption that you'd never see said person again."

She cringes but gracefully covers it up with a smile. "Oh, you noticed that, huh?"

"I went to bed with a beautiful woman and woke up alone. It was kinda hard not to notice." That makes her more

awkward, and I change the subject because I'm just teasing. I'm not trying to be a dick. "So, you're a model, huh?"

"Uh...no." Her eyes widen, and she vigorously shakes her head. "No, I'm not a model."

"Are you shy to admit that? I just heard the bouncer say you're a model."

"You misheard."

I move past her to get the bouncer's attention, but she catches my wrist before I tap him on the shoulder.

"Okay, fine." Forcing a smile, her petite jaw remains tight as she replies. "He did say I'm a model, but I...I'm currently between jobs. Gigs are hard to come by at the moment, so I don't have anything lined up." She casts a glance toward the VIP section. "Well, it was great to see you again, Peter, but I'd better—"

"Leaving so soon, dollface. What's the rush?"

"Uh...no rush. Just, you know, places to go. People to see."

It's the way she says it that prompts my next question. "Who are you here to see?"

Her eyes widen like she gave too much away. "It's just an expression."

I noticed this on Wednesday, but I thought I was just reading too much into her odd behavior. Now I see that this is a habit of hers. She purposely doesn't divulge too much personal information. Not everything, just certain things. And it's odd that something as basic as this is one of those things.

I can tell that she's not being forthcoming because she's scanning the crowd as if she's worried someone might catch us together. She's definitely looking out for someone.

"Any particular reason why you're so jumpy?"

"I'm not jumpy."

"Who are you looking for?"

She shakes her head, pretending to be nonchalant. “I told you...no one.”

“Uh-huh.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You know, I’m just gonna keep asking questions until you tell me the truth.”

A frustrated humph leaves her mouth, and she finally drops the façade. “Look...don’t judge me...but I’m here as a last-ditch effort to...to get my ex back.”

“Hmm...” I nod, my gaze skimming down her slender body, then back up again. “That dress makes a lot more sense now. It would definitely work on me. Quick question, though. Is this the same ex that made you feel stupid and worthless... and was just using you for sex?”

“Oh, wow. You were actually paying attention that night. I thought you were just staring at my boobs.”

“I was. You have the most incredible tits. It’s hard *not* to stare. But my eyes and ears work independently, and I distinctly heard you telling me that your ex was a jerk.”

“I didn’t say that. You did.”

“Because it’s true. Is he the same guy you’re here to see tonight?”

She pauses for a moment, then gives a sheepish nod. “Yes, but it’s not—”

Disappointment carves itself into my every feature. There might also be a tiny element of jealousy in there as well, but that’s irrelevant. “Ah, Lia, come on. You know—”

“I told you not to judge. Besides, I’m...I’m desperate. I got kicked out of my penthouse. My car got taken away. I’m living in some dingy motel. I can’t go on like this. I need to—”

Not only can I see the stress and desperation on her face, I can hear it in her panic-stricken voice. I’m not sure what’s this feud she’s got going on with her dad, but he’s taken it to an extreme if he kicked her out.

“Okay, calm down.” I grasp her shoulders and squeeze gently to put her at ease. “I have a suggestion. Let’s go have a

drink at the bar, and you can tell me why going back to your asshole ex is the best idea you could come up with.”

That gets her more riled up. “What? No. Peter, I came here with a singular goal in mind. I didn’t come here to get lost in your enchanting green eyes or fawn over your cute, little grin. I have more pressing things to do with my time. You also smell incredible, by the way. These are unnecessary distractions.”

“Thanks.” I try to hold back a smile. “I just want to point out that you have an uncanny ability to mix in a substantial amount of hostility into every compliment you give me.”

“I wasn’t complimenting you. I was expressing my intense hatred of your entire being.”

“Somehow, they sound the same.” I slip an arm around her shoulder and slowly usher her through the crowd toward the bar. “Now, let’s get a drink.”

Although her feet are moving in the same direction as mine, she protests by shaking her head. “I really shouldn’t be drinking.”

“Based on what you told me, I can guarantee you’re gonna make better decisions when you’re drunk.” We reach the bar and I help her up onto the high stool. The beat of the music thumps loudly, vibrating beneath my feet. I lean closer so she can hear me over the noise. “So, what’re you having?”

“Um...” She wrings her hands, seemingly nervous to answer, though I’m not sure why. “I’m not much of a drinker. Can you order something that isn’t going to wreck me?”

I’m already ticking from the drinks we had in the limo and also opt for something lighter than tequila. Turning to the bartender, I order a strawberry daiquiri for her and a beer for me. I wait for our drinks, then slide her glass over to her. “So, what kind of voodoo magic spell did that dickhead cast over you that you’re willing to go back to him?”

I check my tone because it’s laced with venom that really shouldn’t be there. I don’t know her ex. I barely know her, and I don’t have the faintest idea about the dynamics of their

relationship. All I know is that she's here for him, and for some reason, that's stirring up a storm of some very irrational emotions.

My ego and I have been at war with each other for the past three days. I've been trying to forget about her, but he hasn't been able to let go of the fact that she snuck off in the middle of the night. Despite my better judgment, I've been reliving that night over and over again in my mind while he's been analyzing every tiny detail. Needless to say, finding out that she's here to make amends with her ex is not something me or my ego wanted to hear.

"He's not a bad guy...he just..." She pauses to take a sip of her strawberry daiquiri. "Oh, wow! This is delicious. Thank you." She gulps down more than half before resuming the conversation. "He's not always a jerk. We just...we just had a misunderstanding. I know he cares about me, but—"

I can already see her formulating whatever excuses she deems necessary to justify his behavior. I don't know why they broke up, but I'd bet my last dollar that it was his fault. "Let me ask you something, Li," I cut in. "And I want you to answer me honestly. If you hadn't been kicked out of your penthouse, and if you weren't living in some dingy motel, would you even consider giving this guy another chance?"

She mulls it over for about a minute and her shoulders slump when she realizes the answer. "No...I guess not. What he said...and did to me was pretty unforgivable."

"And if I'm not mistaken, I think I also saw you glance at the VIP section a few times. Trust me, if that's where you were expecting to find him, he's definitely not worth your time."

"Didn't you just come out of there too?"

"Yeah, which proves *my* point, not yours. The fact that I was in there should tell you just how sleazy it is." I cup her chin and tilt her head up for her to look at me. "Don't sell yourself short and settle for a man who doesn't deserve you just because he can offer you security."

She deflates instantly. “Well, what else am I supposed to do? I have no one to turn to. No family. No friends. No one... and the world is a very scary place when you’re all alone.”

Anxiety and despair are encompassed in her body language. Her ex seems like the biggest asshole in the world. The hurt he caused her is written all over her face. Her big hazel eyes are brimming with tears, begging for reassurance, and I don’t have the answers she’s looking for. Instead, I make it my mission for the night to make her forget all about him.

“You know what?” I say. “You’re already out, looking gorgeous. Let’s just have fun tonight. Then tomorrow, I’ll come over to your dingy motel, and we can come up with a better plan. I’ll even help you look for a job or another modeling gig. Whatever you want.”

Her eyebrows draw together, and she studies me for a moment. “You would do that for me? Why? Why do you care? You don’t even know me.”

“You’re throwing around loaded words again. I don’t *care*, but I have nothing to do tomorrow, and I wouldn’t mind... spending the day with you. I imagine it may be slightly less than awful.”

A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips, but she doesn’t let it fully materialize. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Get me another one of these...” She tips her glass toward me. “...then let’s dance the night away, Peter Danahay.”

“You got it.”

I order another strawberry daiquiri, and after slurping it down, I swear she becomes an entirely different person. Taking my hand, she leads me to the dance floor.

I am by no means a good dancer, but she loops her arms around my neck and somehow our feet find a mutual rhythm. With every song, she loosens up a bit more. The day I met her, she was uptight and had her guard up around me pretty much

the entire evening. Judgment was rife, and she was analyzing my every word to prove the existence of my inner misogynist.

It's weird, but I'm sort of intrigued by this tepid energy she gives off. She's so closed off, almost stoic, as if she's carrying a burden I can't even fathom. There's a distant loneliness in her eyes, but just like the other night, I somehow get her to a point where the stress and tension leave her body. She allows herself to unwind and have fun. I like the fact that she feels that level of comfort when she's with me, like she's free to just let go.

We talk. We dance. We get another round of drinks. Although she continues to throw verbal jabs at me every chance she gets, her demeanor becomes more playful and relaxed as the night progresses.

Multicolored lights flash across the dance floor, highlighting her skin with hues of green and blue. The alcohol has not only given her cheeks a warm rosy glow; it's also stained her lips the most tempting shade of pink. I resist the urge to taste them and spin her around.

She twirls back, stumbling into my chest. "What's in a strawberry daiquiri?" she yells to be heard over the music. "It's gone straight to my head."

"I don't know," I yell back. "It's a chick drink. I think it might be white rum. Do you want another one?"

"No! I think I had too much. You're already hotter than you were ten minutes ago. I'm pretty grossed out by it."

"Ooh, another backhanded compliment. Listening to them is slowly becoming my favorite pastime." Slipping my arms around her waist, I pull her closer. "Be honest with me, though. Do you have any regrets about leaving me high and dry the other day?"

"So many." She tilts her head back slightly to look me in the eye. "I've had to slap myself a few times for being so stupid."

"Did you think about me more than once?"

"Did you?"

“Nah, it was just once for me...but it was a *very* long thought. It lasted about three days.”

Again, she tries to hold back a smile, but that dimple on the apple of her cheek still deepens. “You’re smooth.”

“I’m serious.”

“Hmm...Okay. And what exactly about me occupied your thoughts for three whole days?”

“Body parts mostly.” Gripping her sides, I slide my hands up her back, and her breath hitches when my thumbs reach her ribs. “The swell of your breasts. The contours of your shoulders.” I dip my head closer to hers. “The general plumpness of your mouth.”

She lets out a disappointed sigh. “And here I thought it was my riveting personality.”

“You have a personality?” I feign being shocked by this revelation. “Sorry, I didn’t even notice.”

She giggles, lightly slapping my shoulder. “So, when you were staring so intently at my lips the other night, it wasn’t because you were absolutely enthralled by what I was saying.”

“Not at all. I just kept thinking about how good it felt to kiss you. And that’s what’s been playing on my mind ever since.” I lift my hand, stroking my thumb over her full lower lip. “Actually, it’s the only thing on my mind right now.”

“Oh, I see what you’re doing. You’re trying to take me down a bad path again, Peter.”

Millimeter by millimeter, I move closer, so close our noses touch. “Was it really that bad?”

“No.”

Her eyes drop to my mouth, the tip of her tongue darting out to moisten her lips. The gesture is subtle, yet so erotic my dick twitches in anticipation.

“So, why don’t we try going down this road again one more time...for old time’s sake?”

“I’m ashamed to say this out loud, but...I must be an absolute sucker for nostalgia.”

She closes the gap between us, and a groan rumbles in my throat the second she presses her mouth to mine. Her velvety softness sucks me in. It’s like my body instantly recognizes that this is the sensation I’ve been craving for the last few days because my arms tighten around her. My tongue slips between her lips as my hand slides up to cup her head. The hard metal of my zipper presses uncomfortably against my cock. It hurts like hell, but I don’t care.

I’ve kissed a lot of women in my twenty-seven years. A lot of beautiful women. A lot of sexy women. But there’s something about the way *this* woman kisses me that catapults me into blissful oblivion. It starts off with this sweet, almost shy hesitance that builds into blazing raw lust. Moist and supple, it brings out the most primal part of me. I want to ravish her, consume her. The alcohol isn’t helping either. It’s heating my blood, making me dizzy.

It doesn’t take long to realize that this situation can easily escalate out of control, and I reluctantly pull away. “I need to stop kissing you before I forget where I am.”

A hint of bashfulness colors her cheeks. “You are probably the worst thing that could have ever happened to my battered self-esteem.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Just...the way you look at me. The way you kiss me. The way your arms are locked around me right now...You make me feel very...*wanted*. And I keep telling myself to not overthink it because you probably do the same thing with every other girl.”

The vulnerability in her voice strikes something inside me. Part of me is glad that she feels comfortable enough to share that with me, but the undertone of what she’s saying truly troubles me. I want to believe that she’s right, that I do the same thing with every other girl. I want to believe that there’s nothing unique about the way I look at her or kiss her, but something inside me knows this feels different.

I'm a one-night stand kinda guy. Once I've had sex with a woman, I generally lose interest. So, why is Lia in my arms right now? Why am I still pursuing her, especially after finding out that she came here for another guy? Maybe I'm just trying to prove something to myself. Maybe my ego is still bruised and—

Shit, this chick's got me firing on all cylinders. I'm out here horny as fuck yet still dissecting everything she says in my inebriated state.

"If I look at you like I want you, it's because I do," I reply, simultaneously reasoning with myself that it is that simple. "I think you're hot. There's nothing more to it."

"You're right." She sways, reminding me that we're still on the dance floor. Her words are slow, and her movements are fluid, a clear indication that the daiquiris have taken full effect. "We don't have genuine chemistry. It's just shallow physical attraction."

God, why is every word coming out of her mouth annoying me so much? Now I want to prove that we do have genuine chemistry. Why? This is just a physical thing...right?

"Listen, don't take offense to what I'm about to say. It's not you, it's me, but everything you're saying is bugging the hell out of me, so can we stop talking, get wasted, then go back to my place, and have wild, uninhibited sex?"

"That's a terrible idea," she replies with a giggle.

"You got a better one?"

She gives it a moment's thought. "Nope. Not really."

"Then let's get another drink."

I lead her back to the bar, and in between sips of strawberry daiquiri, I steal a few more kisses. It's the fourth daiquiri that sends her over the edge. She's hammered, giggling at everything. I swear, it's like her lips have never touched alcohol before because I didn't expect her to reach this level of drunkenness on *four* drinks.

I'm nowhere near sober either. I'm at a point where even the lightest touch from her is sending me into overdrive. So, when she throws her arms around my neck and kisses me with a hunger so intense that I have to physically restrain myself from ripping her clothes off and fucking her right here on the bar, I know it's time for us to leave.

I pull away, my breaths labored. "We need to go."

"Agreed."

It's only then that I remember I didn't come here alone. "Wait here. I just need to get my friends."

That instantly puts her on edge. "You...we...we're going home with your friends?"

"No, but all of us came together. I'll just ask the driver to drop us off at my place first."

She's not too happy with this arrangement, but gives a small nod, and I set off to find the rest of the gang. I scan the dance floor and I'm not surprised that Isabella and Dylan are nowhere in sight. Chances are the dork called an Uber and left early. Why we even had this lame-ass bachelor party is beyond me, but I'm not complaining. Seeing Lia again made the whole night worth it.

I spot Scott and Cat dancing on the opposite end and make my way through the crowd to reach them. "Are you guys ready to leave?" I ask, tapping Scott on the shoulder. "Because I'm ready to get out of here."

He turns to Cat, who looks like she still has the energy to dance for another six hours. "Nah, we're not ready to leave," he replies. "It's only two o'clock. It's still early, Pete. Why don't you stay for a bit?"

I look back at Lia, and considering how close I am to abandoning all forms of social etiquette, it's gonna be a hard no from me. "Hmm...tough choice. Stay here with you two... or get my world rocked by that model over there." Hearing myself say it solidifies just how hot she is. "She's a *model*. Don't take it personally, but it's a landslide victory for her. Sorry, but I'm out. I'll send the limo back for you guys."

He challenges me with his eyes. “Aren’t you the one who’s always preaching the philosophy of bros before hos?”

“Alright, let’s make a deal. Show me your tits, and if they’re even twenty percent as hot as hers, I’ll stay.”

Scott laughs. “Fine, you win. Have a good night, Pete.”

“Trust me...I will.”

I head back to Lia, taking her hand in mine as I take long, determined strides to the exit. The alcohol makes it a little difficult for her to keep up in her heels, but I grip her tighter to stop her from stumbling.

“So, your friends are not coming with us?” she asks as we step outside.

I only realize how stuffy it was in there when I inhale the crisp night air. I send a message to the limo driver to tell him to meet us out front, then turn my attention back to her. “No, they’re gonna stay. Part of me wants to force Scott to leave with us, but...”

Leaving the sentence hanging intrigues her to know more. “Why?”

“The woman you saw him dancing with...Well, that’s his ex-fiancé, Cat. They dated for, like, four years or something, and even though he says he’s over her...I don’t think anyone can truly get over a long-term relationship like that. Being around her is just going to fuck with his head.” I shrug. “And that’s why I avoid relationships. Women are like leeches. They’ll suck the life out of you, use you, bleed you dry, and then just leave.”

She seems taken aback by that statement and stares at me for a long while. “Hey, Peter.” She wrings her hands, looking nervous. “You know I’m not in a good space right now...but I want you to know that I’m not using you as a rebound. And...I’m not going home with you because I’m...lonely or whatever...or because I don’t have anyone else to turn to.”

I’m speechless for a second because admitting that definitely did some internal damage. “I...I know that, Lia. Everything that happened tonight was purely coincidental, so I

wasn't trying to insinuate anything about *you*." It's the sadness in her eyes that makes the most asinine shit fly out of my mouth. "You know...I'm not using you either. We don't have to do anything tonight." For some reason, it's suddenly imperative that I mention this because she told me that her ex used her for sex, and I don't want her to have the same association with me. "If you want to go back to my place and just chill, that would be cool, too. We could watch a movie, talk, you can even introduce me to this riveting personality I've heard so much about."

I want to donkey-kick myself the second that suggestion leaves my mouth because what *I* want to do is have sex with her. But the look on her face tells me she is tapering right near the edge, and I just can't work up my libido looking at a face like that.

A small smile tugs at her lips, and I gotta admit, this particular smile does something to me. The top corner of her mouth twitches because she actively tries to fight it at first, and when she can't hold it off any longer, she presses her lips into a tight line to kill it once and for all. Yet even then, it lives on in that tiny dimple on her cheek. It's fucking adorable.

"I'd like that," she says. "Can we watch *You Got Served*?"

The question insults me on such a personal level. "There are a million epic movies that are deep and impactful with great actors and a solid storyline, and you choose that trash?"

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for dance battle movies."

I cave with a dramatic sigh. "Fine. I'll let you have that one."

I grit my teeth and force a smile because I deserve to get punched in the dick right now. I had the most amazing opportunity, and I just pissed it away. I'm going to have the hottest woman I've ever seen at my house for the *whole* night, and we're gonna watch *You Got Served*.

The limo stops in front of us, and I open the door for her to climb in. The gravity of my stupidity only hits me when I tell him our destination. I've never taken a girl back to my place

before because if she's psycho and shit goes south, she at least won't know where I live. And yet not only have I taken Lia to my beach house, I'm about to take her to my *home*. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me. I'll have to figure this out tomorrow.

It takes about fifteen minutes before the driver stops in front of my condo. Lia already has her shoes off when she gets out of the limo. Somehow, between my blurred vision and her unsteady steps, we manage to get inside without injury. We stumble up to my bedroom, and she stops dead in the doorway, taking in her surroundings for the first time.

"This is not the same house you took me to the last time."

"It's not."

"So, your parents bought this for you as a...what? Graduation gift? Birthday present?"

I'm sure her assumption stems from the fact that the penthouse she lost was probably an extravagant gift from her parents. And if it was a gift, it was pretty shitty of her dad to kick her out. A gift, by its nature, should be irrevocable.

"Nah, I actually bought this one myself," I reply.

"Impressive."

We don't linger on the conversation. Instead, I step into my walk-in closet, grab a T-shirt, and toss it to her as I walk back out. "Here. I'm sure you want something more comfortable."

She reaches out to catch it, but her coordination is off, and it lands at her feet. "God, I'm so drunk," she says with a giggle.

She pulls the T-shirt on over her dress, then sneaks her hand underneath to undo the zipper before pulling it down. Next, she takes off her earrings and leaves them on my nightstand. She removes the pins from her hair and allows it to tumble over her shoulders. After a quick stretch of her arms, she climbs under the covers and sighs as her body sinks into the softness of my mattress.

For a moment or two, I simply stare at her. I just watched her make my space hers like it was the most natural thing in the world, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

“Are you gonna stand there all night, or are we gonna watch this movie?”

That spurs me into motion, and I kick off my shoes, strip down to my boxers, and climb in beside her. I switch on the TV, searching through the various streaming services. I don't find *You Got Served*, so we settle on *Step Up*.

She nestles up against me, pulling her leg up over my thigh and resting her head on my chest. It startles me because this isn't how I expected things to go. I thought she'd lie on her side, I'd lie on mine, and we'd just sort of watch it together... but apart. I don't...cuddle, but after a few minutes, I get over the initial discomfort and curl my arm around her.

After hearing another sigh, an unfamiliar warmth spreads through my chest. I'm just going to blame it on the alcohol. I also blame the alcohol for being hornier than a dog in heat. It's taking every morsel of self-control to restrain myself and knowing that she's lying so close to me with nothing on underneath my T-shirt...

I keep thinking about shifting ever so slightly, spreading her legs and slowly running my fingers up her silky thigh. She would be soaked, just waiting for my cock to slide into her. I remember what she tastes like, and my tongue is craving that sweetness again. My head could be buried between her legs right now, but instead, I'm just wasting away watching this bullshit because I decided to be Noble Nick tonight.

We don't have to do anything.

What an asshole! That was such a dumb thing to say!

This is premium pussy right next to me. Nothing – absolutely nothing – compares to the feeling of being inside her. I remember how it felt when I slipped into her wet heat, how she locked me in, how she gripped my cock tighter than a fucking vise. I could be reliving that experience tonight, but

my abject stupidity is going to leave me with blue balls instead.

Moron!

I stop deriding myself and focus on the screen, more to get rid of my hard-on than actual interest. Twenty minutes in, and I feel like I've lost over a thousand brain cells. Lying down has caused the alcohol to settle. I'm completely wasted. My head is pounding and I'm struggling to stay awake. "This is honestly the dumbest plotline in the history of the universe."

Her head shoots up to glare at me, indignation flashing in her eyes. "You're kidding, right? The uniqueness of this story is unparalleled." The sly smile on her face tells me she knows she's talking shit. "Unlike the other dance movies, there's no financial crisis, no fifty-thousand-dollar prize that will magically save the day—"

"The fifty-thousand dollars that's usually needed by one person but will have to be split between the twenty other people in the dance crew?"

"Exactly! That storyline is a dime a dozen, but this? This is cinematic gold."

I chuckle. "Even though we both know you're lying, you are *way* too passionate about this."

"Old habits. My dad and I used to love watching these dance movies together." She rests her chin on my chest, her smile widening as she reminisces. "Waiting for that final dance routine was always such a thrill, and we'd argue over which crew was actually better. For some reason, he always liked the opposing team more."

The sadness I saw earlier returns to her eyes. This burden she's carrying is crushing her.

I lift my hand to brush her hair off her forehead. "It sounds like you really miss your dad."

"I miss him *so* much."

She's on the verge of tears, so I offer her the solution that seems pretty obvious to me. "Why don't you just reach out to

him? I don't know what happened between you two, but maybe you should give him a call...and try to talk it out."

Her eyes widen as if she just realized something. "Peter..." Her mouth opens like she's about to say something, but she seems to reconsider because she shakes her head instead. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because..." She traces her finger across my chest to distract herself from the tears welling up in her eyes. "No matter how hard I try, my dad will always be out of reach to me."

She abruptly ends the conversation there, and I take the hint that she doesn't want to delve into her emotional baggage. I don't think I'm equipped with the patience or empathy to deal with that anyway, so I don't force the issue. She flips the conversation back to *Step Up* and tells me about how she had the biggest crush on Channing Tatum when she was twelve.

She keeps talking as the movie continues. I don't mind because it's boring as fuck and I'd rather listen to her, anyway. With every word, I fall further into my drunken stupor. She's not doing much better. She's tired. Her speech is slurred, but it's like she's fighting to stay awake, and she's dragging my entire lethargic being along for the ride.

About forty-five minutes after the movie ends, I decide to call her out on it. "Why don't you want to fall asleep?"

"Because I like tonight." She dips her head, placing a soft kiss on my chest before looking up at me again. It's another gesture that's weirdly intimate, but I say nothing about it. "Tomorrow, I have to go back to reality, and I guess I'm scared of the uncertainty."

"We'll come up with a plan tomorrow," I assure her.

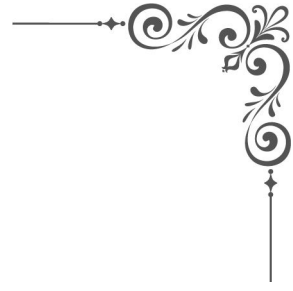
"Thanks, Peter. You know...I bet when you woke up this morning, you didn't think your night would end like this...and I'm sure you weren't expecting to entertain a homeless motel-squatter for the better half of tomorrow."

“Nope. Wasn’t expecting that at all. At the very least, I was hoping to see some tits tonight, but I have long since kissed that dream goodbye.”

“I think it’s very possible for you to still see tits tonight.”

“Oh, yeah?” That immediately perks up my interest. Even though my head is spinning, and I’m totally fucked, I manage to roll over until I’m on top of her. My hand slowly glides up her thigh and beneath my T-shirt. “Please tell me you’re talking about *your* tits and you’re not suggesting that we watch *Magic Mike*.”

She doesn’t answer. Instead, she slides her hand into my hair and pulls me down to kiss her.



5. Lia

The distant sound of a flushing toilet stirs me from sleep. My eyelids weigh a ton, and it takes a few tries to pry them open. The sight of the unfamiliar room startles me before memories of last night slowly creep to the fore.

Despite my better judgment, I came here with Peter last night. I still don't fully understand why, but there's something about him that puts me at ease. Maybe it's because he's so relaxed about everything. Nothing seems to faze him. He just seems to have it all figured out. Honestly, he's not the guy I assumed he was.

Last night made me re-evaluate my opinion of him. He'd been plaguing my every thought since the night we first met, but no matter how many times I tried to suppress the image of his smile or the feel of his mouth or every delicious feeling that came with those memories, he just kept popping back up...like a fungus. I was constantly trying to convince myself that he was just a fuckboy who in no way deserved to live rent-free in my mind like that.

But my eyes took on a different view of him yesterday. He was thoughtful and considerate. I would even go so far as to say he was...sweet. I mean, he listened to my drunken ramblings for almost two hours with no complaint. He gets bonus points for that. And he didn't even do it to get into my pants. I think he took that option off the table before we even got into the limo.

And most importantly, he saved me from myself. I was on the verge of doing something so incredibly stupid last night. I wasn't lying when I told him I was desperate. I was. So desperate that I was willing to overlook everything Teddy did to me and go back to beg for one more chance. How pathetic! But I'm at my wit's end. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to pull myself up by the bootstraps and just soldier through life like I'm made of steel.

My parents died before I was barely an adult, and Teddy took me in just a year after that. I never developed life skills or

any kind of coping skills. It's all just too much sometimes. But even though I don't have a cent to my name, I can at least have some self-respect, right?

I'm so grateful to Peter for coaxing me off that dangerous ledge last night, but at the same time, I'm still ashamed that I walked away from one man, only to drop straight into the bed of another.

I'm naked under the covers. There's a hickey on my shoulder. A box of condoms is toppled over on the nightstand with some sealed packets strewn across the floor. It's like we couldn't reach for one fast enough. It looks like we had one wild night and yet I don't remember much of it. All I remember was that I kissed him first and the heat of his mouth sucked me into a hazy realm where all I wanted to feel was his skin against mine.

I gave in to him, and I'm sure it must have been amazing, but my drunken brain didn't hold on to any of the vital information. I can't believe I'm becoming this person. I had sex repeatedly with a married man twice my age, then jumped straight into bed with another guy not even two weeks later. And I did this while being completely wasted. I don't even recognize myself. Maybe this is the skill I'm developing to cope with a lonely life and a tragic past.

I try to sit up and immediately grip both sides of my head to stop the relentless pounding. "I'm never drinking again," I say with a muffled groan.

"Spoken like a true lady," Peter quips as he emerges from the bathroom looking like he just escaped from a 2019 Wattpad novel.

It was a great era, an iconic moment in our history where the literary world gave us strong jawlines carved by Leonardo himself, rippling biceps that glisten with moisture, and smiles that could melt glaciers. This man is giving me *all* that this morning.

He's already had a shower, his black hair wet and disheveled. He's wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, clouds of steam emanating from every sculpted muscle on his

body. This is a good cope, right? Sleeping with someone as hot as him instead of actually dealing with my issues should be worthy of a few points. Especially because I now know that I am capable of so much worse.

So, if I do a quick tally in my head, the scoreboard currently stands at:

Life: 7 454 638

Lia...1.

Actually, I'm gonna take 2 because he's not just a snack. He's a whole meal with dessert.

"Do you feel as bad as you look?" he asks.

I toss myself back against the pillows. "Worse."

He chuckles, crawling across the bed before he drops over beside me. "I'm just kidding. You don't look bad." Propping himself up on his elbow, he drops a quick kiss on my lips. It's a little awkward, almost obligatory, probably because he has very limited experience regarding the etiquette and proceedings of the *morning after*. "In fact, you're killing this smeared mascara look. It's very..." He puts on a very bad French accent. "How do you say...raccoonesque."

"Shut up!" I laugh (even though I should be mortified) and slap his arm.

He catches my hand to stop a second smack, his expression becoming more serious. "Hey...last night is sort of a blur for me, so I wanted to ask you...Did we use a condom?"

I think back, but all I encounter is a gaping black hole of missing information. "I'm not sure. I don't remember..." I stop myself short of saying the word *anything* because that would just make things weird. "...much."

"Yeah, it's a bit foggy for me, too. The last thing I remember is you talking about your dad and how much he loved dance movies. I was basically asleep by then."

I feel better now because he remembers less than me. "Nope. Far from asleep. We were up talking for a long time after that. And then we started kissing and then..."

“I can guess what happened next. But did we use a condom?”

“We must have,” I reply, looking at the mess strewn across the floor. “There are condoms everywhere.”

He nods, but skepticism is still all over his face. “Yeah... you’re right. I’m probably overthinking. It’s just...I couldn’t find the condom or the wrapper when I woke up, so...”

“Maybe you flushed it down the toilet after...we were done.”

“The wrapper too?” He looks up at the ceiling as if he’s also trying to scour the foggy memories of last night. He shrugs when he comes up empty. “I was pretty drunk. I guess I could’ve done that.”

“Look, don’t stress about it,” I assure him. “Even if we weren’t...safe, my cycle is very irregular. I only get my period every couple months, so I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. And you’re...”

I leave the question hanging because discussing how irresponsible we were last night is actually pretty intense. We clearly did not consider repercussions. He assures me I have nothing to worry about because he always uses protection and gets tested regularly.

And after clearing all that muck from the air, he releases a sigh of relief and sits up. “So...are you hungry?”

“Starved.”

“Me too.”

He gets out of bed and disappears into his walk-in closet. I’m mildly disappointed. I know I should feel some level of shame, and I know I shouldn’t *want* to have sex with him again...but I do. I really do. My memories of last night seem to be lost in a void, so I feel robbed in a way. I thought we’d have one more passionate encounter before parting ways, but I guess it’s only me feeling that way.

The awkwardness I sensed a few minutes ago has solidified, and he’s not cold, but he’s...distant. I remind

myself that he is a *hit-it-and-quit-it* kind of guy. He told me that one time with a woman was more than enough for him. We've spent the night together twice, so it's very possible that I'm expired goods in his eyes now. I don't feel rejected, but it definitely feels weird.

He returns wearing black sweatpants with a light blue T-shirt in his hand, but instead of putting it on, he tosses it to me. "C'mon, let's go rustle up some grub."

"I'll meet you downstairs," I say. "Can I use your bathroom first?"

The request is preposterous enough to draw a chuckle out of him. "Of course. I have extra toiletries in the cabinet above the sink. Help yourself to whatever you need."

After he leaves, I rush into the bathroom to take advantage of his offer. I feel icky and sweaty, and I probably smell like rum is seeping out of my pores. The water at my motel runs cold more often than not, and I'm dying for a nice hot shower. I almost squeal in delight when the warm water sprays over me. I shower, wash my hair, brush my teeth, and by the time I'm done, I feel like a new woman. Damn, who knew these basic things could be so revitalizing?

I didn't exactly think it through when I hand-washed my underwear, but it's wet now, so all I have is the T-shirt he gave me. It's long enough, and it's not like he hasn't seen me naked anyway, so I guess this is what I'm wearing today.

Stepping out of his room, I look around and feel just a tiny bit intimidated. I should've asked him to wait for me because this house is massive. Similar to the beach house, it has a sleek, modern style. Everything from the art to the décor is absolutely stunning and, once again, I find myself being a little envious of the life he lives as an unemployed, second-generation rich boy.

It's the music that eventually helps me find my way. I follow the bold sounds of trumpets and saxophones and enter the kitchen. The sound is not coming from his phone or a Bluetooth device. He's got a whole music station on the other side of the kitchen, where it opens up to a wide veranda and

entertainment area. The entire thing looks like a time capsule that's been preserved. It's equipped with a hi-fi system and a CD player, but the music seems to be coming from an old vinyl record player. He's so odd. People in our generation don't own relics like that.

I find Peter in front of the fridge, hips swaying as he stares at its contents.

“What are you even listening to?”

“*Ain't That A Kick In The Head.*” He glances over his shoulder to look at me and encounters a blank expression. “C'mon. Dean Martin.” Still, nothing registers. “You don't know Dean Martin?”

“How would I know him? This sounds like it's from the fifties.”

His correction is adamant. “Sixties. July 1960 to be exact.”

I don't know how he remembers all this stuff. “Whatever. Why don't you put on something a little more...poppy. You know, something from the last five years at least. How about some Artie Monkeys?”

“Did you really just suggest that we listen to Artie Monkeys over Dean Martin?” It still baffles me how easily offended he is by comments like that. “This song is a classic. I can't listen to the trash they make today. There's no feeling in it.”

“What feeling do you get from this?”

“Happiness. Doesn't this song make you happy? You don't get that from anything made after 2005.” He pulls me toward him and starts singing along. “*If this is just the be-ginning, my life is gonna be beee-aut-iful.*”

“So, you just hate modern music?”

“Not just music. TV, too. I stopped watching series after *Game of Thrones*.”

“Was it season eight?”

“Yep.” Still swaying with me in his arms, he nods somberly, even though trumpets are blaring in the background. “It destroyed such a fundamental part of me. I can’t...I can’t take the risk and put myself out there like that again.”

I give a nod in solidarity. “I understand.”

He spins me around and after a quick dip, he turns me slightly so I can stare into the fridge too. “So, what do you want to eat?”

He casually rests his forearm on my shoulder and leans on me like I’m his little sister. It reinforces the fact that he’s trying to distance himself from me...sexually.

“Wow! I wasn’t expecting you to have such a well-stocked fridge,” I say, pushing aside the dejection I feel. “I thought all you’d have is beer and leftover Chinese food.”

“If I’d met you a year ago, that’s exactly what you would’ve found in my fridge. But my friend, Dylan, moved in with me after his divorce and that changed very quickly. He’s quite picky about what he consumes, and he’s also a gourmet chef, so all this healthy shit is his doing. He doesn’t eat anything processed. Everything has to be fresh.” He turns to give me a somewhat sheepish look. “I’m not much of a cook though, so I’m thinking eggs and—”

“Oh, I’ll cook!” My overly enthusiastic response shocks me as much as it shocks him, but I don’t even try to hide my excitement. I’ve been living off tinned food and sloppy microwave dinners for two weeks. I’m dying for a home-cooked meal. “I love cooking, and I haven’t cooked in a while.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Sit down. I’ll take care of the rest.” Rummaging through the fridge, I take out butter, garlic, and eggs. He doesn’t have longganisa, so I improvise and use Italian sausages instead. “I know it’s almost three in the afternoon, but it’s Sunday, so I’m gonna make you a traditional Filipino breakfast. Just like my mom used to make it when I was a kid.

Every Sunday, without fail, she'd make sure we had breakfast as a family."

"That's a nice tradition."

I glance over at him. "Why do you sound so surprised?"

"Well, my dad was always working on some movie or another, so we didn't eat many meals together as a family. And that just created a habit where now we don't do *anything* as a family. We all just kind of live our separate lives with a sporadic text every few months. It's nice that your dad made time for that. I guess...I just assumed he had Sunday breakfast with his golf buddies at the country club."

That's an accurate assumption of Teddy, but my dad was never like that. We were always his number one priority. For the first time, I consider telling Peter the truth, but doing so now will be even more embarrassing. Teddy called me a slut in front of dozens of people, and Peter was a witness to that, too. He's also aware of the fact that I was at *Grit* last night to get my ex back. Admitting I was at such a low point that I was willing to take Teddy back, even though he treated me like trash, is a humiliation I don't wish to relive at this moment.

"My dad always made time for us," I reply softly. That's at least not a lie, and I swiftly end the conversation there.

He seats himself on a stool on the other side of the wide island counter while I scour through the kitchen cupboards, looking for pans, utensils, and the other ingredients I need.

"Don't you have any rice?" I ask.

"No. Dyl and I try not to eat too many carbs."

"But it's rice. Rice is a staple food in every household."

"Not mine. Besides, who eats rice for breakfast, anyway?"

"Me." I sigh my disappointment. "Now it won't be just the way my mom used to make it. The sinangag is a critical part of this dish."

"What is that?"

"Garlic fried rice."

“I have egg noodles if that helps.”

“It doesn’t...but I guess I have to make do.”

He falls quiet as I go on another quest, this time in search of spices and the noodles. He watches me silently as I walk back to the stove to fry the sausages. I use a bit of honey to achieve that sweet and savory flavor reminiscent of longganisa. I also sprinkle in some garlic powder and a pinch of paprika for a touch of spice. Although it’s not ideal and I have no idea how it will taste, I make the noodles like I would’ve made the rice, frying it in butter and garlic.

Not one word is spoken between us. He’s just staring at me like he did last night when I was getting ready for bed.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I ask.

He shifts back, crossing his arms over his chest. The movement draws my eyes to his taut pecs, and for a moment, I lose myself in the thought of having them pressed against me, the fine hairs grazing my nipples. He really is a fine specimen of a man. I finally force my attention back to his face, and he’s still studying me intently.

“You’re very comfortable in my house,” he says.

I freeze, my body involuntarily halting all actions. It’s not the words, but rather his tone that seems a little unwelcoming. “I’m sorry. Should I...should I stop?”

“No. It’s just an observation.”

I’m still rigid, unsure of how to react. “You don’t sound happy.”

“Well, it’s a little weird for me. This doesn’t happen often. Actually, this doesn’t happen at all. Part of me is annoyed that I brought you here because that’s a personal rule that I never break...but the other part...” He scrubs a hand over the stubble on his jaw. “The other part is simply appreciating the sight of a beautiful woman cooking breakfast in my kitchen.”

I’m caught between feeling flattered and insulted. “That’s quite a conundrum.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Any regrets?”

“Nope.”

That’s enough to settle my anxiety. “Let’s eat, and you can explain to me all the horrible things that messed up your psyche and turned you into this whoring maniac who’s incapable of sharing his personal space with another human.”

He nods. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Don’t tell me where the plates are.” Placing my forearms on the counter, I lower myself to his eye level. “I want to find them myself just to annoy you more.”

He laughs, tossing a dish towel at me before I go poking around in his cupboards again. I dish up for the both of us, then sit down on the stool beside him. I waste no time and jump straight back into the conversation.

“So, who was the girl that made you an avid subscriber of Top G’s manosphere?”

A chuckle pops out of him. “I don’t subscribe to the *manosphere*, and I certainly don’t give a shit about what Andrew Tate has to say about women. He’s a jerk, anyway.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.” I reach over to take his hand and condense all my fake empathy into a single look of concern. “Stop deflecting and spill the tea...Who hurt you, Peter?”

That gets me a louder laugh. “Apart from the writers of *Game of Thrones*...no one *hurt* me. I’ve never been in a long-term relationship, nor have I ever been in love. I’m just wary. Women can be very manipulative, and I don’t trust their intentions. I’m a rich guy. I attract a lot of gold diggers. It’s about risk versus return. I’m not about to invest in someone who at any point can up and leave with half my shit, so I avoid it altogether. Simple as that.” He subtly pulls his hand away from mine to reinstate the distance between us and eats another bite. “This is amazing, by the way.”

I reason with myself to not be offended. I knew what I signed up for. “It would’ve tasted better with rice.” I force a

smile and soldier on. “I have to say, I find it weird that you’re so protective of money when it’s not really *your* money.”

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you a second-generation rich kid? It’s daddy’s money, right?”

He gives a nonchalant shrug. “Depends on how you look at it. My parents gave me a good...springboard, but Scott and I started investing our allowance when we were twelve. He got himself a financial advisor, but I’m more of a risk-taker, so I went at it alone. There were times I lost a lot, but I learned from those losses. I started thinking ahead, planning properly, studying the market. I made sure I had a very diversified portfolio, so if something crashed, I wouldn’t lose everything.”

It’s shocking how different our lives were. When my parents were alive, I guess we would’ve been considered an upper-middle-class family. I had a very comfortable and privileged upbringing, so I’m not complaining. But my parents were lavish spenders and definitely didn’t have long-term financial planning skills or goals because they didn’t leave me with much when they died.

“Now obviously, it’s easier to make money when you have money,” he continues. “I had the freedom to learn the market, play around, gamble a bit, and I wouldn’t’ve been able to do that without *daddy’s* money. But I haven’t taken a cent from my parents since I was sixteen. I’ve always had a pretty good memory, and I retain a lot of stats and financial information. That helped me make some excellent investment decisions, and I was able to move out right after I finished high school.”

I lift a forkful of food to my mouth. “Did you go to college?”

“No, I’m not disciplined enough for college. I bought my first apartment building that same year. I got it cheap because it was rundown and dilapidated, so I spent a big chunk of my savings trying to revamp it. Scott was living in my parents’ guesthouse, so we moved out together *into* this shitty building. He and Cat were both studying, and I still remember every day after class, they would help us install cupboards or whatever.

Cat actually sculpted some amazing pieces for the pool area. It looked like quite a prestigious living space once we were done, but it only started earning rentals eighteen months later. It was worth the wait, though. I used those rentals to buy another building...and then another. I own twelve now if you count the three on the west side of this property.”

My eyes bulge. “You own this entire property, this whole...complex?”

“Pretty much...yeah.”

“It’s massive.”

“I know. And it can be a lot of work. That’s why I have a management company that keeps them all running smoothly for me. It costs me a small fortune, but I’d rather have more time and less stress. And that’s how I can live this kinda life even though I’m unemployed. I think I can take a tiny bit of credit for where I am today.”

“Ouch!” I suck in a sharp breath, pressing my hand against my side.

He reaches over to touch my arm, concern evident in his expression. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah...I’ve just got this pain here. It feels like...like some kind of growth. Shit, I think...I think I might be developing some respect for you.”

He cracks up, laughing so hard it echoes through the kitchen. “You had me going there. Are you sure you’re a model and not an actress?”

I’m neither, so I deflect and steer the conversation back to the original topic. “So, now that we’ve established that you’re only partly a second-generation rich kid, let’s get back to your love life. Are you planning on being single forever?”

“Not single. I might consider dating in the future. I think I’m gonna be like Leonardo DiCaprio and have some kind of a rotation system going. Date a chick for a few weeks, then swap her out for a younger model.”

I slam my hand against my mouth, making a retching sound at the back of my throat. “Sorry. I just gagged a little.”

“Many girls have that problem around me.” He winks to make sure I get the sexual innuendo, and I slap his arm.

“Pig! You’re repulsive. Do you honestly see yourself as some pervy fifty-year-old with wrinkly, sagging balls, hitting on a twenty-three-year-old waitress at the country club?”

“Of course not. For one, my balls wouldn’t be wrinkly or sagging. I would’ve kept them in shape over the years. And two, due to aforementioned aversions to gold diggers, I wouldn’t date a waitress or anyone who didn’t already have some level of wealth to her name. She needs to come from money so I can be sure of her intentions.”

“But then why not just date a woman your own age? Why go for someone so much younger?” Somewhere deep down inside, I know the real reason I’m asking this question.

“Younger women don’t have much life experience. Their expectations are low. They’re naïve, so they believe whatever bullshit you tell them. They don’t question much of anything. You can’t try that with an older woman. She’s been deceived so many times, she can spot a lie before it even leaves your mouth. If I’m looking to avoid commitment, the younger one is just the easier option.”

My heart plummets into my stomach. It confirms that Teddy was just using me. He saw me as foolish and naïve. The only reason he kept me around was because I was convenient. He got what he wanted, and I never questioned him. I believed every bullshit lie he told me. He was never going to commit to me. He intentionally chose me to avoid exactly that. I decide to distract myself in case I end up in tears.

“Hey, do you want some juice?” I offer, standing up.

“Sure. Glasses are on the top shelf of that cupboard over there.”

“I know. I saw them when I was looking for the plates earlier.”

Walking over to the fridge, I take out the carton of orange juice, then cross the kitchen to the cupboard on the other side. I'm quite tall, but I still have to lift onto my toes to reach the glasses.

"Fuck," Peter curses under his breath.

I spin around to face him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah...uh...I just..." He looks down at his plate, shutting his eyes as he rubs his temples. "I bit my tongue."

"Ow. I hate when that happens."

I pour two glasses of juice, then carry them back to him and sit down. He groans, shutting his eyes again. He clenches and unclenches his hand, blowing out slow, even breaths.

I almost roll my eyes. "Oh, c'mon. It can't be that bad, you big baby."

"You don't understand." When he opens his eyes, his gaze drops to my thighs, and it stays there for a while before it slowly moves back up to my face. "I'm in the worst kind of pain right now."

It's a little hard to take him seriously because a naughty grin curves on his lips, and he chuckles to himself as if he knows something I don't.

"If you're trying to get sympathy points from me, it's not working," I say.

"Yeah, sympathy is what I want."

The golden oldies continue to float through the speakers, and he's right. Those songs are upbeat and chirpy. They do make me feel happy inside. We continue chatting as we clean up the kitchen. Well, mostly me. He doesn't know the first thing about cleaning. After the dishes are packed away, he grabs a pint of ice cream from the freezer, and we return to our respective stools.

We seem to be doing a lot in this kitchen, but the one thing we never get around to is the very reason why I'm here. I'm supposed to be looking for a job, but he's such an enjoyable escape from my sad, pathetic reality. I can't bring myself to

ruin our conversation by reminding him that we're supposed to be job-hunting.

The sun creeps across the sky, and as night draws closer, I realize that I can't keep procrastinating. It's time to get back to my sad, pathetic reality. I have one last spoonful of ice cream before standing up. "I should get going."

Peter jolts with surprise, as if it hadn't occurred to him that I would have to leave at some point. "What? No. You can't leave now. It's getting dark, and you don't even have...pants."

"I've got a great solution for that. You're gonna drop me off at my motel, and no one is gonna notice that I'm not wearing pants when I run the five steps between the parking lot and my motel room."

He doesn't like that idea at all and stands up, too. "Just stay the night, and I'll take you back tomorrow."

"No!"

"Why not?"

How are we even having this conversation? The answer to that question is blatantly obvious. "Listen, Peter. I know you sold your soul to the devil to get your wealth and your insane good looks and those eyes that they stole from the fucking Jade Palace, but the rest of us mere *mortals* actually have to work to earn a living."

He smirks, pulling his lips in to keep a straight face. "I'm immortal now?"

"C'mon, you're not fooling me. Your taste in music and movies is a dead giveaway that you were born in the 1800s."

A howl of laughter rips out of him. It's so contagious I have to bite my lip to stop myself from joining in.

"I'm sharp as nails," I continue. "I grew up on *Vampire Diaries*, *Supernatural*, and Wattpad paranormal romances. You can't sneak something like that past me."

He still can't stop laughing. "I tried so hard, though."

“So, what are we dealing with here? Wendigo? Chiron? Some type of demon?”

“Vampire,” he confirms with a nod.

“I knew it.” I narrow my eyes at him conspiratorially. “But now that we’ve got that out the way, I’m sure you can understand why I shouldn’t be spending time with an immortal fuckboy. It’s very unproductive. Especially if my goal is to eventually meet a nice, faithful guy and settle down. Nice guys don’t want to necessarily date women who...have been with guys like *you* in their past, so every second I’m with you only further ruins my chances of getting married one day.”

His jaw tightens, and even though I notice a quick eye roll, he doesn’t make a comment about that.

“But that’s only one small part of the problem. Bottom line is, I need to sort my life out and get a job.”

“I told you I’d help you with that.”

“And I appreciate the offer. I appreciate your hospitality. I appreciate that you stopped me from making a really stupid mistake last night. Then you still brought me back here and listened while I babbled ‘til God knows what time. I’m grateful for all of that...but it was all just a distraction from the life I need to get back to. Staying here, talking about random crap all day, is not gonna help me find a job.” I reach up to lightly touch his face. “Thank you for everything. Sincerely, I mean it. But I have to go now.”

He stiffens at the contact, shifting back until my hand falls from his face. It’s the same distant coolness he’s been showing me from the moment I woke up, so I shouldn’t be surprised, but that reaction still catches me off guard.

“Sorry,” I say, sounding rather sheepish. “I’m new to this, so I don’t understand the rules or...how any of this works?”

“How what works?”

“This.” I gesture between the two of us. “You know...the day after. We’ve already had sex, so I’m sort of...expired goods because...you’re only into doing it, like, one time with

a girl...or whatever, but now I'm still here, and I'm just making it awkward by touching you..."

He's speechless, staring at me, completely dumbfounded, and it only makes everything *more* awkward.

"Like I was saying...I think I've overstayed my welcome," I say when the silence stretches on for a tad too long.

I spin on my heel and make a beeline for the staircase. As I pass through the foyer, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror above the entryway table. My cheeks are bright red with embarrassment. Peter catches up to me before I even get halfway through the foyer. Grabbing my wrist, he spins me around to face him.

"Wait." Confusion has etched itself into every crease on his forehead. He literally looks like his brain is about to explode, trying to process everything I just told him. "Back up a second. Say that again. You're expired what?" It must be a rhetorical question because he doesn't give me a chance to respond. "How did you even..." He runs both hands down his face before fixing those jade eyes on me. "Okay, let's clear this up because some wires got crossed here. The reason I don't want you touching me is not because I see you as *expired goods*. What the fuck even is that? Jesus!" He's still grappling with that statement because he shakes his head, as if he's mentally rejecting the entire concept. "The reason I don't want you touching me is because..." His hands curl into tight fists. "...because I am right there. Right on the fucking edge, so close to just...losing it. You're looking sexy as all hell in my T-shirt...and I know you have *nothing* on underneath that. So, I've been sitting in there for *hours*, just gritting my teeth, trying not to think about that."

I watch the rise and fall of his chest as his breathing elevates. His jaw is tight, shoulders tense.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"No, I'm not okay." His cool demeanor disappears instantly. "Do you understand that I've been watching you *all* day? When you got the glasses from the top cupboard, and *this* lifted up..." He grabs the front of the T-shirt like it's some

kind of traitor. "...I got the most tempting view of...Shit!" He shuts his eyes, his hands clenching as if he's battling something internally. "And I had to restrain myself and not act on it because we've got some weird dynamic going on here, and—"

"What do you mean?" I cut in.

"I mean...you're in a vulnerable situation, Lia. Emotionally. Financially. And I don't want to take advantage of that. I brought you here. I offered to help you, but I don't want you to feel like...you owe me anything. I haven't even tried to kiss you because I don't want you to think that I'm expecting *anything* from you. I'm not."

Wow. There might actually be a decent guy in there somewhere.

"So, I've been white-knuckling it through this day. I'm edgy. I'm irritable. I'm *not* okay." He points down to the bulge in his sweatpants. "I don't know how you didn't notice this. I've been in this state of perpetual horniness all afternoon, doing absolutely everything I can to distract myself. You think I give a shit about Leonardo DiCaprio's dating life? No! All I've wanted to do all day was get you naked. The only thought going through my head is how badly I want to fuck you right now."

False alarm. Decency remains undetected.

It finally clicks. He did the same thing last night. He waited for me to make the first move. It's weird, but knowing his reasons makes me like him just a tiny bit more. I don't understand what he does to me because once again, I find myself in the same predicament I continuously find myself in when it comes to him. Alarm bells go off. Gut feelings go into hyperdrive. My head tells me to not indulge this man, but I ignore all the warning signs and dive in head first.

"So, do it," I say.

"What?"

"Whatever you want."

It takes a second for the words to sink in, but as soon as his brain registers the green light, he grabs the back of my neck and yanks me toward him. If a wild animal was caged and left to starve for weeks and was then suddenly released to maul its unsuspecting prey, I imagine it would feel like this. He's so much bigger than me that I feel helpless and overwhelmed. But I give in and allow this ravenous predator to devour me.

His kiss is hard and hungry. The way his teeth scrape across my lower lip tells me how much he's been yearning for the taste of me. The way his tongue explores the depths of my mouth shows me how badly he wants me.

I respond with the same desperate fervor his kiss always extracts from me. With voracity in every step, he surges forward, sandwiching me between the wall and the crushing weight of his chest. His breaths are labored, fanning my flushed skin.

"Spend one more night with me," he whispers hoarsely.

Even though that sounds more like an order than a request, I still attempt to answer. My mounting need makes me incapable of finding my voice in my own throat, so I nod, and he takes possession of my mouth.

A rough hand skims up my thigh, creeping under the T-shirt, so eager to slip inside me. The moment it does, I find my voice again. A loud moan bursts out of me, but it's stifled by his unrelenting kiss.

The hard ridge of his cock presses against my abdomen. This is something I'm still getting accustomed to because prior experience has taught me that erections come from hard work and dedication to the task and not simply traipsing around the kitchen in a T-shirt.

It's such a turn-on knowing that I can get him to this state without even touching him. It feels like sorcery, witchcraft, and I want to see just how much power I can wield over him. I push him back a step and drop to my knees in front of him.

He stops breathing. His eyes fix on me, filled with lust and anticipation as I slowly drag down his sweatpants. His cock

springs free, and I take a moment to appreciate it. His head drops back when I wrap my fingers around it. I lick him slowly, my tongue running up from the base before closing over the thick tip. A ragged breath hisses out of him, and his fist slams against the wall.

“*Ahhh...you’re killing me, Li.*”

Oh, I like this superpower.

Bracing one hand against the wall, he weaves the other into my hair to hold me in place. His hips begin to rock, pushing his cock deeper into my mouth. My tongue works its magic, and his body grows more tense. He pumps faster, muscles flexing on his abs and quads. I tilt my head up, keeping my eyes on his so he can see how much pleasure I take in having this power. It only makes him lose control.

He hoists me up, stripping off the T-shirt before he bends me over. Hand on my back, he shoves my upper body down onto the entryway table. The wood rapidly cools my overheated skin, and my nipples begin to tingle. He opens the drawer, takes out a condom, and rips it open with his teeth. Having condoms right here so he can grab a few as he leaves the house is just another red flag that I ignore.

A big hand grasps my inner thigh, forcing my legs further apart before sliding up to my core. He rubs me up and down a few times, readying me, lubricating me with my own moisture before he rams his cock inside me.

The movement is sudden, so powerful it sends shockwaves through my entire being. Nails bite into my flesh as he grips my hips to keep me exactly where he wants me. His thrusts are rapid and furious. The table squeaks as it grinds against the hardwood floors. I’m so hot, trapped in a bubble of ecstasy, waiting eagerly for it to pop and spill over. I feel myself getting closer, but right before I orgasm, he abruptly stops.

His hand fists in my hair, and he tugs my head back so I can look at the mirror. Long fingers curl around my throat, and he leans closer.

“Look at yourself,” he rasps. “Do you see what I see, Lia?”

I see a wanton slut getting fucked from behind by a guy she hasn't even known for a week, but I don't share this viewpoint.

“See that fire in your eyes? It's burning for me. One day, you're gonna meet the nice guy you've been looking for, and you're gonna fall in love and get married.” A hint of acid laces his tone, and I can't help but wonder if he's jealous of a man I haven't even met yet. “You'll tell him all your secrets. You'll tell him about your asshole ex and the other guys you've dated, but you won't tell him about me. I'll be that dirty secret you hide from him forever.” He nips my earlobe and a sinister smile curves on his lips. “Because you won't want him to know that *this* is what I did to you.” His hips slam against my ass, hitting a spot so deep I cry out. “You won't want him to know that I'm the only man who ever made you feel like this. He's never gonna see that fire in your eyes...because it burns only for me.”

Something about that scares me. What if it's true? What if no one ever makes me feel this way again? I told him earlier that every second I spend with him ruins my chances of finding a nice guy. But he's not ruining my chances. He's ruining *me*...for every other man that comes after him. Whether I like it or not, I'm never going to be the same after this encounter with Peter Danahay.

His fingers tighten around my throat, and his mouth closes over mine. This kiss is tender, with a hint of danger. His other hand lightly cups my breast, massaging my nipple as he begins to move again. He drives into me slow and hard. So slow I feel every solid inch that fills me. So hard I jolt forward on impact. Placing both hands on the table for support, I curve my back, almost bending myself into a pretzel so I can kiss him again.

The pads of his fingers trace down my abdomen. It's a featherlight touch, so different from the devastating force of his pelvis. The conflicting sensations are erotic, lulling me into a hypnotic trance. He rubs small circles around my clit, and I almost explode. With aggravating slowness, his hand moves back over my hip and across my ass until it reaches the place where we join.

“Take a deep breath,” he says, his voice thick with desire.

It’s another order I mindlessly obey. I inhale, and as I do, he inserts the tip of his finger. His girth is already too much, and this sudden intrusion is difficult to accommodate. I feel stretched to my absolute limit, and my body stiffens in response. The discomfort alone is enough to expel a sharp breath from me, but it’s halted halfway when his fingers tighten around my throat. A small sound of protest still escapes.

“Shhhh.” He lightly grazes the apple of my cheek with his teeth. “Don’t talk. Don’t scream. Just feel.”

I allow myself to relax, trusting him enough to fully submit to this game he’s playing with my body. His finger pushes in deeper, and he uses the rhythm of his thrusts to work it all the way in.

“Feel my cock moving inside you.” It’s the undisguised depravity in his voice that turns me on even more. “Feel how wet you are for me. Feel the way your pussy is pulsing around me, gripping me like a fucking vise because it hurts so good.”

It does. It hurts in the best way. He takes total control of my breathing, loosening his fingers whenever he thinks I need more air. The reduction of oxygen is already making me lightheaded, but it’s the intoxicating mix of pain and pleasure that flings me into a rapturous death spiral. My nails claw against the wooden table, desperately trying to hold on to something, anything. A cold sweat breaks out on my back, tantalizing me as it runs down my spine.

“Open your eyes, dollface.” He shifts my head until I’m staring at myself in the mirror again. “I want you to see the ecstasy on your face when I make you cum.”

I don’t even recognize myself. My cheeks are flushed. My skin is damp. But it’s my eyes that catch my attention. They’re wild, ablaze with the fire he’s lit inside me. He didn’t imagine what he saw. I see it now too.

I watch him as he fucks me. The effect I have on him thrills me. The hard line of his jaw tightens as he withdraws

and plunges in again. His groans become deeper and more erratic. The flames grow in pace with his thrusts, fast and unyielding until they eventually consume me. I watch myself surrender control and come apart in his arms.

In the aftermath of my orgasm, the residual heat cascades over my body. I was so lost in the inferno I don't even know how it ended. All I know is that he's breathing hard when he loosens his grip around my neck and slowly pulls out of me.

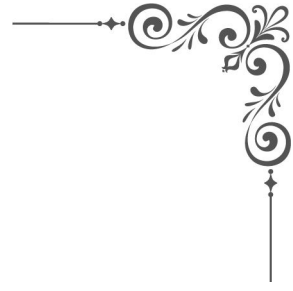
He takes a moment to regain some composure before he turns me around and lifts me up to sit on the table.

"I needed that," he says with a satisfied sigh.

"Wow, Armand," I say, looping my arms around his neck. "The undead sure do have some moves."

He chuckles at the vampire reference. "I'm immortal. I've had centuries to perfect this craft."

His arms slip around me, and he brushes his lips against mine. Languid at first, but as soon as he deepens the kiss, it reignites the embers in the pit of my stomach. It doesn't take long for the blaze to start up again. I realize then that this is *his* fire. It burns only for him.



6. Peter

Things have gotten slightly out of hand. I know this. I accept full responsibility. It's my fault. Not hers. She's been here for five days now, and I am entirely to blame. She protested. She argued. She gave me every excuse under the sun, and I was having none of it, so I am one hundred percent accountable for the situation we're now in.

In my defense, I took her back to the motel on Monday morning like I promised. She warned me that this place was dingy, and yet I still wasn't prepared. I took one look at her room, and it was a fuck no from me. No way was I going to let her stay in that dump. Paint was peeling off the walls. All the pipes were rusted, and she only got hot water about thirty percent of the time. There were trash bags all over the floor filled with her designer clothes. She can't live like that. Out of a fucking trash bag? No one should live like that.

I did what any reasonable person would do. I grabbed the bags, tossed them in the trunk of my car, and told her she could stay with me for a few weeks. That would give her enough time to get a job and find a decent apartment. And here's the kicker. Noble Nick decided to rear his stupid, ugly head again, so the most nonsensical drivel was falling out of my mouth.

I told her I would set her up in her own room all the way down the hall if that would make her feel more comfortable. She was under no obligation to even share my bed. I took sex off the table. Imagine that. Imagine that kind of soy boy energy just permeating off me with such reckless abandon. There were times I caught myself sounding so much like Dylan that I felt like I needed a life jacket so I didn't drown in the shame.

I asked the hottest woman alive to live under the same roof as me with NO sex! I have obviously lost my mind. Next thing you know, I'll be ordering pumpkin-spice lattes topped with extra fricken cinnamon. And I made this suggestion, knowing full well that fucking her is the best thing I've ever

experienced in my whole goddamn life. That was the kind of stupid shit I was saying. And I meant it. Yet even after making this offer, her response was still a resounding and vehement *No!*

It was then that we had our first heated argument, right there in the parking lot of the motel. I told her I wasn't leaving without her. She stormed into her room and slammed the door shut. She caved six hours later when she found me outside, sleeping in my car.

When she jumped into the front seat, she asked me why I cared so much. I told her not to throw around loaded words like that, but now I have to take a step back and self-reflect. I need a measured and strategic plan to figure out what the fuck is wrong with me. Why do I care?

I want to say it's because the sex is amazing, but that goes without saying. The sex *is* amazing. I can tell that she isn't very experienced by the way she reacts to me. The sex isn't great because she knows exactly what to do. The sex is great because she's still learning her body. Everything seems new to her and there's something so erotic about her eagerness to explore, her willingness to push her own boundaries. That's what keeps me coming back for more.

I've been with many women, and bar an exceptional few, one time is...sufficient. But Lia has created this insatiable chasm inside me. I can't seem to get enough of her. I love her taste. I love her smell. I love the way she looks at me with that burning passion in her hazel eyes.

Now that I'm thinking about it, I realize the depths of my idiocy. I was willing to give *all* that up. Thankfully, it didn't play out that way. We have a hard time keeping our hands off each other, so the no-sex thing lasted all of three hours. But that's not the point. The fact is, I was willing to make that sacrifice, so it's not about the sex. I've proven to myself on more than one occasion that I would choose her company over sex. It's torture, but I've done it a few times already.

So, if it's not the sex, what is it about her that draws me in? Maybe it's because she's this unsolvable puzzle. On the

surface, she's fun and a little flirty, with an unpredictable sense of humor. I don't know if it's because she had a sheltered life before her dad kicked her out, but there's an innocence about her that sometimes comes across as childlike, and she seems younger than her actual age.

But peel back a layer and she's a complete enigma. She shows her vulnerability so easily, but that's the only thing she shows. Everything else about her is a mystery. She's stoic, emotionally detached. I don't know what her asshole ex did to her, but I suspect he destroyed something very special inside her.

Now, maybe my subconscious has taken that information and manifested it into an unhealthy compulsion. I seem to be on a mission to find that special thing and possibly rebuild it. It's stupid. More stupid than sacrificing sex. But it's there and I can't get rid of it.

I keep telling myself that this woman wants to get married, and instead of that quality scaring me away, it actually infuriates the living hell out of me. She wants a nice guy to settle down with. Great. I'm not that guy, so it shouldn't bother me.

But it does! Every time she says that, some guy walking around in her imaginary world of book boyfriends gets punched in the fucking face. Shit, how much time have I spent with her that I know what a book boyfriend is?

And eventually, one of those guys is going to walk straight out of her imagination and wife her up. And he would be winning the jackpot because this chick is proper wifey material.

She's always cooking or baking or cleaning. She straightened out my entire walk-in closet, right down to my sock drawer. She reorganized the entire kitchen. Everything is in glass jars with little labels on them. She even folds the towels in the bathroom in that fancy way the hotels do. In a mere five days, she terraformed my place to look like the set of an IKEA commercial. This intrusion of my personal space should bother me.

But it doesn't! I happen to like the slight touch of femininity she's sprinkled throughout my house. Though, I shouldn't get used to it. This is only temporary.

"So, they called me back," Lia says, stepping into my bedroom. She shuts the door, then sits down on the bed beside me.

We brought back multiple bags filled with designer clothes, and she still wears my T-shirts. It's another infringement of my personal space that I let slide because...I like it.

I sit up against the headboard and rub the sleep from my eyes. "And what did they say?"

"I didn't get the job." She releases a heavy sigh of disappointment. "I don't have the necessary skills, experience, or qualifications."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I was sure you had that one in the bag." This is her third rejection. I didn't know finding a job was so difficult. "What qualifications are they talking about, though? That one just required a high school diploma."

She wrings her hands, looking nervous. "I'm not sure. They didn't give me any details."

Her uneasiness escalates, and she becomes more fidgety. See, this is the part of her that's a mystery. We could be in the middle of a normal discussion, and out of the blue, she'll withdraw for no reason. Or maybe there is a reason, and she doesn't want to tell me what it is. I don't know if she's hiding something or if that's just an odd personality trait, but she's got a wall up with a big no-entry sign in front. I'm not allowed past that point.

"Peter, I shouldn't be staying here."

Oh, God. Here we go again. She does this every day. Sometimes two, three times a day. Even though I've told her that I don't mind and she's not a burden, it's the same song and dance *every* time.

With an irritated groan, I get out of bed, pull on my sweatpants, and walk into the bathroom. "Lia, we've been

over this.” I smear toothpaste onto my brush and start brushing my teeth.

She follows behind me but stops at the door to lean against the frame. “I don’t know how long it’s going to take for me to find a job, and I can’t just...stay here...indefinitely. It’s not fair to you.”

My response is clipped. “I told you it’s not a problem.”

“But it is. You had a *life* before I came along. Don’t you want things to go back to normal? You’re supposed to be going out with your friends, drinking and partying, sleeping with a girl every night.”

I spit out the white foam then rinse my mouth, growing more annoyed by the second. “That isn’t an accurate description of my life.”

“Well, maybe not every night, but you get what I’m saying.”

“No, I really don’t.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, readying herself for a fight that I don’t want to be the other party to. “On Sunday night, you got a call from a girl named Linda.”

“Which I didn’t answer.” I grab my hair trimmer from the cabinet and switch it on.

“Because of me.”

“No.” I take a deep breath, making an active effort to tamper down my aggravation. “Because I didn’t want to talk to her.”

“And last night, I overheard you listening to a voice note from Shelly.”

“Shelby,” I correct, stroking the trimmer across my cheek to neaten my stubble so that it’s giving three days instead of five.

“Whatever. She asked you if you wanted to go out, and she was going to *bring a friend*.” She air-quotes the words as if the actual meaning was lost on either of us. “And then you just

stayed home, playing backgammon with me and listening to music from the seventies.”

“Sixties,” I correct again. “If you want to have this discussion, at least get your facts straight.”

“Peter.” She stomps her foot, frustrated that I’m not giving this the seriousness she wants me to.

I wash my face, then grab one of the expertly folded towels to dab my skin dry. “Li, just get to the point.”

“I just...I feel like I’m cramping your style.”

I walk over to her, getting so close she has to crane her neck up to look at me. “You know, dollface, I wouldn’t have let you unpack if I knew you were going to be taking these guilt trips so often.”

I drop a quick kiss on her cheek. When she’s in this mood, any form of affection annoys her, and I want to bring her up to the level she’s taken me to. Hearing the exasperated humph satisfies me, and only then do I move past her, back into my bedroom.

She turns around to look at me as I sit down on the edge of the bed. “Are you telling me you didn’t want to have a sweaty, dirty threesome with Shelby and her bimbo friend? I mean, I wasn’t even aware that people engage in those kinds of extracurricular activities on a weeknight, but she sounded very enthusiastic.”

The slight hint of jealousy in her voice gives me another dose of satisfaction. It’s a fact I’d like to gloat about, but I don’t because I’m the asshole here. I’m the one who passed up a dirty threesome with Shelby and her bimbo friend to play backgammon and listen to music from the sixties. It’s not a choice I’m proud of, but it’s a choice that took me less than a nanosecond to make.

On the one hand, there was the promise of raunchy, filthy sex with two incredibly hot women. And on the other hand, there was Lia. It was a no-brainer, but I’m not going to stand here and try to justify myself. I’m not going to explain to her just how easy it was for me to make that choice.

Largely because...

I don't even understand it myself.

"If I wanted to go out and have a threesome, I'd go out and have a threesome. It's an option that's pretty much *always* available to me. Can we end this discussion now?"

Her eyebrows draw together because she's still confused. "What do you get out of this?"

"Fuck, if I know. So far, it just seems to be nagging and complaints. I've been searching for the mute button on you for about two days now, but I can't seem to find it."

"Like your sense of humor?" she fires back.

"Like the deed to your penthouse."

Her mouth drops open in shock. "Wow." She blinks repeatedly. "Just give me a second." She rubs her eyes, then blinks again. "Sorry, my eyes are just trying to adjust because it got *dark* in here so fast. That was dark even for you, Lestat."

I try to hold back a smile. These vampire references are never-ending. I get renamed every day. "It wasn't that dark."

"That joke wasn't just dark. It was...*cold*." She hugs herself. "So cold. Do you have a jacket? I feel like I'm lost and alone in the forest. Are my nipples beading up? I'm freezing."

I chuckle. This is something I really like about her. When she's not stressing or overthinking, this playful, funny side comes out. It's silly and dramatic, and I sometimes say things intentionally just to get that reaction. She bounces between stoic, withdrawn, and closed off, but every now and then, she drops the mask, and I get to see glimpses of who she really is. This is that special something I think her ex destroyed. This is the thing I keep chasing.

"Come here," I say.

She walks over to me, and I grip her legs and pull her onto my lap to straddle me.

"Why don't we have an agreement so you can stop overthinking this? If I ever feel like this is going on for too

long or...you're cramping my style, I'll tell you."

"What if when that happens, you feel too bad to tell me, or what if you feel obligated—"

"Lia, I barely know you. I don't owe you a goddamn thing, not even sugarcoating or euphemism. The very first thing you learned about me is that I'm a straightforward guy. If I want you to leave, I'll tell you to pack your shit and leave. So, can we agree that you'll trust me enough to be frank with you, and I'll trust you enough to respect my house and my things even when I'm not around, and then we can put this to bed?"

She's quiet for a while, considering everything I've said, and then finally nods. "I agree to those terms."

"Me too." I grin, tossing her over as my hand slowly glides up her smooth thigh. "Now, let's put it to bed."

My mouth closes over hers, and she draws me in instantly. Pulling me closer, she threads her fingers through my hair. Those long legs wrap around me, and she moans when my eager cock presses against her denim shorts at just the right spot. There's something so intoxicating about her kiss. It destabilizes me, disarms me. The plumpness of her mouth is the reason why threesomes no longer hold any appeal for me. I deepen the kiss, but this lust-fest comes to a screeching halt when my bedroom door swings open.

"Yo, Pete, wake up."

My head springs up to see Dylan strolling in. Seeing him is the equivalent of a bucket of ice water being dumped on my flaming hot skin. "Fuck, Dyl!"

I let out a frustrated groan when I see Scott walk in behind him. I do a quick check to make sure Lia is still decent before my attention turns back to my friend, my eyes narrowing to a death stare. He's unperturbed by the barrage of threats I'm silently flinging his way.

Instead, he glances between me and Scott, amusement dancing in his brown eyes. "Shit, Pete. I don't know if you know this, but...but there's a girl trapped beneath you."

I grit my teeth. "I'm fully aware, thanks."

“Hi, I’m Dylan.” He casually reaches out to shake her hand. Leave it to him to do something like that, even as the awkward tension builds in the room.

“Lia,” she responds, sounding a little uncertain. And, of course, she’d feel that way. She doesn’t understand the inner workings of this dumb-ass and how he thrives on moments just like this one. “Mahalia, but you can call me...Lia.”

“Nice to meet you, Lia,” Dylan says with cheerful exuberance. “Sorry to barge in on you like this, but we didn’t expect Peter to have a woman in here because he never invites girls over.” He smirks when he glances back at Scott. “Isn’t that right, Scott? He’s *never* brought a girl home before.”

“Never,” Scott agrees, desperately trying to keep a straight face.

“Wow, that must mean you really like her, huh, Pete?”

“Fuck, Dyl.” I drop my head against Lia’s shoulder, trying to compose myself. I’m going to kill him. I’m going to fucking kill him. And he still has the nerve to grin at me when I look up at him again. “We’re friends, but this is inappropriate.”

“Is it?” He gasps, feigning shock. “How inappropriate would you say? Like, if you had to rate it on a scale, would you put it on the lower end? Like that time Scott sent me that super-cringe voice note in the middle of the night...”

Scott rolls his eyes. “Leave me out of this, please.”

“Or would you put it more on the higher end, like that time when you groped your dick in front of my fiancé...*during* my proposal?”

Scott snorts out a laugh, but I just shake my head because I should’ve expected this from him. I ruined his corny proposal, and it looks like he’s going to remind me about it *forever*. He just can’t let go of the past.

“The things you’ll do to prove a point,” I huff.

Lia apparently finds this hilarious because her awkwardness disappears and is replaced with a giggle. “Did you do that?”

“I didn’t know he was proposing,” I reply before my eyes lock on Dylan. “Consider this me giving you an official notice. I’m kicking you out. You have one week to pack up your shit and get the fuck out of here.”

Once again, he doesn’t care about the threat because he’s moving out after the wedding, anyway.

“You’re talking out of anger again, honey. We’ll find a way to work this out.” The bastard winks at me. “Well, I think we’ve done enough damage. We’ll meet you downstairs, Pete. Lia, it was lovely meeting you.”

They leave the room, snickering like morons, and with a frustrated groan, I slowly stand up.

“Are you leaving?” she asks, sounding slightly apprehensive.

“I have to,” I admit, much to my disdain. “Sorry, this slipped my mind. Dyl wants to do this cringy-ass shit at the wedding, and we have to practice every Thursday. I promised Scott I wouldn’t let him suffer alone, so we’re both stuck doing it.”

“What does he want to do?”

I’m too embarrassed to even say it out loud. “I’m not telling.” I pull on a T-shirt, then sit down on the edge of my bed to pull on my socks and sneakers. “The only way you’re ever gonna be a witness to that humiliating spectacle is if you come to the wedding.”

“Guess that means I’m your date for the wedding.” She freezes as soon as the statement leaves her mouth, her playful giggle dying on her lips. “I mean...uh...That was a joke. You don’t have to...to take me to the wedding or...anywhere. I was just...”

She’s going into overthinking mode again, and she shouldn’t. I know what she meant. It was a joke, but I gotta admit, it’s not the worst idea in the world. I certainly won’t have to deal with Dylan’s mom and aunts constantly asking me when I’m going to get a girlfriend and settle down.

“Why don’t you be my date for the wedding next weekend?”

And even though I posed the question in an offhanded, nonchalant way, it still makes her uncomfortable. “I can’t come with you to the wedding. Dylan seems to be a close friend of yours. That’s so personal. I can’t...” She releases a heavy sigh. “Peter, you and I are not...together like that. I know we’re...we’re...”

“Fucking?” I fill in.

“Yes, but that’s...sort of it. I don’t want lines getting blurred and calling it a date does exactly that. I’m already in very real danger of almost...*liking* you. Having a thing for sexy, womanizing manwhores is a very acquired taste. And do you understand that I am right on the cusp of acquiring that taste? Imagine if, after this encounter, I have this irrepressible attraction to Hustler University graduates. What will become of me? It’s gross, Peter. Disgusting!”

I pull my lips in to stop a smile. “I’m not that fond of you, either.”

“Good. And we need to keep it that way because...well, you’re the furthest thing from what I want in a life partner.” She’s playing it off as lighthearted, but she means every word. “You’re not exactly husband material.”

One day, I’m going to figure out why it bugs me so much every time she says shit like that. It shouldn’t because I have no interest in pursuing a relationship with her. Maybe it’s because I know that I’m just a placeholder until her Mr. Perfect comes along. I don’t know who he is, but every time I think of this nameless, faceless person putting his hands on her, it drives me up the fricken wall.

This is a very unfamiliar feeling to me, so instead of dwelling on it, I shove it aside and continue with the conversation. “Slow your roll, dollface. I’m not asking you to gallop away into the sunset with me and live happily ever after. It’s just a wedding. If you want, I’ll even help you practice catching the bouquet. We’ll make sure all the planets

are aligned and nothing is left to chance when your dumb Prince Charming finally comes along.”

“That was so inspiring and heartfelt.” She clasps her hands together, tilting her head to the side in that Disney Princess kind of way. She even heightens her voice to a sickeningly sweet tone. “I feel like I’m on the verge of breaking into song.”

I grab my wallet from the nightstand and tuck it into my back pocket. “Save it for later. I need to get going. Are you going to be my date – Sorry, not date – my plus one for the wedding?”

“Well, you asked so nicely, how could I refuse?”

“Glad we got that settled.” I lean over, pluck a quick kiss on her lips, then straighten again. “I’ll see you later.”

She smiles. “See you later.”

I dash out the door and stop midway down the stairs. “Hey, Li, do you want me to pick up some food on my way home?” I yell. “Pizza or something?”

“No, I’ll cook dinner,” she yells back.

“Okay.” I run down the rest of the stairs but freeze at the front door.

What the hell just happened? That whole exchange was too familiar, too domesticated. I remind myself that I’ve only known her for about a week, yet we sounded like an old married couple. And we’re not even a couple. How did we get here?

I shake off the feeling and step outside. I feel their energy the second I get into the backseat of Dylan’s Lamborghini Urus, and they snicker when I slam the door shut.

The asshole of all assholes can’t even keep it together for two seconds and starts singing as he backs out of the driveway. “Peter and Lia, sitting in a tree.”

“Shut up, Dyl.”

Scott twists in the passenger seat to look back at me. “You brought her home...to your house? Not even the beach house. Your actual house.”

I know they’re just going to give me shit if they find out that I’ve also taken her to my beach house, so I decide to play it cool. “Yeah, so?” I reply with a shrug. “What’s the big deal? I do it all the time.”

“K. I. S. S. I. N. G.”

Scott knows as well as I do that my statement is a complete fabrication and wastes no time in calling me out on it. “Pete, we’ve been friends since the second grade. You have done that exactly *zero* times.”

“First comes love. Then comes marriage.”

“That’s real mature, Dylan. I swear to God, Scott, today’s the day I donate him to charity. I don’t want him anymore.”

“Then comes baby Peter in a tiny carriage.” Dylan makes a right, then starts the song again.

“And she looked familiar, too,” Scott continues, as if he doesn’t hear the chaos in the background. “Wasn’t she the model you hooked up with on the night of Dylan’s bachelor party?”

That grabs Dylan’s attention, and he finally stops singing. “You went back for seconds? One time wasn’t enough for you? You had to go back and smash that again. I don’t blame you, Pete. Use her for what she’s good for, then kick her to the curb.”

“Yo, don’t talk about her like that,” I snap, and it’s only when Dylan slouches over the steering wheel howling with laughter that I realize it was just a ploy to get a reaction from me, and like an idiot, I fell for it.

It’s not like him to say anything disparaging about females, so that should’ve been the first clue. I should’ve thought about it more before I ran my mouth, but hearing him speak about her like that spiked my anger straight through the roof. My regret is instant because now I have to deal with this shit.

Dylan looks over at Scott like he just caught me out or something. “Fuck me! You do like her. You like her a lot!”

“I don’t.” I groan inwardly. Why does he have to turn every goddamn situation into an episode of *Perfect Match*? “I don’t...like her. We’ve just been hanging out. Is that a crime?”

“I’m not as good at math as Scott is, but I do know that hanging out plus making out equals dating.”

“I’m not dating her!” My little epiphany at the front door draws that rebuttal into question, but I still say it with conviction.

“Okay, how often do you guys *‘hang out’* together?” Scott asks.

“Well, she’s...” This is the moment I’ve been dreading. “...she’s sort of been staying at my place since the bachelor party, so...every day.”

“Wait! What!” Dylan meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “That’s almost a week. She’s been staying with you for a week? How did I not know about this?”

“Because you’re never home, Dyl. You’ve been sleeping over at Isabella’s house every night since you proposed. You only come home to shower, change, and have breakfast.”

Dylan parks the car, and now that we’ve reached our destination, I’m hoping they’ll drop the entire discussion, but Scott has latched onto it like a Chihuahua on an ankle.

“So, how did you go from a one-night stand to her just... living with you?”

It’s really none of their business, but I answer just so the end can come faster. “It’s a long story, but her dad kicked her out, so I told her she could stay with me until she gets a new place.”

We hop out of the car and walk toward the entrance of the dance studio.

“Not gonna lie, that sounds a little sus to me,” Scott says. “I don’t know her, but I’m picking up some low-key forty-niner vibes. That’s definitely a sob story a gold digger would

use to manipulate an unsuspecting victim. Are you sure she's not lying about her dad, playing the sympathy card to...I don't know...exploit you for your money?"

Did I hear him right? Did he just ask me if she's trying to exploit me for my money? I'm no stranger to exactly the type of woman he's referring to. I've met many of them, so I know the root cause of his concern, but he doesn't even know Lia. How does he have the gall to even make an assumption like that? The truth is, the whole situation is my doing. *I* asked her to go to my beach house that first night. *I* asked her to go home with me on the second night. And *I* was the one who asked her to live with me until she finds a place.

They're my friends. My best friends. But they're really starting to piss me off.

"She's not trying to *exploit* me, alright?" I snap, and my exasperation is carried in my tone. "She's a model, for fuck's sake. Besides, you know I don't hook up with chicks who are...poor. She comes from money too. Her dad owns the Bayview Country Club."

Scott's eyebrows furrow together as if he still doesn't believe me. "My dad and I go there all the time. We know the owner. I don't think he has a daughter."

I don't know why Scott is so adamant about this. He wasn't there. He didn't witness what I'd witnessed.

We step into the studio and step across the glossy wooden flooring to get the room that Dylan booked. I expect to find Tommy there already, but instead, we encounter a bunch of seven-year-olds closing off their ballet dance recital.

"Of course, he has a daughter," I say, lowering my voice so none of the little girls hear the whole sordid story. "*She's* his daughter. Remember that day you left to pick Cat up from the airport?" I wait for him to nod. "About ten minutes after you left, he chewed her out in front of everyone. It was brutal, so... after we hooked up the night of the bachelor party, I offered to let her stay with me. And she's not trying to exploit me because she made it very clear that she is utterly repulsed by the thought of dating me."

“Yeah, it definitely looked like she can’t stand you,” Dylan quips.

Scott smirks. “That’s probably why she was lying down.”

“Fuck off, the both of you.” I decide to end it there. “Can we talk about something else, please? Like this voice note you keep referring to.”

Dylan’s eyes light up, and he reaches into his back pocket for his cell phone. “I didn’t let you listen to the voice note?”

The look on Scott’s face gives me a level of satisfaction I’ve never felt before. I’m so glad I’m not the only one that has to suffer through these antics.

“Dyl, c’mon. That’s not necessary.”

“Oh, I think it is, Scott. I told you I’d use this as a gentle reminder one day.”

He presses play and from the first few drunken words Scott slurs out, I know this is going to be nuclear. Scott rags on Dylan for, like, four minutes straight, telling him that marrying Francesca was a terrible mistake. Scott warned him several times not to go through with the wedding because it was clear to both of us that he was still in love with Isabella.

But Dylan refused to listen, so the *I-told-you-so’s* in this voice note are running rampant. It takes a turn after that, and Scott tells him that he’s so fucked up because he found out Cat’s dating someone else. This is the part Dylan wants me to listen to because Scott truly is a drunken mess as he pours his heart out. It’s quite entertaining.

Both of them are such...simps. I don’t know how they allowed themselves to get so twisted over women. Hearing the hurt in my friend’s voice only reinforces my stance on relationships. It’s a hard pass from me.

“See that?” I say. “That’s the reason why I’ll never fall in love. Women are not worth that kind of trouble.”

We wait until all the girls have filed out of the room before we enter. We’ve done this a few times, so all three of us

silently shuffle to the assigned spots. I do a few lunges, stretching my legs out while we wait for Tommy to arrive.

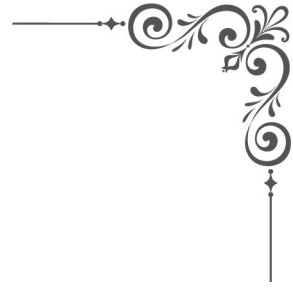
“I wouldn’t say that with so much confidence if I were you, Pete,” Dylan says. “Once a woman sinks her claws into you, you have no defenses, no control, so you better buckle up because I heard a rumor about you. You wanna know what I heard?”

“What?”

“Well, a little birdie told me that he saw...Peter and Lia sitting in a tree. K. I. S. S. I. N. G.”

I roll my eyes. He’s such a fucking asshole.

“Shut up, Dyl. Put the music on and let’s get this over with.”



7. Lia

“Peter, this is not the time or the place for this.”

The push-door swings closed behind me. He quietly creeps alongside the wall until he reaches the edge, then peeps around the corner like some kind of secret spy. “It’s empty. C’mon.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me into the laundry room. My heels click against the tiles as I try to keep up with his brisk steps. My dress is quite an elegant piece. A one-shoulder bottle-green silk evening gown adorned with silver sequins and rhinestones around the midriff. It hugs every curve from my breasts to my hips, but flares out when it hits the slit midway down my thigh. It’s the perfect attire for this wedding, just not the ideal getup for racing through a laundry room. With my free hand, I gather the long edges to stop myself from tripping over.

“Did I tell you that you look incredible today?” he asks.

“Only about a hundred times.”

“I’ve been watching you all day. I want you so bad I can’t even think straight. You and that dress are doing crazy things to me.”

“Please don’t blame the dress. You’re exactly the same even when I’m wearing your old football jersey.”

All I get is a chuckle in response and his steps increase in pace. We pass about twelve stainless steel industrial-sized washing machines before we get to the other side. One lonely whirring drum tells me it must be a slow day. Hopefully, that means none of the staff will come stumbling in here. Hope is all I have because logic and rationality don’t work when he gets like this. He’s focused on one thing and one thing only.

In contrast, I’m trying to think beyond how sexy he looks in that suit and be the voice of reason. “Damon, there are over two hundred guests on the other side of the door.”

Him in a suit is giving that Damon Salvatore energy today, hence the name. But the joke and the attempt at logic land on deaf ears. “And it’s just the two of us in here,” he counters.

He yanks me into a narrow space. On one side is a washing machine, which is thankfully high enough to shield us from view. On the other side are long rows of metal shelves mounted to the wall, stacked high with clean, folded white towels.

“You’re a groomsman. Surely, someone’s going to come looking for you.”

“Photos are done.” He’s already unbuckling his belt. “The reception hasn’t started yet.” He hoists me up, balancing my ass on the edge of one metal shelf. “We’ve got about ten minutes before anyone even notices I’m gone.”

His impatience is such a turn-on. The way he lifts my legs around his waist. The way he drags the silky green material higher up my thighs. The way he just doesn’t give a damn that someone might walk in at any moment.

With bated breath, I watch as he tugs his zipper down and slips on a condom. My pulse thrums beneath my skin when his hand sneaks beneath my dress. He catches the seam of my lacey thong and shifts it to the side. Something about me seems to mesmerize him because he doesn’t say a word as he positions himself at my entrance.

Those jade eyes remain fixated on me as he sinks into me. A husky groan echoes in his throat, an erotic sound that sends pleasure waves rippling through my body. He doesn’t kiss me. He just stares at me as his hips begin to rock.

The way he looks at me has become an addictive aphrodisiac. It gets my heart pounding wildly, my temperature rising rapidly. It’s a look of raw lust and rapt appreciation. It’s a look of yearning, even though he’s buried inside me. Peter always looks at me like he could never want anyone more.

He reaches up, gripping the shelf above my head. The sturdiness of the metal gives him enough leverage to drive

deeper inside me. A loud moan rips from my throat and his other hand clamps down on my mouth to muffle the sound.

“Shhhh,” he whispers, a playful grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Let’s not draw attention to ourselves. I don’t want anyone seeing you like this except me.”

His thrusts are slow and purposeful, his pelvis hitting against mine in a hard, relentless rhythm. My ass jerks as his movements increase in force, the buckle of his belt clinking each time it taps the metal shelf. The need mounting between us is palpable. He’s panting. I’m moaning into his palm.

“Fuck, Li, you feel so good.” Right before I climax, he drops his hand, his mouth hovering mere millimeters above mine. “The way your pussy pulses around me makes me lose my fucking mind.”

When he finally kisses me, molten heat engulfs me. Our lips meet in a fervent collision of hunger and desire. I should be used to it by now. Over the last two weeks, I must’ve kissed him a thousand times, but every time it’s different. More passionate. More intense. The dexterity of his tongue mixed with his rough, rapid thrusts is a potent blend of sensations that sends me over the edge.

A sexy sound rumbles in his throat when he feels me tighten around him. I come apart in his arms and he swallows every aching whimper. His body stiffens and his teeth sink into my lower lip as he climaxes. We stay there, an entangled mass of limbs, as the euphoric high slowly subsides.

He drops his forehead against mine, his heavy breaths warm on my skin. “It was definitely the dress,” he whispers hoarsely.

I snicker as he withdraws and sets me back down on the floor. I hold on to him until I can feel my legs again. He helps me neaten my dress and I straighten his jacket and tie before we walk back to the door. He does his stealthy spy checks, then gives me the go-ahead to leave the laundry room.

I tell him to meet me outside the ladies’ room, then disappear to freshen up. A naughty grin is still plastered on his

face when I emerge five minutes later.

“Now, remember,” he says, taking my hand. “I’m trying to avoid lectures and life advice at all costs. If anyone asks, you’re my girlfriend...except if it’s Mrs. Diaz. I can’t have you ruining my chances with her.”

I giggle. He seems to have the sweetest schoolboy crush on the mother of the bride, and I find it absolutely adorable.

As we walk through the crowd, he interlinks his fingers with mine. Part of me wonders if he’s holding my hand to keep up the pretense or if he *wants* to hold my hand. Is it weird that I want it to be the latter?

It is weird. Actually, it’s not weird. It’s stupid. I remind myself that this is a temporary situation, and I shouldn’t even indulge in such ludicrous thoughts.

“I thought Katharine Hepburn was the only woman you were keen to wife up,” I tease.

“Mrs. Diaz ranks a little higher than good, ol’ Kathy, seeing as though she’s still alive. And way hotter.”

I look across the room at Mrs. Diaz, who has her arm looped through her husband’s as they walk around, greeting all their guests. “And her husband doesn’t deter you at all?”

“Keith is a bit of a nuisance,” Peter quips as we walk to our table, “but I’ve made my intentions clear.”

We reach the table close to the stage and Peter pulls out a chair for me. I sit down, taking in the details around me. This wedding is not what I expected at all. I was expecting this sort of snooty, overly posh, rubbing-shoulders-with-the-elites type of event. But everyone here seems very down to Earth. I wasn’t totally off the mark, though. It’s a very posh wedding.

The church was immaculate, and the reception is being held at the Royale Hotel, where even the most basic finger foods are served on a silver platter. The bride must have a thing for pink because soft pink lighting illuminates the slightly dim room. Pink satin is delicately draped from the middle of the ceiling to every corner. White and pink roses have been neatly set in the middle of every table surrounded

by round pink scented candles. It truly is an elegant display. I take a picture of the table before I sit down.

“Another one?” Peter asks.

I give a sheepish smile. “Well, yeah. It’s a special day.”

“It’s not just today. You take *a lot* of pictures in general. It has nothing to do with the occasion. No matter where we go – the park, the beach – you’re just always taking pictures.”

“Sometimes...sometimes a picture is all you have left of a moment. If something good happens, or if I get to experience just a sliver of happiness, I like to have a picture to remember it.”

He shrugs it off because he doesn’t get it, and I didn’t expect him to. No one truly understands how important pictures are until they only have one left. “Yeah, but...it’s a very obsessive habit, don’t you think?”

He may not understand my reasons, but he’s right about the result. I’ve been quite obsessive today, even more so than usual, taking pictures of every tiny detail, not only to remember how exquisite everything is, but as an electronic journal of all the things I would like at my wedding one day.

Well, that’s if I ever meet a decent man who will have me. God knows I have significantly reduced my chances of that happening. From an extra-marital affair to living in sin with the world’s biggest manwhore. I’m not exactly racking up points on the marriage eligibility scale, especially after I just screwed said manwhore in a laundry room not even ten minutes ago.

And we’re not only living in sin. We’re doing...things. Together. All the time. That gated community complex he lives in (and owns) is conducive to a lot of fun-filled activities because there’s so much to do there.

Just this week we’ve gone biking and had a picnic and went for a long walk as we watched the sunset. That’s couple stuff. And then to top it all off, last night he took me to the rehearsal dinner at Dylan’s family restaurant, and we hung out with *all* his friends. In all fairness, I enjoyed their company.

They're a jovial bunch, but I don't feel right being involved in such personal parts of his life.

Then, to make matters worse, he actually kept his promise and helped me practice catching the bouquet. He bought a bunch of plastic flowers for us to toss around in his backyard. After his first throw almost took my eye out, he admitted he used to play football in high school. I told him I wasn't aware that I was in the presence of a professional, and from that moment, I gave it my all. I mean, I brought my A-game.

I've never watched a game of football in my life, but I was out there yelling "*blue forty-two*" and "*hut-hut*" before every throw. He even let me wear his old football jersey during a training session because he believed in my *potential*. The entire exercise was way more fun than I'd anticipated, and I'm not going to lie, there were moments when I was absolutely swooning over this guy. It's the grin. It's the eyes. It's everything, his whole demeanor. He's so...

Whatever. I'm not even going to go down that road. The bottom line is, he had my heart shooting chocolate bubbles. Thankfully, I popped every last one of them because that's the kind of nonsense that blurs the lines I've been trying very hard to keep in place.

So, to summarize: on the one hand, he trained me to become an expert catcher because, in some superstitious way, it helps in my endeavor to find a husband. Couples don't do things like that.

On the other hand, one particularly frisky tackle led to us having the hottest sex outside on the grass. It was seeing me wearing his football jersey that brought on the lust so suddenly. Apparently, seeing me in his clothes turns him on. That's something a boyfriend would say, so that brings us right back to *couple stuff*.

I don't know what's going on between us. It's all so confusing. The more time I spend with him, the more uncertain the situation becomes. I wasn't lying when I told him I was in real danger of liking him. I *do* like him. I don't want to, but it's hard not to. He's just a fun, carefree guy. He's

so magnetic. No matter how much I try to distance myself from him, he pulls me right back.

But I need to be on high alert. Teddy taught me some hard lessons. I know not to fall for the charms of a playboy. I know that guys who aren't looking for commitment don't magically wake up one morning ready to commit. For men like Teddy and Peter, one woman is never enough.

Just like Teddy, Peter will eventually grow bored. Any day now, he's going to tell me to pack up my shit and leave, and I'm fully prepared for such a scenario. That's why I can't allow myself to get sucked into stupid emotions, because emotions are dangerous and can take me down a very dark path.

A resounding applause yanks me out of my inner musings, and I realize I daydreamed all the way through Scott's best man's speech. Cheers and whistles erupt as Scott walks back to the table. Tommy pops open a bottle of champagne, pours a glass, and hands it to me.

"Oh...no, thank you. I feel kinda queasy." This isn't even a lie. I feel sick to my stomach. It must be all this anxiety.

"You okay?" Peter asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a bout of nausea."

Scott returns to the table and sits down. I can sense some tension between him and Catalina. Peter told me they used to date, and I guess the fact that her current boyfriend and ex-boyfriend are sitting at the same table must be awkward for her. Cat and Scott exchange glances, and I detect a silent yearning. I only pick up on it because it's a constant feeling for me, so it's easy to spot. I'm sensing they still have unresolved feelings for each other, which makes the presence of her boyfriend even more...awkward.

"That was a great speech, Scotty," Tommy says, sounding almost tearful.

Tommy is the bride's best friend, so I can understand the emotion in his voice. They're so close she made him the maid

of honor, and he deserves it. He's been her biggest cheerleader today.

It must be nice.

To have a friend like that. Someone who knows you inside out and stands by you, regardless. My heart sinks with the heavy weight it carries. Being around Peter and his friends is not great for my mental health. All of them have such a close bond with each other. Peter complains about Dylan all the time. Scott does too, but there's no doubt in my mind that they all have a deep love for one another. I get the same sense of connection between Tommy and Isabella.

They're not related, but they're family. They have that strong human connection that I miss, that I crave. I hate watching all of them together. It reinforces my loneliness, highlights every empty space in my isolated existence.

I watch the newly married couple cut their wedding cake and feed it to each other. Dylan is completely enamored by her, and she is utterly in love with him. I envy them. I want what they have. It's the same kind of love my parents had, and I'm determined to find it for myself.

So, when Dylan's mother announces that all the single ladies should report to the dance floor, I shove the melancholy aside and stand up. I'm ready to find happiness of my own.

"Make me proud," Peter says with a wink.

I walk with Catalina to the dance floor and stop somewhere in the middle. "Are you hoping for a proposal from your boyfriend?" I ask as we wait for the other women to gather around us.

Her body tenses. "It's unlikely. I've...I've done something...unforgivable." Her eyes flash back to Scott at the table and the guilt on her face lets me know exactly what the unforgivable act is. It also explains the tension and yearning I've seen between the two of them. "When I tell him..." She leaves the sentence hanging for my imagination to complete and gives a nod, like she's already accepted her fate. "JP deserves better."

I was just asking a simple question. I wasn't expecting her to divulge that kind of information. I met her for the first time at the rehearsal dinner last night. The guilt must be fierce for her to just blurt that out to a stranger like that.

"Uh..." I don't know how to respond, so I nod, too. "I hope both of you find happiness...even if it's not with each other."

"Thank you," she says with a somewhat sad smile.

Isabella tosses the bouquet in the air and the conversation was a distraction for a second too long because I jump too late. It flies over my head and lands in the hands of one of Dylan's cousins.

I let out a disappointed sigh. Well, there go my chances of finding a husband anytime soon. Superstitious, yes. But that's all I have to work with at the moment. Nothing else in my life is going right.

We walk back to the table and my shoulders lift in a small shrug when I reach Peter.

"I missed it," I say, sitting down beside him. "And we practiced for this all week. I was ready."

He curls his arm around me and plucks a kiss on my cheek. "Maybe next time, dollface."

Little things like that are responsible for the recurring eruption of chocolate bubbles. I lean back to rest my head against his chest, taking full advantage of his comforting embrace. "I hope my prince charming comes to whisk me away very soon. I can't be living with you for extended periods of time."

He chuckles. "Why? You scared you might end up liking me?"

"Ugh!" I tease playfully. "No. That will never happen."

It's the men's turn to report to the dance floor, but only JP and Tommy stand up. Tommy all but begs Scott to go with them, but he refuses. Peter doesn't budge either.

Whoops and wolf whistles fill the air as Dylan slowly slides his hand up Isabella's thigh. He drags the garter down her leg and twirls it around his finger. The crowd gets rowdier, waiting for him to toss it, but he doesn't get a chance. It flies off his finger, across the room, and drops straight into Scott's lap.

"See what happens when you tempt fate, Scotty?" Tommy jeers as he sits down again.

"Well, we all know marriage isn't in the cards for me." Again, I pick up on the tension when Scott glances at Catalina, but he turns to me and hands me the garter. "I think you should have it."

"Really?"

"Of course." He laughs at the obvious chirpiness in my voice. "I hope this gets you one step closer to your Prince Charming."

Another wave of nausea attacks me, and I simply smile instead of responding. The rest of them continue talking, but my discomfort makes me zone out what they're saying. I inhale deep breaths and release them slowly until it eventually passes.

"This is it, gentlemen," Scott says, standing up.

Tommy gulps down another glass of champagne before standing up too.

"Pour a glass for me and Peter," Scott says. "God knows we need some alcohol for what's coming up next."

Peter takes a glass from Tommy, then turns his attention to me. "Please promise me that you'll still have sex with me after this. Whenever I do activities with Dylan, my dick tends to invert, so it might take a while to find it, but as soon as we do, we're having sex."

I should be shocked, or at least embarrassed, that he can say things like that in public, but it actually builds my excitement. This is it. This is the thing he was too embarrassed to tell me, the very thing that got me an invitation to this

wedding. I give him a nod, biting my lip because my anticipation is so high I could scream.

“Just find a happy place. It’ll be over soon,” I hear Scott tell him as they walk to the middle of the dance floor.

Isabella is sitting on a chair center stage with Dylan standing in front of her. The other men take their positions around him, and the lights dim, leaving only one spotlight on the very excited groom.

Peter told me that Dylan was corny, but I only fully understand the extent of his corniness when the first chords of Justin Bieber’s *Baby* come through the speakers.

Oh wooooah

“Sing your little heart out for me, De Lorenzo,” Isabella yells, beaming with excitement.

Oh wooooah

“Oh, I plan to,” Dylan replies.

Oh wooooah-o-o

Peter and Scott are cringing so bad, but when the beat drops, they give it all they got. The women in the crowd start screaming like they’re at a boy band concert. I understand why. I want to scream too. The choreography is bad, ranging from the step and tap they used in front of the mic in the 1960s to boisterous over-the-top jazz hands. They go through several poppy love songs, and the moves change every time one song remixes into another.

Despite their hours of practicing, there are some missteps by all of them. One jumps too early, another slides to the left instead of the right, but they are killing themselves laughing. Isabella is in hysterics. It’s a wonderful moment to experience.

On the day I met Peter, my love spilled all over the floor. I scooped it up and tucked it safely back into my pocket. But watching him today...

I’m not sure if it’s going to stay in my pocket.

Geez, what's wrong with me? Why am I always attracted to the unavailable ones?

They finally bring it down a notch and switch to Ed Sheeran's *Perfect*. Peter's panting hard when he comes back to the table. Adrenalin is still pumping through me. I stand up and throw my arms around him.

"Oh, my God! That was so cute."

"You've just witnessed my most embarrassing moment. Please don't make it worse by calling it *cute*."

"Fine. That was the most rugged display of manliness I've ever seen."

"Better." He takes a step back and holds out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

In the interest of not engaging in *couple* activities, I should say no, but I have zero willpower when it comes to this man. Plus, he's wearing a suit. *No* doesn't feature in my vocabulary tonight.

I take his hand, and he whisks me off. There seems to be some unspoken custom playing out. Every few minutes, the people dancing around us swap partners. Dylan was dancing with Isabella and now he's with one of her aunts. Mrs. Diaz was dancing with her husband, Keith, but now Scott is twirling her around.

Scott seems quite skilled in ballroom dancing, and I half-turn to catch a glimpse of their elegant routine. What I catch instead is the tail-end of their conversation.

"I promise I'll still come over every second Saturday," Scott assures her.

"Yes, but you come over for Keith now," she snaps playfully. "It's like I'm not your favorite anymore."

"How can you say that?" Scott asks. "You'll always be my favorite."

"Just give me one second," Peter says. "This is an opportunity I can't let slide." He steps away from me, and between Scott and Mrs. Diaz, curling one arm around her

waist. “I want to make it very clear that I have *never* come over for Keith...not even *once*.”

Keith is behind us, dancing with Isabella, and I’m guessing that the unimpressed look on his face was Peter’s ultimate goal. “I heard that, Peter.”

“Keith, why do you always have to be this constant obstacle on my path to love?” Peter fires back.

“Because that’s my wife you’re holding.”

“A fact I can easily overlook.”

Keith chuckles, shaking his head. “You know, I honestly thought you’d be different around your date.”

“I’ve been very open with her. She knows where my heart lies.” He winks at me. “Now, if we disappear, don’t come looking for us.”

He spins her around, and they get swallowed by the crowd. Scott and I are left there after being abandoned by our respective dance partners.

I look over at him. “Peter is really something.”

“He is.”

He holds out my hand, silently asking for a dance. It’s a little weird because I don’t really know him, but the partner-swapping is an ongoing thing, and I rather it be him than someone I don’t know at all. I place my hand on his shoulder, and he leads me into step.

“So, Peter tells me that your dad owns the Bayview Country Club,” he says.

I freeze. That came out of left field, and I have no idea how to respond.

“My dad knows Robert very well,” he continues, “and I gotta be honest, he’s never mentioned you. I didn’t even know he had a daughter.”

I don’t want to lie, but I can’t tell him the truth, especially because I haven’t even admitted the truth to Peter yet. “I’m more of a scandal than a *legitimate* child. I’m the mistake he

tries to deny ever happened, so yeah...he doesn't talk about me much."

His eyes narrow, analyzing me. "Something's amiss with you. I feel like you're hiding something."

My body stiffens, and my blood runs cold. I feel so exposed, like he can see all my secrets in my eyes. I swallow hard and put on a brave face. "Am I supposed to walk around with my whole life story on display for all the world to see?"

He smiles despite the wariness etched on his forehead. "All I'm saying is that Pete's really into you. He doesn't take kindly to lies and manipulation, so...tread carefully."

That was too much information for me to process in one go. Peter's been nothing but nice to me. He opened up his home to me, but Scott has just reminded me that his hospitality was based solely on a lie. However, what's sending my brain into free fall is the nonchalant statement that he's into me.

Peter's not *into* me.

In the history of the universe, there has never been a man that has tried to avoid commitment as much as Peter. There are no misconceptions that the arrangement between the two of us is casual and temporary. Scott is obviously mistaken on that front, but I'm going to heed his warning. I can't keep doing this to Peter. It's not fair to him.

Speak of the devil. Peter appears out of nowhere and catches my wrist. "Can I have my date back?"

Scott nods. "Sure, Pete."

I only manage to keep it together for a few minutes. I dance with Peter for one song, then excuse myself to go to the restroom. My anxiety-induced nausea is back. I race out of the venue and down the long corridor. Shoving the door open, I rush into a stall, and the door isn't even fully closed behind me before I hurl my dinner into the toilet bowl. My stomach contracts and empties out all its contents.

That was sudden and violent, and I take a few breaths to steady myself before leaving the stall. After rinsing my mouth several times, I pop a breath mint and try to clean off the

smudged mascara around my eyes. When I finally look decent enough to leave, I find Peter outside waiting for me.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “You were in there for a while.”

“Yeah. I told you I was feeling a little queasy, but I’m fine now.”

“Do you want to leave?”

“Um...” I do want to leave, but this is his friend’s wedding. I can’t be selfish and stop him from celebrating this special day. “No, I’m good.”

We start the long walk back to the party, and I remain quiet as I contemplate my next move.

Should I tell him the whole truth?

Should I make up some excuse and leave without telling him any of the sordid details?

Should I be the biggest coward and just wait for him to go to the gym tomorrow and disappear with no explanation while he’s gone?

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks. “You’re acting kinda weird.”

Am I? I need to check myself. “I’m fine.”

He stops walking and grabs my wrist to stop me, too. “What did Scott say to you?”

“Nothing.”

He’s not buying it. “You were fine before you danced with him, and now you’re not. What did he say to you?”

“He’s just looking out for you, Peter.” I’m about to blurt out everything when common sense hits me. I can’t tell him this at his best friend’s wedding. It’s not the right time. “Listen...no matter what happens...just know that I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I’m not trying to manipulate you...or use you in any way, so—”

“Is that what he fucking said to you?”

The words come out in a harsh whisper because shock seems to have knocked the wind out of him. His breath staggers. His jaw tightens, the vein on the side of his neck ticking with voracity. I've only known him for two and a half weeks. During that time, I've seen him annoyed and frustrated, and on the day I met him, I saw a tiny smidge of his anger. But this is the first time I've ever seen this level of rage.

It's a stark difference from his usual demeanor. He's a jovial character, never taking anything too seriously. There's even an element of humor when he expresses his frustration. But his anger is targeted and controlled, as if he's making a concerted effort to restrain his reaction.

"I can't believe he would say something like that to you. I swear to God, if he called you a gold digger, I will—"

"He didn't," I say quickly, placing my hand on his forearm to calm him down. "Don't get mad at Scott. It's not his fault, and I don't want to cause a rift in your friendship. He means well. I'm the problem, okay?"

This only infuriates him more. "You're not a goddamn *problem*," he grinds out, his voice low and acrid. "It took me almost a week to get that shit out of your head, and now he's gone and put it right back. He had no right to say that to you. Don't listen to him, okay? He doesn't know what he's talking about, so don't let anything he said upset you."

"I'm not upset."

"Li, I know you, and I—"

"But you don't," I cut in. "You *don't* know me, Peter."

That statement is a catalyst, fueling his volatile mood. "So, why don't you enlighten me? Tell me something about yourself. *Anything*. You're like an impenetrable steel box that's impossible to get into. We've talked for hours, and I know about five minutes' worth of personal information." He crosses his arms over his chest. "I know all your moods. I know all your weird quirks. But you're right. I don't know a single thing about *you*. All you've told me is that your parents were amazing while you were growing up, but now you and

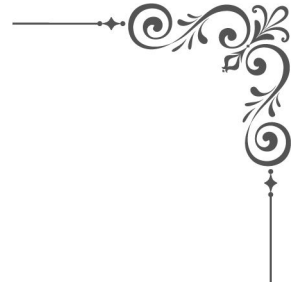
your dad aren't on talking terms. That's it. You're locked up tighter than fucking Fort Knox. So, why don't you clue me in on what I don't know about you?"

Shit! I've just opened up a can of worms. That's all he knows about me, and only fifty percent of it isn't true. I remember the guilt on Catalina's face earlier and how she felt like JP deserved better. I feel the same way. Peter had a perfect life before me. He shouldn't be burdened with me or my past. I've decided to go with option three – the coward's option. Leave quietly, with no explanation.

"That's not necessary," I say, my voice small and meek. "You don't need to know me, and I don't need to know you. We're currently caught at an intersection where our paths have crossed. But this is temporary. I'm going to be leaving soon, so investing time in getting to know each other is a futile exercise. It will yield no returns for you, Peter. As an investor, I know you're capable of making better decisions than that, so don't bother with me."

He stares at me for a long time, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat as he swallows. It takes but a nanosecond for him to switch off. He becomes cold almost instantly. "Sure, Li." He shoves his hands into his pockets. "Whatever you say."

He turns on his heel and walks down the corridor back to the party.



8. Peter

I'll be the first to admit this. It's a stupid idea.

But I've been making a lot of stupid decisions lately, so what's one more? Just like the others, this one is impulsive and not very well thought out, but I do kinda have a plan. And my plan is to stick to the plan. I'm just here to check on her and then I'm going home. Alone.

That's it. That's the plan.

Exactly twelve days ago, we left Dylan's wedding and drove home in silence. That night, Lia stayed downstairs watching TV and didn't come to bed. The next morning, I woke up to more silence. She made us breakfast, and we ate together, but she didn't say one word to me.

Scott was still hungover. He called me to drive him to the airport so he could say goodbye to Catalina. Seeing that he was the reason for my shitty morning, I had a few words with him in the car on the way home. I told him to back off and stop harassing Lia. He told me that there's something weird going on with her and he'll save his *I-told-you-so* for later. I don't know why he keeps insisting that she's trying to use me. Lia is not forthcoming about anything, but the one thing I know for sure is that she's not using me.

A fact that was confirmed when I came home to an empty house.

All her stuff...gone. She vanished without a trace, and I mean without a trace. No note. No reason. Not one thing left behind. We were living together, so I never bothered to get her number. I couldn't ask her why she left. I couldn't call her to check in and make sure she was okay. And that's me. That's fundamentally who I am. I'm the type who always checks in on people. That's why Dylan calls me honey and sweetheart every chance he gets, because I always ask him to check-in. I hate worrying. It fucks with my head, and Lia activated my compulsive paranoia when she disappeared without a word. She didn't even tell me she was leaving.

And this shit has got me twisted tighter than a fricken sailor's knot. I can't eat. I've barely slept in twelve days because I'm worried about her all the time. But more than that...I miss her. I really miss her. I miss walking into my closet and seeing her clothes on my shelves. I miss sitting in my kitchen watching her cook. I miss her overly dramatic jokes. I miss her vampire references. I miss her eyes. I miss her mouth.

Fuck, I miss *her*.

And I shouldn't be feeling like this. I shouldn't be feeling anything. As she rightfully pointed out, the arrangement was only ever meant to be temporary. A couple weeks max and then she would leave. She stayed a couple weeks and then she left. It all worked out the way it was supposed to.

So, why the hell am I parked outside this dingy motel? Why did I bribe the manager to tell me which room she's staying in?

These are the stupid decisions I've been making all day. I knocked on her door and peeped through the window earlier. It doesn't seem like she's inside, so now I'm just sitting here, waiting for her to come back.

This isn't what Dylan was talking about. He told me that once a chick sinks her claws into me, I'd have no defenses, no control. But that's not what's happening here. I'm in control. This is just a weird manifestation of worry. So, what if I miss her a little. That's to be expected. No big deal. And yeah, I'm getting edgy because I have this need to see her that's sort of hard to suppress. But that's manageable. I'm in control. I'm going to stick to the plan.

The sun slowly creeps across the sky, moving from east to west, and it's just after five p.m. when I spot Lia coming around the corner. She halts when she sees me in front of her room, just casually sitting on the hood of my car. She looks a little pale, and I'm not sure if it's because she's unwell or just surprised by my presence.

"Peter," she murmurs, sounding slightly shellshocked, "what...what are you doing here?"

“Hey.” I stand up. It feels awkward to hug her, so I slip my hands into my pockets to avoid touching her entirely. “I just wanted to check on you...see how you’re doing.”

She nods, nervously tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’m fine.”

I take note of her outfit, a simple black golf shirt with a red logo on the breast pocket matched with a straight-cut black skirt. It’s a uniform. Her hair is neatly tied back in a high ponytail, but it’s the small hoop gold earrings that add just a hint of class and elegance.

“I see you got a job.”

“Uh...yeah. Down at the department store...Henley’s. They assigned me to the cosmetic section. I do some makeovers and help customers with fragrance sampling and whatnot. It’s not much, but it pays the bills.”

“That’s good.” With clumsy rigidness, I reach out and pat her shoulder. “That’s...great. Con...gratulations.” The movement feels stiff, so I turn it into a light arm rub. That makes things more uncomfortable, so I shove my hand back in my pocket.

I’m usually more composed than this, but I have this overwhelming urge to touch her constantly, and it’s bringing out the dork in me. We usually can’t keep our hands off each other, so this distance feels unnatural.

She feels it too because after our eyes lock for a moment too long, she rummages through her knapsack to retrieve her key card. “Listen, thanks for—”

That’s her getting ready to end this discussion, and I’m not done with my checkup yet. “So, is it close by? Do you...do you walk there? Alone? By yourself?” I do a quick scan of the surrounding area. “In this neighborhood?”

I’m trying to remain calm, but this place is dodgy as fuck. I literally saw three guys doing drugs on the sidewalk when I pulled into the parking lot. What if she’s walking home one day and one of them—

Stop! Reel that paranoia right back in. She walked home just fine today. She's been here for two weeks, and she's fine. Nothing to worry about.

"It's about a ten-minute walk."

Her clipped response is a sign of her growing impatience. She swipes her card and opens the door. Nothing makes me cringe harder than the sight of these motel rooms. They're dreary and rundown and just gross. She shouldn't be living like this.

Calm down, I tell myself. I'm not here to be a hero or her knight in shining armor. I just came here to check on her and then I'm going home. Alone.

She steps inside. "Peter, I appreciate the concern. Thank you for stopping by. I—"

"Why did you leave, Li?" I blurt out. After this, it'll be over, and I can't let her shut that door without telling me. "You didn't say one word. I know I said that I didn't expect anything from you, but...I at least deserved an explanation, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry. I should've told you, but I thought you would've convinced me to stay." Guilt flashes on her face, and she lets out a deep sigh. "But I left because...you don't need to be burdened with me and my baggage. You're a single guy who doesn't want to be tied down, and that situation would've lasted indefinitely. I'm barely making enough to live in this shithole, but I—"

"So, how are you paying for the other things you need? Food? Or toiletries?"

Wow. It's weird how that white knight complex of mine just stepped in and overrode the conversation. I didn't even realize it had such a quick reaction time, but she shuts it down just as fast.

"Peter, that's not your concern." She closes the door halfway. "Look, I'm exhausted. I'm really nauseous. I just want to have a shower, crawl into bed, and sleep until tomorrow."

I grab the door before she closes it in my face and push it open again. “What do you mean, you’re nauseous? Have you been feeling like this since Dylan’s wedding?”

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal. If I have some warm water, I usually don’t throw up.”

“No big deal? Lia, it’s almost two weeks. That’s not normal.”

She lets out an irritable breath that sounds almost lethargic. “It’s probably just a tummy bug.”

“Tummy bugs don’t last that long. Have you seen a doctor?”

“Well, I’m a little low on funds, and I don’t have insurance, so this ailment is gonna have to sort itself out.”

God, she’s frustrating. “Lia—”

“Peter, just let it go.” She rubs her forehead, her patience reaching the end of its tether. “I’m just a little under the weather. I’ll be fine in a few days. Thank you for everything. Thank you for coming here to check on me, but please don’t do this again. I’m no one to you, so you are under no obligation to look after me or check up on me. My problems are not your problems, okay? It’s time for you to go back to your life and forget about me.”

She closes the door, and this time, I let her. She’s right. Her problems aren’t mine. I need to forget about her and move on with my life like I do after every other hookup. But this wasn’t just a hookup.

We were never dating, yet it feels like I just got dumped. But I’m going to see this as a good thing. I wanted an explanation. I got it. I wanted to make sure she’s okay. She is (sort of). This is the closure I came here for, I guess. So, now that all has been said and done, I can go home. Alone. Just like I planned.

I climb back into my car and begin the twenty-minute drive back home. About halfway into the trip, I get another stupid idea. This is it, though. Last time. One more act of impulsiveness and then I’ll say goodbye to this life of bad

decisions and go back to having wild sex with random women I meet at bars.

I pull up and park in front of a drugstore, then walk inside. She doesn't have money for meds, so I'm just going to get some over-the-counter pills to help settle her nausea, and that will be the end of that.

I walk over to the guy at the counter. "Hi..." I look down at his nametag. "...Tyrese."

"Good evening, sir. How may I be of assistance?"

"A friend of mine has been suffering with nausea. Can I get some Pepto-Bismol or something that can help?"

"Sure. Come with me."

He walks around the counter, and I follow him to the third aisle. Bending slightly, he scans the middle shelf. "Okay, we got Tums, Maalox—"

"Those are antacids, right? I think she needs something stronger. This isn't indigestion. I think there's actual vomit involved, and she's been feeling like this for about two weeks."

His head snaps up to look at me. "Two weeks! Dayum!" The fact that his professional demeanor disappeared so suddenly makes me realize this may be more serious than I thought. "Bad sushi doesn't even last that long. Has she seen a doctor?"

"No."

"Well, she needs to. Two weeks is cause for concern. She needs medical attention."

With every word, my anxiousness builds. "She's not going to let me take her. She's...stubborn."

"Women." He rolls his eyes. "What are her other symptoms? Does she have a fever?"

"Um...I'm not sure. I don't think so. She was a bit pale, but all she said was that she was nauseous and exhausted. I

don't know if the latter is from her condition...or just life. What do you think it might be?"

"It could be a variety of things. It could be gastrointestinal issues, bacterial infections, allergies. But then she would have a fever." He scratches his head and mulls it over some more. "It could be something more serious, like gallbladder problems or issues with the liver or pancreas. But you said she was tired, so it could just be..." He thinks it over for a second, then walks me over to the next aisle. After a quick check, he hands me a bottle of Emetrol. "I think you need this." We leave that aisle and walk back to the shelves at the front of the store. "And these." He picks out four different pregnancy tests and hands them to me.

"Woah, woah, woah. Tyrese, what the hell is all this?" I look down at all the products in my hands and even Emetrol is for the relief of morning sickness.

He returns to his spot behind the counter. "Tell her to take the tests. All of them because if it's too early, it might give a false negative. If she's not pregnant, the Emetrol will still help for maybe a day or two. But if she's not pregnant, Emetrol is not a cure. You still need to take her to a doctor."

My brain switches off. I don't remember paying. I don't remember getting into my car. I don't remember driving back to the motel. I sit there in the parking lot, staring blankly at the steering wheel. The weight of the world is crushing down on my shoulders. Either outcome is bad here. She could potentially have serious gallbladder or gastrointestinal issues...or she could be pregnant.

Fuck, what if she's pregnant? What will I do?

No, she's not pregnant. We were always safe. We always used a condom.

I shut my eyes when the memory hits me with blunt-force trauma to the head.

Oh, shit!

The night of Dylan's bachelor party. I woke up the next morning and couldn't find the condom or the wrapper. Maybe

we didn't use a condom.

How could I have been so stupid?

And now she might be pregnant.

After twenty minutes, I decide to stop torturing myself with the possibilities of the unknown. I have four pregnancy tests. We're just going to find out. I grab the paper bag with the tests, step out of the car, and head straight to her room.

I knock. Then knock again. Panic and impatience bubble ruthlessly inside me, and I knock again.

"What!" The door swings open, and the frown lines on Lia's face deepen when she sees it's me. "Peter, I told you—"

I push past her, barging straight in without an invitation.

"What is wrong with you?" she shouts, slamming the door shut behind me.

She turns to face me, crossing her arms over her chest. She's already showered and dressed in red and black plaid pajamas, her hair up in a messy bun. Lia's an incredibly attractive woman and can usually make anything look good. Not today, though. Today something's off.

And it's not like I haven't seen her dressed down, ready for bed with no makeup. But this particular ensemble irks me because, frankly, she doesn't look good in her own pajamas. My T-shirts suit her better. It's just a fact, and my eyes are having trouble accepting her in anything else.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"We need to talk."

"About what?"

I hand her the bag. "Go into the bathroom, do what you need to do, and tell me what it says."

Her frown turns into confusion. She sticks her hand into the bag, pulls out a test, and reads the box. Hazel brown eyes shoot up to meet mine. "I'm *not* pregnant."

Her confidence in that answer gives me a tiny glimmer of hope. “You sure?”

“Yes. My cycle is erratic. I haven’t gotten my period in months. And we always used—”

“Did we?”

Doubt creeps in and her shoulders slump. “I’m not pregnant. I can’t be.”

“You can’t be.” It’s not only her words that I echo, but the trepidation in her voice as well. “But let’s just make sure.”

She nods, and without saying a word, disappears into the bathroom. I sit down on the edge of the bed and look around the room. This place is a dump. It’s horrifying that she’s been living here all this time.

I cut that thought off before it goes any further. I remind myself to stick to the plan. No need to be a hero or her knight in shining armor. Her problems are not my problems. She’s not my responsibility. She’s just—

Wait. What if she is? If she’s pregnant, then—

She’s not pregnant.

“I’m pregnant.”

My head snaps toward the bathroom door. Lia’s standing there looking like she’s just seen a ghost. Her breaths are uneven, and the hand holding the test is trembling.

“What?”

“I’m pregnant,” she says again, her voice a strained whisper.

The words feel like they weigh a million tons as they sink into my brain. “Take...take the other one. He said...he said... um...” My thoughts are racing so fast I can’t form a coherent sentence. “He said sometimes...sometimes they give false positives.” I grit my teeth, becoming more frustrated that I can’t find anything in my muddled head. “*False. Positives.*” Or did he say false negative? I can’t even remember. “Just take another test.”

“I took all of them.”

“And?”

Her panic-stricken eyes lock on mine. “They’re all positive.”

“Can’t be.”

I rush past her into the bathroom. They’re all lined up on the sink. I check the first one. It says positive on the tiny screen, and I chuck it. The next one has a big, fat plus sign on it, and I chuck it. The third one shows two pink stripes. I toss it over my shoulder, hoping and praying that test number four says something different, but it only confirms my worst fear.

She’s pregnant.

Holy fuck! She’s pregnant.

I grip the edge of the sink, holding on so tight my knuckles turn white. I take slow, deep breaths to bring my heart rate down. When I finally gather my courage and leave the bathroom, I find Lia sitting quietly on the bed. Hunched over, she’s staring helplessly into oblivion.

I cross the room and sit down beside her. Our collective regret hangs in the room, making the air thick. It’s so hard to breathe. Silence stretches on for almost forty minutes before my throat loosens up enough for me to talk.

“So, what are we going to do?”

She releases a heavy sigh. “I don’t know.”

I can hear that she’s on the brink of tears, yet she never breaks character. As always, she remains stoic and withdrawn. It’s driving me nuts because I am freaking the fuck out.

I don’t know how to broach the subject, or if now is the right time, but I need answers. “Are you...” I inhale a sharp breath. “Are you gonna...keep it?”

She scrambles off the bed, staring at me like I’m the enemy. “Of course, I’m gonna keep it. How can you even ask me that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—” Shit, this is so hard. “It was just a question.”

She’s still defensive. “Yeah, and I don’t understand why you would ask me that when you know how much I want a family.”

This decision has been based purely on emotion. “Li, you gotta think about this logically. You’re not in the best position right now. We’re not even...together. You wanted a nice, faithful guy to marry and raise a family with. That’s the guy you should be doing this with. Not me. I’m not him. I’m not that guy.” My voice rises with my anxiety. “I don’t want a kid. I’m-I’m not ready for a kid. This is a big decision that affects both of us, and you’re not giving me *any* say in this. I don’t know what you want from me or how I even fit into the picture you’re painting for *both of us*. What’s the role you’re expecting me to fill here? Do you want money? Commitment?” I rest my elbows on my thighs and drop my head into my hands. After a few steadying breaths, I look up at her again. “Maybe you want a family, but I don’t. I made it clear from the start that I never wanted to settle down. At the wedding, you told me this was temporary, and having a kid isn’t fucking *temporary*, Lia!”

My voice was so loud, my last words seem to echo in the silent aftermath. My voice was so loud the echo reverberated off the drywall and struck the deepest chord inside her. She remains silent for a long time, absorbing the shock, blinking back her tears. She swallows whatever emotions she’s feeling and nods as if she’s accepting her fate.

“I understand,” she says softly, slipping her stoic mask back into place. “I don’t want money or commitment from you. You do have a say, and you’ve made your stance clear. I understand. I’ll figure out a way to do this on my own.” She walks to the door and opens it. “You can leave now.”

“Lia, c’mon. Don’t make it seem like I’m abandoning you to go at this alone. I’m trying to compromise so we can find a resolution here. I’ll help in whatever way I can, but I don’t want—”

“You don’t want to change your lifestyle or make any sacrifices. I get it, and that’s fine. But parents don’t *help* their children, Peter. They raise them. If help is all you have to offer, you can keep it.” She nods her head toward the door. “Now, please leave.”

I snatch my car keys off the bed and storm out. She closes the door the second I walk through it, and the lock snaps from the inside. I’m so fucking mad I could break something. I get into my car and slam the door shut. My fist flies against the steering wheel, hitting it repeatedly until my knuckles bruise. I throw my head back in frustration.

“Fuuuuuccckkk!”

My voice is trapped within the confines of my car. And that’s exactly how I feel. Trapped.

What does she want from me? Does she want me to turn my whole world upside down to accommodate her and this baby? Does she want me to give up my single life to raise a child with her? What does she want? Because from that conversation, it seems like that’s exactly what she wants, and won’t settle for anything less. She had dreams for the future, and now she’s imposing those dreams on me.

But I don’t want any of that. I just wanted a simple life. This is why I always made an active effort to avoid women and relationships. They are nothing but trouble. My rules were simple. No emotional attachments, and I always told myself that if I ever wanted to indulge in anything more than a one-night stand, I would tap out at two weeks.

But I didn’t tap out, did I?

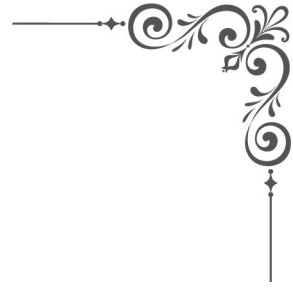
The one time I broke those rules and look at where it got me. It got me completely twisted over the most closed-off woman on the planet, who – by the way – is looking for the polar opposite of me in a life partner. But now she’s carrying my child and wants nothing to do with me.

One time. *One* month. *One* woman. That was all it took. And now my life is an unrecognizable shitshow!

My tires squeal as I zoom out of the parking lot, the smell of rubber lingering in the air. There is one tiny consolation. I stuck to the plan. I met the sole objective.

I'm finally going home. Alone.

And I have never felt more...alone.



9. Lia

“OMG! You are a miracle worker, Lia.” Shontelle zooms in on the photo on her phone screen. “I’m usually not photogenic, but I look like a celebrity in this pic.”

“You look like Rihanna,” Tori concurs, looking over her shoulder to see the screen.

It’s a Sunday, so it’s been a slow day. Hardly any customers. My co-workers and I have been messing around to pass the time until closing. Tori suggested I give them both a makeover, and I agreed because I need to keep busy. Every time I’m left alone with my thoughts, I go from mild anxiety to flat-out panic in just a few short minutes.

I’m pregnant!

With each passing day, it sinks in a little more. Some days, I’m overjoyed and elated because being a mom is something I’ve always wanted. But on other days, reality hits me with a right hook and I have to come to terms with the fact that I’m only twenty-four and...

Dammit! I’m twenty. I need to stop telling that lie because I actually believe it now.

Somehow, the truth makes the reality harsher because, as a mere twenty-year-old, this is a responsibility I’m forced to bear on my own. I never even considered such a possibility.

Getting knocked up by an immature, egotistical fuckboy was never part of the plan. This isn’t how I saw my life playing out. I wanted to be in a loving, committed relationship before I ever reached this point, and now, thanks to lustful impulsiveness and incredibly bad choices, I’m going to be doing this all alone.

I don’t have much experience with men, but I’ve learned some hard lessons in the last year and a half. Both Teddy and Peter have played me for a fool, and I don’t know how I managed to fall for the same trick twice.

Both of them were just in it for the sex.

Both of them made me believe they cared about me when they didn't.

And both of them dropped me like a hot potato the second shit got real.

And shit is very real. I'm pregnant. I haven't told anybody because I'm so scared I'll lose my job. I have no idea what I'm going to do. I don't know how I'm going to pay for doctors' appointments. The uncertainty of the future is so overwhelming that I'm constantly on the verge of a panic attack.

I haven't seen or heard from Peter in over a week. He just abandoned me to figure this out on my own because it was *inconvenient* for him. Adding more notches to his bedpost obviously ranks higher on his priority list. And that's fine. I feel like I'm drowning at the moment, but I will figure it out. I'm not going to freak out about the future. I'm just going to focus on the here and now and take one step at a time. I've been doing that since my parents died, and I'm not dead in a ditch somewhere, so I must be doing something right.

"You look amazing," I say to Shontelle.

Tori takes the phone from her, scrolling through the dozens of pictures I've taken. "You take the most incredible pics. Even with this fluorescent lighting, you've made her look... radiant."

"Bitch, I *am* radiant," Shontelle snaps playfully, drawing a laugh out of all of us.

"I'm serious, darlin'," Tori continues. "My fiancé *loves* the pictures you took of me on Tuesday."

Tori sounds exactly like Dolly Parton, and I hate it. Not her accent but what it reminds me of. I once made a comment about how much I love Whitney Houston and the song *I Will Always Love You*, and Peter schooled me on who the original artist was. He then made me listen to the Dolly Parton version, and I became an instant fan.

I miss that about him, how passionate he was about movies and music. I miss having those golden oldies playing in the

background at all hours of the day. I got used to living with him so quickly because he made me feel safe and always made sure I was comfortable.

His house became sort of a sanctuary for me because it sheltered me from all my other troubles, but it was Peter's presence that put me most at ease. In two short weeks, I became so accustomed to having him around all the time. Apart from the few hours he'd go to the gym with Scott and Dylan, we were together *all* the time. And now my days feel empty without him, like something is missing.

It's him.

I'm *missing* him.

I push his stupid face out of my head and focus on the conversation. "It's just the angle of the pose mixed with a little makeup."

"But the poses and the angles are what make 'em so great." She whips out her phone. "See this one here where you blurred out the background and focused on my jaw and neck. Oh, and this one where you told me to look off into the distance. He loves this one. He says he wants one like this at our—" She gasps, her eyes widening as if she just realized something. "Hey, I'm gettin' married next year September, and we can't afford one of those fancy photographers. Would you...would you be our photographer?"

"What?" I giggle, the sound carrying my disbelief. "You barely know me. I can't come to your wedding and take pictures...of you and your family. That's so personal."

Shontelle facepalms. "Why are you like this? You're so anti-social."

"I prefer the term introverted," I correct.

"No, introverted just means shy. I think even anti-social is being too generous. Every day we invite you to join us after work, and every day you think of some excuse not to."

I don't even bat an eyelid because I expected that from Shontelle. She never pulls any punches and just says it how it is. Tori, on the other hand, is borderline ditsy, but when

coupled with that thick Southern accent of hers, it comes across as cute. She's the sweeter one out of the two of them, always stepping in to soften the blow or sugarcoat some of the abrasiveness Shontelle flings at me. But she doesn't do that today. Instead, they both look at me, waiting for an answer.

This is so awkward, and it's better to be truthful. "You guys have your little circle of friends, and I don't want to intrude on that."

"Inviting you means we're trying to include you in our circle," Shontelle fires back, flicking her faux locs over her shoulder. "But it's like you're purposely trying to stop us from getting to know you on a personal level. It's like you're... you're ..."

"Emotionally castrated," Rafael fills in.

I glance back and see Rafael, the assistant manager, walking down the aisle to the open area where all the cosmetics are displayed. He is the third member of their little circle of friends and probably the most persistent. His pushiness bothers me sometimes, but I overlook it because I know it's coming from a good place.

He was the first one to spot that something was weird with me. I haven't opened up to him about a single thing, but he told me earlier this week that he can see I'm going through something and offered me a shoulder to cry on if I ever needed it.

I need one, alright. But I'm just going to avoid all men until further notice. It's a pity, though. Rafael is such a nice guy, kind and compassionate with a charming sort of aloofness. He's also very good-looking, and his baby-boy features are complemented by his curly black locks, playful brown eyes, and smooth olive skin. He's exactly the type of guy I've been looking for all this time. But all prospects to settle down with a good, decent man are dead in the water because I've gone and fucked up my life.

It's for the better, I tell myself. I need a break from guys, anyway. Me and relationships don't seem to be vibing on the same wavelength. I used to be the kind of person who was all

in on the fairytale. I was just waiting for my Prince Charming to swoop in and rescue me from all my troubles. That dream is officially dead because the last time I sought comfort and safety in the arms of a man, my problems got exponentially worse. But I've learned my lesson and developed an immunity to alluring green eyes.

"I'm not that bad," I say with a vague smile.

"I can prove you wrong," he replies, a challenge gleaming in his eyes.

"How?"

"Come out with us after work today."

I let out a heavy sigh. This is the persistence that grinds me sometimes. He's already asked me twice today to join them for drinks later, and I said no both times. I just want to curl into a ball in my ugly motel room, wallow in a bit of self-pity, throw up a little, then cry myself to sleep. I'm feeling generous today, so I might even throw in some self-loathing. I'm still deciding.

But what I don't want to do is be around overly chipper people who ask way too many questions about my personal life. I like them, yes. But they don't need to know that my life is a royal shit show right now.

"Um...I have to do...laundry today, so—"

Shontelle cuts me right off. "Girl, you cappin'."

Rafael simply shakes his head as if he was expecting exactly that response. "See? You are that bad." Disappointment shows on his face, but he winks at me and turns to walk back to the front of the store. "The invitation will stay open if you change your mind."

"You could at least make up a believable excuse." Tori giggles, but I can tell they're all offended on some level, and it's not my intention to hurt their feelings.

"Listen, don't take it personally," I say, looking from one woman to the other. "It's not that I don't want to hang out with you guys, it's just...I've got a lot going on at the moment, and

I just wanna be alone...so I can sort through my thoughts... and figure out what I need to do.”

Shontelle starts packing away the sample eyeshadows and lipsticks I used to do her makeover. “I’m sure it’s not that bad. Maybe it feels worse than it is because you’ve isolated yourself from everyone, and if you open up a—”

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt out.

I don’t know why. All I know is that I feel like I’m about to explode keeping this secret contained.

“Ooookay,” she says after taking a second to recover from the shock. “Guess it is that bad.”

“It’s not,” Tori rushes to reassure me, but her tone is panic masquerading as optimism. She grabs my shoulders, pulling me in for an abrupt congratulatory hug. “It’s incredible. It’s...a miracle.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Not all heroes wear capes.”

A pang of confusion wrinkles Shontelle’s face. “That literally does not make any sense.”

“It’s the best I could do on such short notice.” She glances down at my left hand. “So, you’re not...married?”

I shake my head, trying not to feel the dagger twisting in my heart. Hearing someone else say that out loud reminds me of every bad choice I’ve made. “No.” I sigh. “Look, please don’t tell Kelly-Anne just yet. I’m so scared she’ll fire me once she finds out.”

“Our lips are sealed.” Tori pretends to zip her mouth shut, then looks over at Shontelle. “Get out your phone. Let’s get a plan of action together.”

“Good idea.” She’s already unlocking her screen. Leaning over the glass perfume display cabinet, she starts typing. After scrolling for a few seconds, she looks up at me. “Okay, so according to this article, you’re looking at about thirty to fifty K just for the pregnancy and the birth.”

My mouth hits the floor. “Thirty K? As in thirty grand? Just for the pregnancy?”

I’ve been using Teddy’s credit card to stay afloat, just minor expenses here and there if my wages aren’t enough. And I keep my purchases small to make sure he doesn’t realize that I still have his card. He’ll definitely find out if I put thirty grand on there. How am I supposed to pay for all this?

My heart gallops against my chest, and my breaths speed up to keep up with the pace. I feel like I’m on the verge of hyperventilation. “What could possibly cost thirty grand? I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Oh, honey, let’s not have a conniption.” Tori urges me to sit down on the high swivel chair usually used by customers. “Just relax. It’s gonna be okay.”

“It’s not.”

She rubs my shoulders to calm me. “It is. Women have been growing babies since the beginning of time. If you eat right and take care of yourself, there’s no need for all those prenatal vitamins, and you can make do with fewer visits to the doctor.”

“But if something’s wrong with my baby, how will I know if I don’t go to the doctor? And if I don’t take the vitamins, aren’t I increasing the odds of something going wrong? I don’t know what to do, Tori.”

The panic in my voice clouds her eyes with doubt. “We’ll help you figure out a way.” She casts a helpless glance in Shontelle’s direction before focusing on me again. “And what about the baby’s father? Can’t you talk to him about—”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t want to have anything to do with me or the baby.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

The deep voice jolts me in my seat, and I spin the chair to see Peter standing behind us. His skin is ashen, drained of color, and I suspect it’s the conversation he just stumbled into that has him looking like he’s just seen a ghost. Both women fall silent, their eyes bouncing between me and him. The

breaths that were coming out of me so rapidly a few moments ago have now ceased altogether.

“Peter.” My throat is so constricted, the sound barely made it out.

“Hi,” he says, nervously stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Uh...” He’s very aware that we have an audience because his attention keeps moving from Shontelle to Tori, barely staying on me for more than a second. “Listen...can we talk?”

Nope. I don’t want to talk to him. He made his stance clear the last time we talked, and I don’t want him using what he overheard as *logic* to convince me not to have this baby.

“I think you said everything you needed to say the last time.”

His eyes shift to the floor, and he still doesn’t look at me when he responds. “There’s just a few things I want to talk to you about.”

“I’m sorta...busy at the moment.”

It’s a blatant lie. The store is empty, and he literally just caught me divulging all my problems to these two ladies instead of *working*.

“It will only take a couple minutes,” he urges.

“Peter, I’m on the clock.”

“Fine. I’ll wait. What time do you get off?”

“Is there a problem here?”

I swivel my chair in the opposite direction to see Rafael coming down the aisle again. Oh, God. This is getting messy. He stops beside me, crossing his arms over his chest as he waits for Peter to answer. But Peter is arrogant enough to believe that he doesn’t have to answer to anyone and just stands there, staring Raf down.

“It’s okay,” I say. “He was just leaving.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Peter retorts.

His tone is even, but when Rafael reaches out to rub my back, Peter's eyes darken, his jaw tightening as he watches us.

I know this mood. I saw it the night of Dylan's wedding. He's calm on the outside, but he's raging on the inside. It's such an unnatural reaction. Most people express their anger by shouting or getting aggressive. But Peter is different. His anger is silent and stealthy, almost undetectable to the untrained eye, but I see it.

"Is this guy bothering you, Lia?" Rafael asks.

"It's really fine, Raf," I say.

"You heard her."

Raf ignores Peter's indirect request to get lost and squeezes my shoulder. "I can call security, and we can escort him out the building."

"I'd like to see you try." Peter's voice is low and controlled, another indicator that he's pissed off.

The tension is rising, and I need to diffuse the situation. I hop off the chair and walk to Peter. Placing my hand on his chest, I push him a few steps back until we're out of earshot.

"You need to leave," I whisper. "Please don't cause a scene. I can't afford to lose this job."

His eyes are still pinned on Raf, challenging him, daring him, so he doesn't look at me when he responds. "I'm not leaving until you talk to me. Just give me five minutes."

"Peter." I press my fingers against my forehead, releasing an exasperated breath when I realize nothing is going to change his mind. "Fine. I finish at one. I'll speak to you then."

He doesn't say a word. He simply nods and walks away.

Raf follows him to make sure he leaves the store, and I feel so unsettled when I return to the other ladies.

"Guuurrrrl, is that your baby-daddy?" Shontelle asks. "Oh, my God! I think my ovaries just exploded."

"I wish that could've happened to me, then I wouldn't be in this mess." I shake my head. "Don't be fooled by his rugged

good looks. He's just like every other manwhore that'll dump you like a sack of shit once he's done with you."

"My mama always told me to watch out for them cheekbones," Tori says, staring dreamily into the distance. "She said if he's got cheekbones that look like they can cut diamonds, that boy is gonna break your heart for sure."

"Where were you when I needed you, Tori?" I ask somewhat playfully. "I could've used that advice about five weeks ago."

"It's not like I ever took that advice. Have you seen my fiancé? His cheekbones are sharper than a double-edged sword."

"And has he ever broken your heart?"

"Oh, no, sweetie. I kindly explained to him that I'm not much of a crier. My way of dealing with heartbreak involves whiskey, leather gloves, and some hydrofluoric acid. That stuff dissolves right through bone."

I giggle. "I could've used that advice too."

As our laughter dies down, her expression turns serious. "So, what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know," I reply with a shrug. "I don't even know why he's here or what he wants to talk to me about."

She reaches out to rub my arm. "Well, if you need a chat later, just call me."

I nod, making a mental note to stop being such a jerk to them. It's not intentional, but I need to make a conscious effort to not be so...cold. They're a great bunch of people, and I could use some friends right now.

The ladies go back to their respective stations, and we all try to waffle through the last hour of the day. Raf comes back to the cosmetics section twice, asking me all kinds of questions about Peter. My answers are brief and to the point. I suspect he wants something more than friendship from me, and I don't want to encourage anything that may cause more complications in my life.

By closing time, I'm an anxious ball of nerves. I don't know what to expect or what he's going to say, but I'm ready to fight him on any of his points of *logic*. However, after this past week of stress and panic, I've changed my stance on one thing. If he offers to *help* support the baby again, I'm going to take it because I need all the help I can get. He doesn't have to be involved at all. He can still go out and live his best single life, but he needs to pay his share of the costs. That's fair, isn't it?

"Do you want us to walk out with you?" Tori asks as I gather my stuff.

"No, I'll be fine. Thank you, though. I appreciate it."

My heart pounds wildly as the automatic glass doors open in front of me and I step outside. It's a scorching ninety-two degrees today. The warm August afternoon air hits my face, making me feel more flushed. It takes a few moments to spot him because my eyes are scanning the parking lot for an electric blue Bugatti Chiron, but instead, I see him leaning against the hood of a very sensible-looking SUV.

Stomach in knots, I slowly make my way to him, awkwardly crossing my arms when I reach him. He's uncomfortable too and for a few beats, we just sort of stand there, looking everywhere except at each other. He's the one who eventually breaks the silence.

"Can your stomach handle some food right now?"

I instantly read between the lines. Food implies that this conversation is going to be longer than five minutes. I don't really want to give him the time of day, but this is our child we're talking about, so it warrants a little more than a five-minute discussion.

I nod. "I could eat."

"Okay."

He opens the door for me, and we drive in silence to a small diner in a quiet neighborhood. I've never been to this part of town before, but it's a quaint little place. The smell of

apple pie and vanilla syrup greets me as soon as we walk in the door.

I slide into one of the rectangular booth seats, and thankfully, he doesn't sit down next to me, but directly in front of me. He's intentionally trying to keep his distance. I ignore the pang of pain that distance causes in my chest and remind myself that it's a good thing. It means we're both on the same page. Whatever we had between us is over, and we're just here to discuss the baby.

I stiffen my spine and tell myself to remain cold and detached. Stand my ground if he tries to convince me to be logical about this. The goal is to keep emotions out of it and find a resolution as to how we're going to move forward.

The waitress comes to take our order. Just the thought of meat sickens me, so I order a plate of fries. Peter remains quiet and doesn't get anything for himself. The silence continues even after the waitress leaves. I sit back and all I can do is stare at him as I wait for him to talk.

Seeing him up close, I notice how pale his skin is and the bags under his eyes. I find some comfort in that. At least I haven't been the only one losing sleep. He crosses his arms over the table, and the breath he releases is weighed down by the heaviness of the situation. He rakes a hand through his hair, dropping his head onto his forearm as he exhales another loaded breath.

When he finally lifts his head again, he doesn't look at me. His eyes remain focused on the table. "I...I owe you...an apology." Another loaded breath. "I don't usually freak out. I never lose my temper. When, uh, when we were in high school..." His hand finds its way into his hair again, and he still avoids eye contact as he continues. "Cat said something to me, some insult, I can't remember. But I lost my shit...and I almost hit her. It's almost a decade later, and I still feel guilty about it. Uh...anyway, after that...I swore that I would never lose control like that again. And I haven't. I'm usually the calm one. I don't raise my hands. I don't raise my voice. I don't lose my cool, but last week...when we found out...I panicked." He glances up at me for a split second before his

eyes return to the table. “What I said...how I said it...I’m sorry.”

The way he expresses his anger makes a lot more sense now. In these few minutes, I’ve learned some new things about him. I’m also seeing a different side of him today. He’s usually the epitome of arrogance, so it’s wild to see him looking utterly remorseful. I’ll admit, it melts my spine of steel just a fraction.

“I understand,” I say softly. “I panicked too, and—”

“Yeah, that’s the point, Li. All this has happened to you... is happening to *you*. It’s your body that has to go through all this. You’re allowed to panic, not me. I have friends, family, security. I’ve got a plan B and a support structure no matter what. You don’t have any of that, so when you freaked out last week, I should’ve stayed grounded. You needed me to be operating at a hundred and fifty percent, and I gave you zero. I should’ve handled it better. You needed me to be a rock in that situation...and I wasn’t.”

I’m a little confused because this is not how I expected the conversation to go. “Peter...I appreciate the sentiment, but you don’t have to be anything to me. Now, when it comes to the baby—”

“Dammit, Lia.” He slams his palm on the table. It’s not loud. It draws no attention, but the recoil is instant. He clasps his hands together and presses them against his forehead as he tries to center himself. After a moment, he reaches over the table and takes my hands in both of his. He still doesn’t look at me. Instead, he focuses on his thumbs tracing over my knuckles. “I know that you’ve been on your own for a while, and you sorta got used to being alone and figuring out everything by yourself with no one to rely on, but we’re in this together now, so we’ll figure this out together.”

What is he talking about? *We* and *together*? Just last week, he asked me if I was going to keep the baby. Where is this coming from? “But we’re not *together*,” I remind him. “You don’t *want* to be in this, and I don’t want you to...to...”

I pause, wondering how to broach this. I know it's my choice to have this baby, but I also have to be real about my financial situation. So, how do I tell him that he doesn't have to feel obligated to be with me, but I sorta, kinda need him for his money? It's like coming out and saying: *Hey, just post a cheque each month and then you can go back to screwing hot supermodels.* That's probably what he wants, but it sounds so tacky to say it like that.

"Look, I think the best arrangement would be for us to continue as we are now...and if...or when I need something for the baby, I'll let you know."

He scoffs. "Am I ever gonna have a say in any of this, or are you just gonna keep shutting me out?"

The sudden attack comes out of left field, and I sit there stunned as I try to collect myself. "Peter, I am so confused right now. You wanted an out. I'm giving it to you. Last week, you told me—"

"Last week, I was a jerk, okay? I'm sorry. I never should've reacted like that. And then it took me a whole week to get my head out of my ass. When I overheard you in the store earlier, stressing about how you were gonna pay for everything...that's a stress you never should've had." He hangs his head. "At the very least, I should've let you know that you didn't have to worry about money, so I'm sorry for that, too. I'm having a hard time looking at you because...I feel so ashamed that I did that to you." He finally lifts his eyes to meet mine. "But I'm done being an immature asshole. I've thought about this long and hard, and I don't want to be relegated to the sidelines of my kid's life. I don't want an *out*."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want you to move in with me."

"Peter, I don't—"

"Before you say that you don't want a guy like me, let me make it clear that I'm not suggesting a relationship. You know how I feel about marriage. I know I'm the furthest thing from what you're looking for in a husband. So, I'm not saying that

we should try to make this *work* for the sake of the baby. I'm just asking you to move in with me, so I know that you're safe and you're comfortable. That's all I want. Nothing else. Going back to what we had before isn't going to work because... having the physical stuff with nothing emotional behind it is not gonna be sustainable long-term. It's going to lead to complications, and I don't want to risk ruining the dynamic between us for something that's not gonna go anywhere."

Hearing that stings more than I care to admit, but it's true. Though, I'm still not sure what this arrangement entails. "I'm sorry. I'm still not understanding. You want me to move in, but we're not together, but we kinda are because we're raising a baby together. What are you saying?"

"I'm suggesting some kind of joint custody or co-parenting arrangement. You can have your own room, your own space. When you get to a point where you can afford a decent place, we can figure out a solution that works for both of us. That choice is entirely up to you. I'm not putting on any time limitations. I'm in it for, like, the next twenty years. So, you can stay with me as long as you like, but there's absolutely no way I'm letting you live in that motel."

It's not a great idea. He's made this offer before, and we ended up sleeping together that very same night.

"This sounds very familiar. We tried this before, remember? And it didn't work out so well the last time."

"That's because you shot me down every time I tried to get to know you...then you told me that us getting to know each other was a futile exercise...then you left the next day without saying a word...and *then* you gave me the cold shoulder when I came to the motel to see you again." Sarcasm mildly colors his tone, and after a light sneer, a sardonic smile quirks his lips up. "Don't worry. I got that message loud and clear. Rejection accepted without any injury to my brain."

Wow! There's a misinterpretation if I've ever seen one.

I was talking about how we weren't able to keep sex out of it the last time, but he seems to have taken the words '*didn't work out*' in a relationship context. He just said a minute ago

that doing the physical stuff with nothing emotional behind it is not going to be sustainable long-term. I thought he was talking about himself. Now I'm starting to wonder if he meant that *I'm* the one who's lacking emotions.

That's not true at all. I care about him. A lot. So much so that I was trying to prevent him from getting sucked into my drama and shouldering burdens that aren't his to bear, and he misinterpreted that too because he took it as *rejection*. I can see the hurt in his eyes, but he plays it off as if it's nothing.

"Peter, I didn't leave because—"

"You don't need to explain yourself." He reaches out to take my hands again, a sign that he harbors no animosity toward me or what happened between us. "It doesn't matter. What matters now is our baby." He stops as if someone just slapped him in the face. "Fuck, it feels weird to say that...but yeah, you...and *our* baby are my most important priorities right now. So, let's just put the past and all our differences aside and focus on what's best for him."

He's so sincere that I feel myself softening even more. I came in here ready to throw flames, and now he's turning me into mush. It's an odd skill of his, and probably the quality I like most. There's a tenderness about him that's very disarming. Beneath his ego and cocky attitude is someone I wasn't expecting at all. He's a loyal friend. He cares deeply about the people closest to him. And he's always willing to help, even if it negatively impacts him. I had to peel back multiple layers to see it, but it's there, embedded in the very core of him.

"Or her," I add.

"Aaaah." He cringes, dropping his head onto his forearm again. "Shit." After a deep breath, he looks up at me again. "I'm trying really hard not to freak out, so...can we *not* even entertain the possibility that it might be a girl until, like, the second trimester?"

I pull my lips in to stop a smile. "Are you worried about what karma has in store for you if it's a girl?"

The chuckle that pops out of him is filled with trepidation. “I’m terrified.”

I’m not melting. I’m not melting. I’m not melting.

I keep chanting this in my head even as the widest smile takes over my face. I don’t know why hearing that made me so happy. I don’t know why I find the panicked expression on his face so cute.

“Whatever you get, you deserve it,” I say.

“I know.” He gently squeezes my hands again. “So, are we doing this?”

I mull it over and come to the conclusion that he’s right. We need to put our own feelings aside and do what’s best for our baby. “Okay,” I reply with a nod.

“Okay.”

He waits for me to eat my fries, and we talk about menial things for over two hours. I’ve been so stressed these last few weeks that it feels good to finally unwind. When the sun starts to set, we drive back to my motel to pick up my stuff. It feels different when we get back to his place. Instinctively, I want to head upstairs to his bedroom, but that’s not what we agreed on. I subdue the urge and follow him down the corridor to one of the guest bedrooms.

He drops the trash bags containing all my clothes and shoes on the bed, then helps me unpack and refold my clothes. I have to teach him how to do this properly because he has a cleaning service that comes in to do all this for him.

I ask him to pack all my high-heeled shoes on the top shelf because I won’t be using them for some time, and while he stacks the boxes, I disappear into the bathroom to have a shower.

When I emerge ten minutes later, I find him sitting on the edge of the bed. It reminds me of that night in my motel room when I found him just like this, waiting for the results. While the tension is not the same, I pick up another similarity. Just like that night, he scans me up and down then sneers, shaking his head as if he disapproves of my...I don’t know. My hair?

My pajamas? I'm not sure, but there's something on me he doesn't like.

"You good?" he asks.

I nod.

"Okay." He stands up. "Uh...you know where everything is, so...just make yourself comfortable." He doesn't leave. He just sort of stands there, shifting on the balls of his feet. "I got you, um, rice...and those honey-barbeque potato chips you like so much."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Another loaded pause ensues. "Well, um..." He reaches out to rub my arm in the awkward way he did when he came to my motel last week. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." When he still doesn't leave, I look down at the hand stroking my arm. "This is honestly the most uncomfortable encounter I've ever experienced."

His laughter breaks the tension, and he sheepishly removes his hand and tucks it into his pocket. "It's so weird."

"And not smooth at all. I expected more from you, Drac."

"I expected more from me. I can't even explain the level of disappointment I feel in myself right now."

"Please ask Mr. Tate for your money back."

He smiles, and after a moment of internal debate, he decides that a playful nudge will be the form of touching he uses this time. "It's good to have you back home, Li."

And just like that, I crumble. Those words trigger something in my brain and every pillar of strength inside me collapses. My reaction is automatic and happens without me even thinking. I throw my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. It takes a second or two for his shock to wear off and then his arms slip around my waist to pull me closer. He nuzzles his nose against the side of my neck and all the tension I've been feeling for the last few weeks leaves my body.

My shoulders relax, and I melt into him. He was right earlier when he said I needed him to be the rock last week because that's what he's always been. From the first day I met him, he's had a way of allaying my worries and doubts. I find comfort in his demeanor because his steadiness keeps me steady. He's so laid back and unfazed by the pressures of life. Nothing ever rattles him. When he freaked out, I freaked out even more because he tipped the scales in a way that made me feel out of control, like everything was falling apart around me.

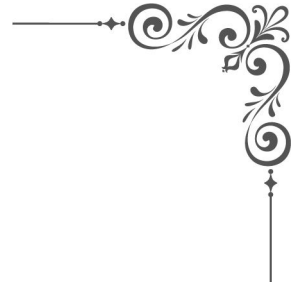
But as his fingers lightly caress my lower back, everything slowly shifts back into equilibrium. I don't know if I was craving some sense of stability or just him, but this is what I needed to set my mind at ease. The world doesn't seem so scary. The situation doesn't feel so overwhelming.

Ever since my parents died, I've been floating around aimlessly from pillar to post, searching for a place to take refuge, a place where I can feel like I belong. I lived in a fancy penthouse for fourteen months, and it never felt like this. I still felt lonely and empty all the time.

Peter is not promising me love or marriage or any of the things I thought I wanted. Instead, he's giving me exactly what I need. A friend. A rock. A place of solace.

Right here in this house, in these arms, he gives me the one thing I've been searching for so desperately.

A home.



10. Peter

The shrill sound of my ringing phone yanks me from my sleep. With a tired groan, I grab it from the nightstand, flipping over from my stomach to my back to see who's calling.

"Fuck," I groan, focusing on the name on my screen. It's a video call from Scott. What does he want? It's barely seven o'clock on a Tuesday morning. Why would he think I'd be up?

"Pete!" he yells as soon as I answer.

I don't know what he's been popping, but he's too energetic for this time of morning. "Scott...what in God's name are you doing calling me at this hour?"

"Hang on. Let me get Dyl on this call."

Dylan joins the call a few seconds later. As expected, he's already dressed and ready for the day. "Hey, Scott."

"What's up, Dyl?"

"Why are you calling so early?"

"So, I wanted to know if you guys are free today and tomorrow."

"I'm unemployed," I reply, squinting at the screen because it's too bright for my tired eyes. "I'm always free."

"I could spare a few hours. What do you need, Scott?"

"Well...I'm sorta getting married tomorrow, and I wanted you guys to be there."

That slaps me awake. "What?!"

"What?" Dylan is more shocked than me. "To whom exactly?"

"Cat. Duh! Who else would I marry?" Scott says, as if the answer is obvious. It isn't. Cat left three weeks ago, right after Dylan's wedding. When did she come back? When did they get back together? What happened to her boyfriend?

I'm still reeling from this information. "What?!"

"What? When did she get back?"

"She crept into my apartment at three this morning," Scott explains. "We talked. She asked me to marry her. I said yes."

If this conversation had happened a month ago, I would've told him to stop and think about it. It's an impulsive decision and he shouldn't rush into it. But I've recently learned that one cannot be talked out of stupid, impulsive decisions. I asked a woman I only knew for three days to move in with me, got her pregnant, then asked her to move in with me again. Stupid, impulsive decisions are now a core part of my existence.

"Well, I'm in," I say. "But why are you asking for today and tomorrow?"

"Do you guys remember when Cat and I were planning our wedding the first time, and I had that thing I wanted to do?"

Dylan groans. "That's hard manual labor, Scott."

"Tough shit," Scott snaps. "Do you remember what Pete and I had to do for you?"

Dylan has obviously forgotten about his corny proposal, which also entailed some hard manual labor.

"We stole a fucking horse for you, Dylan," I remind him.

"It wasn't a real horse, and we put it back right after."

"That's not the point," Scott retorts. "The point is, we helped you and you owe me."

He relents with a humph of annoyance. "Fine. I'll be there."

"Me too."

There's a stilted pause before Scott speaks again. "Why don't you bring Lia as your plus one?"

"Really?" Considering that he basically called her a gold digger the last time he spoke to her, I wasn't expecting that at all.

“Yeah. I think maybe I judged her too soon. It looks like she’s going to be in your life for at least the next few months, and□”

“Next few *years*,” I say. I have to tell them at some point. I might as well break the news now. “Uh...she’s pregnant.”

I get nothing but radio silence for a solid minute. Scott isn’t even blinking.

Dylan is the first to speak, his voice carrying his surprise with a hint of playful mockery. “Wow, Pete. That’s...that’s great. Congratulations. You must be so excited.”

I’m stressed. I’m scared. I’m anxious. Excited doesn’t even fall into the top ten. “I’m not.”

“Maybe that’s just because you’re thinking about the point when you have to stop having sex...and the diaper changes...and the vomit...and staying up all night...”

I hate him so much. “Just so you know. None of what you’re saying makes me feel any better.”

“...but once you get over the feeling of losing all your freedom and taking on this *enormous* responsibility, you are going to be so fired up to have this kid.”

“You are literally the worst friend in the world, Dyl.”

“Some people would love to be in your position, Pete. Never forget how lucky you are to be blessed with such a gift. I’m just pointing out that there are multiple reasons to celebrate today.”

I know Dylan is sensitive about this topic because he can’t have kids. He’s saying it playfully, but I know he’s referring to himself when he says things like: *Some people would love to be in your position.*

“Yeah, you’re right, Dyl,” I say, knowing that I need to change my mindset on this. But that’s a struggle for another day. Right now, we have another wedding to focus on. “So, let’s not be somber and focus on Scott’s special day. Congratulations, boy! I’m so happy that you and Cat managed to work it out.”

“Thanks,” he says. “And don’t stress, alright? Dylan’s an ass sometimes, but you know we always have your back, and we’ll be there for whatever you need.”

“I know. So, listen, give me half an hour and I’ll come over. Dylan, bring your toolset. We’ve got some DIY building to do.”

I hang up, then throw my head back against the pillows. *It’s a blessing*, I tell myself. *Some people would love to be in your position*. Currently, I’m not one of those people, but I’ll get there...right?

A kid is only a commitment for, like...a lifetime.

I only have to make the tiny sacrifice of giving up all my time and freedom and all the joys of single life.

Easy, right?

Nothing to panic about.

Oh, God! What have I done? One stupid, irresponsible moment and now I have to deal with the repercussions for the Rest. Of. My. Life!

Did I fuck around? Yes.

Am I finding out? Most definitely.

I’ve been trying to come to terms with this for a week, and eventually, I had to stop burying my head in the sand. The reality is that this problem isn’t going away, so I can’t keep running from it. I told myself that I need to stop being a pussy and handle this like a man, so that’s what I did. I found Lia and brought her home.

This is the right thing to do. Taking responsibility for my actions is a given. I can’t leave the full burden of raising a child on Lia. We both did this. We both have to deal with the consequences. So, even though I’m freaking out, even though the stress is probably going to make me lose hair, even though this is going to turn my whole life upside down, I know this is the right thing to do.

I’m going to give Lia and our baby a good home, and—

Our baby?

I'm still trying to get used to that. It's a lot to wrap my head around. I'm going to be a dad. That's something I never thought would happen because I'm not a 'dad' type of guy. I'm not selfless and loving. I don't even know how to fish. Is that a prerequisite? Because if it is, I failed right out the gate.

What if I end up being a shitty dad? What if I ruin my kid's life, and he ends up hating me? He's gonna be sitting in therapy in fifteen years talking about how I'm the worst role model and how I'm the reason he's addicted to marijuana and has too much sodium in his diet.

I grab my phone and go straight to Google: *How much marijuana do you need to smoke to be considered an addict?*

I chuck my phone before I even click search. He's not even born yet. I need to calm the fuck down.

I toss off the covers, and after a deep breath, I walk down the hall to Lia's bedroom. This is honestly the worst arrangement I could've possibly thought of. Living under the same roof as the woman who is quite literally the embodiment of feminine perfection is no easy feat. But then Noble Nick stepped in again and took sex off the table, and now it's a million times worse.

Again, I know I'm doing the right thing. We can't keep having sex because then when do we stop? When we get bored with each other? When she finds the man she *wants* to settle down with? I'm not going to be a placeholder until she finds her Prince Charming.

That's just going to get messy, and I don't want my kid getting caught in the crossfire if shit goes south between us. I need to make sure that his therapy sessions are limited to dealing with his marijuana addiction. He doesn't need more issues. He's just a kid, for fuck's sake!

I'm going off the rails again.

Calm down.

Needless to say, it is in fact her continuous quest to find the perfect husband that made me enter into this completely

sexless arrangement. Subtle though it was, she has rejected me not once, not twice, but *several* times now. I mean, I left for an hour and came back to an empty house. That was a clear sign. But I ignored it and went back to the motel to check on her.

Now, while it wasn't my intention to convince her to come back, I thought we could still be friends (with some benefits), and we could continue to...see each other. That sorta sounds like dating, but I wasn't going to rush into labeling it or anything.

However, that attempt ended with her shutting the door in my face, and the only reason it didn't end there was because I took a detour at the drugstore. All in all, I got the message. But just because it's the right and logical thing to do, doesn't mean it's easy.

This woman is a walking temptation. I don't know if it's because she's pregnant, but her tits are bigger, her ass is juicier. Everything about her is a little fuller, plumper. I'm not doing okay. The baby is one stress, but Lia is putting a different kind of strain on me.

I'm going to give myself credit, though. I got through Sunday night and the whole of yesterday without cracking. I have persevered and stayed strong. I'm a man of steel. Nothing's going to break me. I can do this for a few more weeks, months...years.

Years?

Am I really never going to have sex with her again?

I shake off the thought because it's a fate I don't wish to bear and knock on her bedroom door. It swings open a few seconds later, and she is in the sexiest state of disarray. Her hair's half up, half down. She's half dressed, half...not, wearing the skirt of her uniform and a white camisole, the lacey trimming accentuating the supple curves of her breasts.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi."

Hazel eyes caress me, prancing seductively over my bare chest. I have no trouble interpreting her body language. Her

lips part. Her breath quickens. And the way she looks at me sends a bolt of red-hot lust straight to my groin. There's no shortage of that in this house. Lust has always flowed in abundance between us. It's extracting *any* other kind of emotion out of her that's the problem.

I clear my throat when I realize I'm rock hard in the middle of the hallway, and I can do nothing to hide it because all I'm wearing is a flimsy pair of boxer shorts.

"Hi," I say again because I can't find another word amid the naked images of her flashing through my mind.

She smiles, that adorable smile where she tries so hard *not* to smile that it makes the dimple on her cheek more prominent. "Hi."

"Uh...hi."

"Let's make a collective effort to move past that word."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Now, let's try the same thing with *okay*."

"Sure."

She giggles. "Our interactions seem to be getting more awkward with each passing day."

I grin, clasping my hands in front of me to hide my ever-growing erection. "One day, we'll figure out a way to navigate around this."

"And by *this*...you mean *that*?" She points to my crotch.

"Yep. In a couple days, you won't even notice it."

The cutest blush tints her cheeks. "It's pretty big." Her gaze drops, and she stares at it for a moment too long. "*Hard*...not to notice."

I shut my eyes for a second because even though her tone is playful, the breathiness in her voice does something to me. "Shut up," I say with a chuckle. "You're making it worse." A

naughty smile greets me when I open my eyes again. “Why are you just staring at it?”

“I don’t know. It sort of feels like a superpower...like I can control it without touching it.”

“Please stop talking.” I shake my head, ridding myself of every dirty thought that look invokes before I redirect the conversation. “Uh...I know I came here to tell you something, but now...Oh, yeah. You’re working the four-hour shift today and tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Scott needs me to help him with something today, so we have to sort of change plans. Do you mind if I drop you off a little earlier today? I’ll make sure I leave by twelve-thirty, so we can still make it on time to our doctor’s appointment.”

“Sure, that’s fine.” She thinks it over for a second. “I work in the opposite direction to Scott’s place. If it makes it easier for you, I can just ask Rafael to pick me up on his way to work this morning. He passes this way anyway. It’ll just be a five-minute detour for him.”

Over my dead body. I know the look of a man who just wants to smash. I can spot my own kind. He obviously has different tactics. I’m more direct in my approach to women. He uses the side door to get in under the guise of friendship. Personally, I don’t think he’d stand a chance with Lia, even if she wasn’t pregnant. But the fact is, he’s going to try, and I don’t want him anywhere near her. And that includes friendly carpools to work.

“I’ll take you,” I say.

“Peter, I’m sure he won’t mind.”

“I’m sure he won’t either.” It’s a mixture of my icy tone and sardonic smirk that gives it away.

She picks up on my change of mood immediately. “What’s up with you? I’m just trying to make all the logistics of this easier. You’re gonna travel twenty minutes in one direction to drop me off. That means it’s gonna take you over an hour to go back the other way to get to Scott’s place. Or maybe even

longer if you end up hitting mid-morning traffic. If Raf picks me up, it'll be more convenient for *you*."

God, even his name grinds me. "In case you missed it, dollface, I signed up for a lifetime of inconvenience, and I can assure you I'm not reassigning that role to anyone else." I place my forearm on the doorjamb and lean closer, lowering my voice like this is a secret just between us. "I also know that your skirt rides up about two inches when you get into my car..." I slide my finger into the waistband of her skirt, tugging her closer, and her breath catches in her throat. "...and I'm not reassigning that view to anyone else, either."

There it is again. That adorable smile tugging relentlessly at her cheek, but she refuses to let it widen. "Fine."

"Fine."

She kills the smile and gives me a disinterested eye roll instead. "Fine."

"Now, get ready, and let's go." I turn and start walking back to my bedroom.

"I left your breakfast in the microwave," she yells out when I'm halfway down the hall. "And lunch is in the fridge."

She did the same thing yesterday. I don't know what time she wakes up to get all this done before she goes to work, but I'm not going to raise any questions because this is one of the very many things I missed when she was gone. It's the one thing that solidifies the fact that she's back. We may not be sharing a bed. The dynamic between us has changed, and it's awkward as fuck sometimes, but if she's cooking again, it means she's comfortable and feeling at home. And that's all I want.

"Thanks, Li," I yell back.

I shower and change, then head downstairs to eat breakfast. Ten minutes later, we climb into my Bugatti. I bought the SUV as a sign to show her I was serious, but until the baby's born, there's no real use for it. And I want to enjoy every bit of my freedom before that day comes.

Lia hands me a bottle of water, then clips on her seatbelt. “You need this if your stubborn ass is gonna be cooped up in this car for an hour.”

“How kind of you.”

She crosses her legs, and maybe it’s because of the comment I made earlier, but the movement draws both our eyes to the silky smoothness of her thighs. She watches me, watching her, and I know she knows that all I’m thinking about is burying my head between those thighs.

“Be honest with me, Li.” I prop my elbow on the steering wheel, biting my thumb as a mechanism to restrain my hands, my mouth...everything. “Are you taking as much strain as me?”

“Possibly more. My hormones are all over the place. I have to battle horniness and nausea at the same time. And my nausea has doubled since I moved back in because I’m so disgusted at myself for perving over you in my mind. It isn’t fun.”

“Glad to know it’s not just me.” I spare a quick glance because I can’t afford to stare at her for too long. “And remind me again why I’m not balls-deep inside you right now?”

The lewdness of my question doesn’t even faze her. She expects that little of me. “Well, I want a committed relationship, possibly marriage, and you...don’t, and we agreed that compromising somewhere in the middle of those two extremes wouldn’t work well in the long run for us or our baby...so we removed sex and all related complications from the equation.”

“Right.” I nod, letting that sink in. “Right. That’s what I needed to hear to renew my resolve.” I back out of the driveway. “I’m good now. I’m gonna stay strong. Nothing’s gonna break me.” I look over at her to let her know how serious I am. “I’m a man of steel, Li.”

Her eyes move down to my crotch, and she giggles. “I can see that.”

“Shut up.”

I shift into gear and head toward the highway. During the drive, I tell her about Scott's wedding and extend the invitation like he asked me to. Although surprised by how sudden it all is, she agrees to go with me. She asks me about a hundred questions about their relationship, and I spend most of the trip explaining my whole friendship circle and the long-winded history of Scott and Cat and Isabella and Dylan.

She also tells me about her new friendship circle with Tori and Shontelle, though her story is much shorter. It seems sort of surface level though, like she's actively trying to not get too close to any of them, which makes me feel a little better. At least I'm not the only person she shuts out.

After dropping her off, it takes me over an hour to get to Scott. I find him and Dylan on the beach outside his apartment building. They're putting together some makeshift deck. It has interlocking plastic pieces, but it looks like it's made of wood. Cat always wanted to get married on a beach. This is the same beach he proposed to her on, and it looks like he's going all out to give her the dream wedding she always talked about.

It's a scorcher today, and my skin feels like it's sizzling as I make my way over to them. Dylan drops everything when he sees me, racing toward me at full speed. He throws himself onto my back, ruffling my hair as his arms tighten around my neck.

He's so excited he can barely contain himself. "You're gonna be a daddy, boy!"

With him still attached to me, I walk over to Scott, whose reaction is a lot more reserved.

"Congratulations!" I say, reaching out to shake his head. "You and Cat are finally getting married. It only took you about a decade."

"I can't tell you how happy I am." His grin stretches from ear to ear, but it slowly morphs into wariness. "I guess congratulations are in order for you, too."

I nod, reading between the lines to decipher what he's really trying to say. "If you have even one negative thing to

say about her, I suggest you keep it to yourself.”

He nods because he knows what I mean without me having to say it. “I still think an *I-told-you-so* is looming, but I’ll save it for that particular day.”

“Much appreciated.”

Scott and I have been friends since the second grade. That’s all we need to say to each other to reach an understanding.

“What did I say?” Dylan says, hopping off me. “Didn’t I say that a little birdie told me he saw you and Lia sitting in a tree? But you skipped a few vital steps, Pete. First comes love, *then* comes marriage, *then* comes the baby in a golden carriage.” He taps me on the shoulder. “So, are we going for a hat-trick? Three weddings in one year?”

“What? No. Dyl, this isn’t the fifties. People don’t just get married because of a kid anymore.” I shrug, kneeling into the sand so we can continue putting this deck together. “We’ve decided that we’ll live together for the time being and we’ll co-parent, but we’re not going to pursue a relationship or anything that may lead to...complications.”

“Solid idea,” Scott says, his tone laced with sarcasm. “It’s not gonna work, but...”

“What do you mean, it’s not gonna work?” I ask when he leaves that sentence hanging.

“Well, firstly, there’s no way you’re gonna last more than a month without sex, so you’re either gonna cave and have sex with her, which is going to lead to exactly the complications you’re trying to avoid—”

“My money’s on that option,” Dylan chimes in, slotting one piece of the deck into another and clicking it into place. “You’re under the same roof. Tensions are high. Chemistry is flowing. Plus, you like her so much it’s gonna be impossible to resist.”

“I don’t like her.” I reconsider my words when he glares at me. “...*that* much.”

“Pete, take it from me. I learned the hard way that it’s better to embrace your feelings rather than deny them.”

I groan, covering my face with both hands. “Fuck, why do you turn everything into an episode of *Love Island*?”

“It’s just who I am.”

“*Or*,” Scott interrupts to bring our attention back to the original conversation, “you’re gonna end up sleeping with someone else, and that’ll cause shit to hit the fan in the most colossal way.”

“Why?” I ask. “We’re not together. If I want to sleep with someone else—”

“But you don’t want anyone else, do you, Pete?” Dylan cuts in again. “She’s the *only* one you want because you haven’t even looked in the direction of another woman since you met her.”

I grit my teeth, trying not to get annoyed by his sentimental ramblings. He’s right, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of admitting that. “What I was trying to say is that we both agreed to this. If I want to have sex with someone else, I can. That’s the whole point of staying single, right?”

“That means she’s single too,” Scott counters, wiping the sweat off his brow. “So, what would you do if she sleeps with another guy?”

“I’ll rip his fucking head off.”

I shut my eyes when I realize just how fast that reaction burst out of me. I had no time to check myself. When I open them again, both these assholes are doubled over, killing themselves.

“Bit of a double standard there,” Scott wheezes between spurts of laughter.

“Just put a ring on it.”

It’s official. I hate both of them.

Dylan taps his phone a few times and Beyonce’s *Single Ladies* comes blaring through the speakers. He starts dancing

and singing along. Other people on the beach turn to see what all the commotion is about. As Dylan has demonstrated many times before, he doesn't care about making a spectacle of himself in public, so he just ignores all the gaping and looks of confusion.

"What if we just send him on an errand one day, and while he's gone, we move...far away?" I look over at Scott, who's still chuckling with amusement as he clicks another set of deck boards together. "No warning. No forwarding address. We just pack up and leave. He'll never find us, Scott."

"I live with the eternal hope that one day...we're gonna find a use for him."

Dylan drops down in the sand beside me when the song ends and throws his arm around me. "For real, though? What's stopping you? She likes you. You're crazy about her. You're already ready and willing to do all the hard stuff that comes with a relationship. Why not enjoy the good stuff too? Just take the plunge, go the whole nine yards, and do this properly. I'm not saying marry her, but go all in."

"Dyl, we barely know each other. What if we try this and it goes sour? What do we do? I don't want to bring a kid into the mix and there's this bitterness between us. He's innocent in all of this. It'll be so unfair to bring him into a toxic environment. Besides, she..." I shrug, bracing myself to admit the truth. "She doesn't want a guy like me. She wants a decent, faithful guy. Her parents and romance novels sold her some delusional fantasy about everlasting love, so she wants a walking, talking fairy tale who's gonna be this upstanding husband and incredible father. I'm not that guy."

"But you could be," is his simple solution to the problem. "You didn't say she didn't want *you*. You said she didn't want a guy *like* you, so just don't be...you."

"Wow. My entire existence has been reduced to a mere character flaw. And you think I can just change that on a whim?"

"You know what I mean. Be a better you. Be a different you. Be the upstanding, faithful guy she's looking for."

“Do you even understand what you’re suggesting?” I ask with contempt. “That means I’ll have to give up every other hot chick for the *rest* of my life.”

“Pete, you’ve already done that.” He slots another piece into place before hammering the side to secure it. “You did that as soon as you asked her to move in with you.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No, I didn’t want any of this. I didn’t want a relationship. I *never* wanted kids, and now all of this is happening so fast, and I have to change my whole life. I’m trying to do the right thing for this kid, but I can’t...I can’t *also* commit to this relationship. It’s too much pressure and responsibility. I don’t have a choice with the baby. I have to step up, but I can’t do the same with Lia. It’s too risky.” It sounds like I’m freaking out again...because I am. “What if I mess up? What if I falter? What if I’m out one night and I end up falling into temptation and cheating on her? Or worse. What if the opposite happens? What if...what if I give up the single life, make all the sacrifices, do everything right, put all I got into this...and I still can’t make her happy?”

Scott has been a silent observer this whole time, but he finally pipes up. “Pete, a lot of people are under the misconception that relationships are supposed to make you happy. But that’s not how it works. You’re supposed to be happy by yourself. As an individual. And then you bring that happiness *to* the relationship. You don’t take the happiness *from* it. I’ve been through a lot of ups and downs with Cat, and I can tell you it’s not always smiles and roses. Sometimes it’s mundane. Sometimes it’s a slow burn. Sometimes you hurt each other, and it’s pure fucking misery. But that’s how it’s supposed to be. Happiness fills in the spaces between all those moments. You can’t spend *years* with a person and be deliriously happy *all* the time. And you shouldn’t be responsible for someone else’s happiness. You’ll drive yourself insane, so that should never be your aim.”

“He’s right,” Dylan agrees. “Our vows don’t say in happiness and...happiness. It says sickness and health, richer or poorer. It’s not just about the good times. You vow to go through all that shit together, and I can guarantee there’ll be

days where you don't like her, and she doesn't like you. Commitment isn't about happiness, and it isn't about whether you like that person on the day. When you commit to someone, you're committing to working it out *every* time. Whether you're happy or not. Whether you like her or not. You work through the pain, the anger, the tears, her going level nine crazy and fucking up your car, whatever she throws at you. You commit to going through *all* that with her. Every. Single. Time. And I hate to break it to you, Pete, but with a baby on the way, you made that commitment the second you told her to move in with you."

"I *didn't* commit," I argue. "Did you not hear what I said? I'm just trying to do what's right."

"Pete, I want you to think about your actions. You own twelve apartment buildings, three of which are in the same complex as your house, literally within walking distance. You could have set her up in any of them, taken care of all your responsibilities when it comes to the baby, with both of you continuing to live your separate lives. But you asked her to move in with *you*. Why is that?"

I'm done. I don't want to hear anymore. I don't want to talk about this anymore. It's too much confusion, and I'll work through it later.

"You know what? Why don't we talk about the commitment that we're actually here for?" I turn to Scott. "I can't believe you're getting married tomorrow. Who gets married on a Wednesday?"

"That's Cat's idea. She wanted to get married today, but I convinced her to be more rational. I also wanted to do this for her..." He gestures to the deck. "...and it takes time to put all this together, so we moved it to tomorrow."

That does the trick and diverts the conversation away from Lia and back to Scott and his happy day. That's where our attention needs to be. He and Cat have wanted this for so long, and nothing should take away from that.

I leave to pick up Lia before the job is fully done, but it's just the finishing touches. The drive back feels like hours. I

have so many thoughts plaguing me. The conversation I had with Scott and Dylan replays over and over again in my head.

I don't know how that discussion warped my mind, but Lia looks different when she slides into the passenger seat of my car. Is that her seat now? Is no other woman going to sit in that seat? Like *ever*? Did I unconsciously commit to her when I asked her to move in? What if she never moves out? What if we end up living together for the entire duration of our baby's childhood? Is she the person I'm going to share my house with? My life with? Indefinitely? There's permanence in these questions, and I don't know how to answer them.

But as I watch her clip on her seatbelt, I come to one conclusive answer. Just one. She takes full ownership of that seat. To the point where I can't even picture anyone else in it.

"Hi," she greets when the silence stretches on for too long.

"Hi."

She picks up on my mood immediately. "Everything okay?"

"Just got a lot on my mind."

"Like what?"

"Like how good you look in that seat."

She giggles. "It's a Bugatti. Anyone can look good in the front seat of a Bugatti."

My head is a mess right now. I feel like I'm being pulled in a hundred different directions, and I don't know where to focus. We don't say much during our drive to the doctor's office. I remain quiet as she fills in the forms to open a patient file, reading the many thank you cards stuck on the wall. This office is covered with baby pictures, and it's incredible to think that one doctor brought so many lives into this world.

"Are you nervous?" Lia asks.

"A little...yeah."

"Me too." She reaches over to squeeze my hand. "It's scary...but at least we're in it together."

I look down at our hands, then up at her. She sees something on my face and somehow misinterprets it because she slowly pulls her hand away.

“Sorry,” she says, sounding sheepish.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I just—”

“Dr. Cheng will see you now,” the receptionist announces.

I huff out a quick breath as I stand up, trying to get rid of the nervous energy building inside me. I follow Lia into the doctor’s office, and we take a seat in front of the wide oak desk.

“It’s Mahalia?” Dr. Cheng asks, looking down at the forms in her file.

“Yes.”

She looks at me. “And you are?”

“Uh...Peter...Peter Danahay.”

“Great! Lovely to meet the two of you. Your file says you’re here for a pregnancy check-up.” She smiles warmly. “First-time parents?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answer.

“Okay. I can tell both of you are nervous, so let’s start with your medical history and a few basic questions?”

The questions she asks cover Lia’s allergies, existing medical conditions, and family history before she moves to the pregnancy. “Lia, when was the first day of your last menstrual period?”

“Um...I can’t really remember. I don’t get my period regularly. I think it must’ve been around...mid-May. Yeah, it was right after my birthday.”

Shit, I don’t even know when her birthday is. How am I having a kid with someone when I don’t even know something as basic as her birthday?

“Okay.” Dr. Cheng nods and makes a note of it. “Have you experienced irregular periods in the past, or is this a recent occurrence?”

“No, it’s always been like that. I would say it’s gotten more regular as I’ve gotten older, but it’s never been an every month sort of thing.”

“And have other doctors ever diagnosed any other medical conditions, such as polycystic ovary syndrome or thyroid disorders, anything that could impact your menstrual cycle?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“Okay.” Again, she makes a note of it. “Now, have you been experiencing any morning sickness, fatigue, or changes in appetite?”

“I’m definitely nauseous, but it’s not limited to the mornings. It’s really bad in the afternoons, but most days it gets better closer to the evening. Appetite? I can’t stomach much, and just the smell of meat makes me want to hurl.”

“That’s a common complaint.” She stands up and walks over to a door on the left side. “We need to do a physical exam. Please remove your clothes, put on one of the gowns, and knock on the door when you’re ready for me.”

“All my clothes?”

She picks up on Lia’s nervousness and tries to set her at ease. “You can leave your skirt on, but if we can’t see enough on the ultrasound, we may need to do a vaginal scan. You’ll have to remove it then.”

We walk into the small examination room, and she closes the door once we’re inside. There’s an awkward pause, and I twist around to give her some privacy, staring at the bed and some weird machine instead.

Lia undresses, pulls on the dressing gown, then knocks on the door as the doctor instructed. Dr. Cheng enters a moment later and immediately gets to work, pulling on a pair of latex gloves. She instructs Lia to stand on a scale and jots down her weight.

After that, she switches on the machine and tells Lia to lie on the bed. I sit down on the chair on the opposite side, rolling it closer so I can also get a better look.

“We’re going to do the ultrasound now. This is going to be cold.” She lifts the gown up, shifts the skirt down an inch, and applies a gel to Lia’s stomach.

Lia winces at the cold, but her smile shows a mixture of anxiousness and excitement. Dr. Cheng rubs a little handheld device over the lower part of Lia’s abdomen and a gray bubble appears on the screen of the machine.

“Okay, let’s see if we can find our little...” She moves the device. “There...There’s little baby Danahay.”

Everything – the words, how she said it, the tiny gasp Lia lets out – all of it rocks something inside me. My whole world shifts off its axis. This is real. This is happening.

I’m motionless for a second, staring at the bean-like shape on the screen. A loud sound fills the room, a whirring similar to a washing machine.

“What is that?” I ask, my throat tight.

“That’s the heartbeat,” Dr. Cheng replies.

“That’s his heartbeat?” I sound as awestruck as I feel. “Doc, that’s my baby in there?”

She giggles at the childlike wonder in my voice. “Yes, Papa, that’s your baby in there.”

Again, her words wind me like a kick to the stomach. I look over at Lia and she’s almost in tears. I don’t often get emotional, but I’m so overcome at this moment, I feel like I may just cry.

I reach over and squeeze her hand. “That’s our baby, Li.”

“Yeah.” It’s barely a word, more like a breathy whisper.

I lean closer to see it flickering on the screen. It’s like witnessing a miracle.

“Heartbeat is strong,” Dr. Cheng says. “Everything looks normal. Oh, look. That might be a little arm.”

“He’s got arms?” That spurs my next question. “Is it a boy?”

She laughs as if she’s amused by my ignorance. “It’s too early to tell.” Based on the way she’s moving the device and the numbers that appear on the screen, it looks like she’s taking measurements. “So, looking at the size and stage of development, it looks like the fetus is about...eight...no, maybe closer to nine weeks.”

“Um...” My eyebrows crease together as I think back. “Sorry, Dr. Cheng. The math is not mathing. We...” I’m embarrassed to admit this to a stranger. “We don’t even know each other for eight weeks.”

The revelation makes her a tad awkward. “Well, did you and Mahalia engage in...unprotected sexual activities quite early in your relationship?”

“Uh...yeah. Very early...like the second time.”

“So...” She glances at Lia, careful not to make assumptions. “The age of the fetus is not counted from the date of conception. It’s technically counted from the first day of her last period. We don’t know when that day was because her cycle isn’t regular, but it’s generally a few weeks before conception. So, the age will be the number of weeks post-conception plus a couple weeks for the ovulation process. Does that...track?”

I nod. We met about five weeks ago, plus a few weeks... okay, the math is mathing. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Okay, today is August, twenty-fourth, so baby’s estimated due date is March, twenty-sixth.” She gives us a warm smile as she hands me a picture of the ultrasound. “Congratulations.”

Hearing that cements...everything. My adrenaline levels shoot through the roof, and I feel like I’m buzzing.

I walk out with Dr. Cheng while Lia dresses, and when she comes out, the doctor talks us through what prenatal vitamins we need and what we should expect over the next few weeks.

By the time we leave, my legs feel like lead. I’ve been operating at such a high level of emotion for the last thirty

minutes that I'm saturated and numb as we walk back to my car. I lag a few steps behind Lia, and eventually, she stops walking and turns to face me.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Just thinking."

"About what?" The way she twiddles with her fingers tells me she's nervous about my response.

"I'm just...I'm trying to figure out if you ruined my life... or made it worth living."

She rushes toward me, throwing her arms around me to hug me tight. I stand there on the sidewalk, holding her as life continues around us. Cars drive by. People walk past. But we're locked in this moment that everyone else around us doesn't understand.

That moment is short-lived, though. She awkwardly pulls away and takes a step back. Her stoic mask falls back into place, and she crosses her arms over her chest. She did the same thing when we got back to my house on Sunday night, and she hugged me in her bedroom. She did the same thing earlier when she held my hand.

It's a repetitive pattern. She tries to remain distant and withdrawn, but every now and then, she slips and lets me in. She only allows me to see the tiniest glimpse of emotion before she pulls away again.

"Sorry about that," she says, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "I was just—"

"Stop apologizing, Lia. I was in there too."

I want her to acknowledge that we just experienced something magical and profound together, but all I get is a small nod and a meager smile.

Maybe it's because we're shell-shocked and overwhelmed, but the conversation does not progress much beyond that point. We're quiet during the drive home. We opt out of dinner because she's queasy and I'm too anxious to eat.

By eight, we're both in bed, but I can't fall asleep. I keep staring at this ultrasound picture. Minutes tick by, and I get lost in all the possibilities the future holds. This tiny little thing has changed my life forever. It's unfathomable how this blurry image is making me want to be a better man. I need to step up and take charge because March will be here before I know it.

Everything Dylan and Scott said to me today is still weighing heavily on my mind.

"You own twelve apartment buildings. But you asked her to move in with you. Why is that?"

The answer is simple. I care about her. Maybe a little too much. It's just hard to admit it (even to myself) because it's kinda one-sided. Lia is the only woman I've ever wanted to pursue something beyond a one-night stand, but sex is the only thing she thinks I have to offer. So, I'm now stuck in a stalemate, and I'm not sure how to get out of it.

I hear a light tap on my door and look up. "Hey, Li. What're you doing up? It's past eleven. I thought you'd be sleeping by now."

"I can't sleep. Too pumped."

"Same."

"Care to indulge me in my excessive need for pictures? You need to come to my room, though. The lighting is amazing on the balcony, and I want a few in the moonlight."

I try to ignore the irritation the words '*my room*' invoke. I also grit my teeth and pretend as if the black satin button-down pajamas she's wearing doesn't bug the shit out of me. "Sure," I reply, standing up.

Her eyes linger a little too long on my bare chest before she shakes it off and walks down the hall to *her* room. I follow her in, and she hands me her phone.

"Okay, so I was reading this website, and it said that at eight to nine weeks, the baby is the size of a grape." She holds up a grape. "I want to take a picture each week with something that shows his size, so we can see how he grows."

I take the grape from her hand to study it. “Really? This is how small he is?”

“Yeah, now imagine that with tiny arms on it.”

I smile, the emotions I felt earlier flooding right back. Excitement officially ranks in the top ten. She lifts her pajama top halfway and holds the grape against her stomach. She’s a bit of a perfectionist because she makes me take the picture about fifteen times.

She wants it at the exact right angle with the exact right pose and doesn’t settle for anything less. We go out onto the balcony and as I take each picture, a slow churning begins in my stomach. With the moonlight casting a warm white glow over her skin and hair, she looks almost angelic, and I’m reminded of how beautiful she truly is.

Dylan’s voice is echoing in my head: “*You didn’t say she didn’t want you. You said she didn’t want a guy like you.*”

Maybe that’s the reason she keeps pulling away. Maybe she’d want something more if I offered something more. Those words mess with my head. I start toying with the idea of walking back the arrangement we made at the diner two days ago. The idea is tempting, almost overpowering, but I dismiss it as outrageous a few seconds later.

I hand her back her phone, then turn to walk back inside. Returning to my room *alone* grinds me because all of this feels so wrong. I hate the distance. I hate that she’s sleeping in here instead of with me. But most of all, I hate her goddamn pajamas.

I suppress a sneer and head toward the door. “Goodnight, Li.”

“Wait.” She closes the glass sliding door, then turns to face me. “Are you okay? You’ve been blowing hot and cold all day. And that *goodnight* was said with a bit of contempt, so...is there something you want to say to me?”

“No.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Nope.”

“Do you...resent me for—”

“You’re overthinking again. It wasn’t aimed at you.”

“Then who was it aimed at? I’m the only one here.”

This is going to sound so stupid. “Your pajamas.”

“My pajamas?” Her giggle confirms how stupid it is. “You hate my pajamas?”

“I hate seeing you in them.”

She obviously doesn’t understand the depth of my hatred because she laughs again. “They’re *pajamas*. What else am I supposed to wear to bed?”

Again, all I can hear is Dylan: *What’s stopping you? She likes you. You’re crazy about her. Just take the plunge, go the whole nine yards, and do this properly.*

I step forward, and she takes a step back, her back hitting the sliding door. It’s her subtle way of pulling away again, but she’s got no room to maneuver when I close the gap between us. Uncertainty weighs down my movement as I raise my hand.

Just take the plunge.

I slowly undo the top button of her pajamas, and her breath hitches.

“Ideally...I’d like you to wear my T-shirts to bed.” I undo the next button. “And ideally, I’d like it to be *my* bed you sleep in.”

Her throat works as she swallows. “I thought we talked about this.”

“Hmm...” Placing my forearm above her head, I lean closer and undo another button. “Remind me again how we arrived at this very unsustainable conclusion.”

“Uh...I want something serious. You don’t want to give up your single life...and we agreed that compromising somewhere in the middle wouldn’t work long-term.”

Take the plunge. Offer her something more than just sex.

“Uh-huh.” My fingers slip beneath the material, lightly caressing the smooth skin between her breasts. “And what if... what if we didn’t compromise somewhere in the middle? What if I told you I would come all the way over to your side...if you just stopped pulling away from me?”

She freezes, her wide hazel eyes locking on mine. “Peter... we both know that’s not what you want. I know you want to do the right thing, but you don’t have to feel obligated to be with me because of the baby. If I weren’t pregnant, we never would’ve seen each other again.”

“Is that how you remember it?” My fingertips trace lightly over her stomach, and she shivers. “Because I remember waiting hours in a parking lot just to see you again...and that was before I knew about the baby.”

For the first time, it looks like she’s seriously considering the true motivations for my actions. I give her time to process that because it took me almost the entire day to come to grips with it, too.

She looks down, watching my hand skim across her skin. “There’s so much at stake. What if it doesn’t work out—”

“The fact that there’s so much at stake means we’ll do everything we can to make it work, right?”

Doubt and skepticism play with her expression. Tears brim in her eyes, and I can see that she’s as scared as me to take this step. “You’re not a one-woman kinda man, Peter. I’m never gonna be enough for you. Eventually, you’re gonna get bored and—”

“Why don’t you stop judging me for the past, and I’ll stop freaking out about the future, and we can both just put all our time and energy into building *us* in the present?”

“I promised myself that I wouldn’t fall for the alluring charms of an immortal fuckboy.”

“And I promised myself that I’d never get this twisted over a woman.” I shrug. “But here we are.”

That smile I like so much tugs at her lips. “You’re smooth.”

“I’m serious. You got me doing some crazy-ass shit I wouldn’t ordinarily do. You got me up at all hours of the night thinking about you. Are you...” I pause because I’m purposely opening myself up to another rejection. “Are you feeling any of that at all?”

“Yes...” she whispers. “But I hate that I do. I hate that I now have a whole sixties playlist on my phone. I listen to Frank Sinatra’s *I’m A Fool To Want You* every time I miss you, so it was pretty much on repeat the whole of last week. I hate that jade became my favorite color after I met you.” She’s angry and upset with herself. It’s reflected in her voice. “I hate that I turn to mush if you just smile at me. I hate that I quiver every time you touch me, like literal chills. I hate that I got butterflies watching you in Dr. Cheng’s office today. I hate that we had this *entire* conversation to determine whether I want to take this further when you had me the second you told me to wear your T-shirts to bed.”

A grin spreads across my face, and I can’t seem to stop it. I wasn’t expecting her to frame anything in a positive way. That’s not her style, but hearing that settles any morsel of doubt I may have had. This is the first time she hasn’t retreated or withdrawn into her shell. Instead, she told me how she really feels and it’s a relief to know that it’s not all one-sided.

“So, if I’m reading you right...you would hate it if I kissed you right now?”

“Absolutely.”

Her arms slip around my neck, pulling me closer until her lips touch mine. I haven’t kissed her since Dylan’s wedding, and the mere taste of her sets me off. An insatiable hunger has been brewing in me for way too long. I’ve been yearning for the smoothness of her skin, the softness of her mouth. I’m ravenous now.

I slip the pajama top off her shoulders, my lips trailing down her neck, then down to her breasts.

Fuck, I missed these tits.

I cup one, relishing in the plumpness that fills my palm. Her nipples harden, and I dip my head to run my tongue over one swollen peak. A constricted gasp catches in her throat, her head falling back against the glass, her fingers threading into my hair to keep my mouth on her.

Her free hand slides down my stomach and into my sweatpants, her fingers curling around my cock. She strokes me once, and I have to grit my teeth to stop myself from blowing my load right there on her hand.

I grip her wrist to halt the movement. “I’m gonna cum soon.”

“How soon?”

“*Very* soon.”

Something about that statement excites her because a seductive smile curves on her lips. She takes a step forward, urging me back. Holding my gaze, she takes another step and then another until the back of my calves hit the bed. With a light shove, I drop back onto the mattress to sit on the edge.

She hooks her thumbs into the seams of her satin pajama bottoms, and with agonizing slowness, she drags them down her legs. My dick twitches as I take in the sight of her naked body. I don’t know how she could even suggest that I would get bored with her. This is a sight I could never get bored with.

I’ve gone three weeks without touching her. Impatience is burning inside me like a furnace. I strip off my sweatpants, then reach out to pull her closer, but she steps back.

“No. Don’t move. Just stay there.”

“What are you doing?”

“Testing my superpowers.” Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips. “Close your eyes.”

I’m not sure what she’s up to, but I comply.

I feel the heat of her body as she steps between my legs. She lifts my right hand, and the warmth of her mouth covers

two of my fingers. She sucks hard, and I stiffen because the sensation sends a bolt of electricity right through me.

“I told you I was close,” I rasp.

I can't see her face, but by the way her lips curve around my finger, I can tell that she's smiling.

“I've spent a lot of nights thinking about you, Peter.” She drags my fingers down, over her chin, across her nipple and the furnace within me burns hotter when she reaches the juncture of her thighs. “Remembering how good your hands feel on my body.”

Does she not know that words have consequences? And her saying that only reminds me that I've been starved of her body for days without end. With her fingers over mine, she guides them inside her. She's soaked, welcoming me in. An ecstatic moan leaves her lips, and she rocks her hips to take me in deeper. Fuck, that must look so hot.

“Can I open my eyes?”

“No,” she murmurs. “Keep them closed and tell me every thought going through your mind.”

The sexy sounds she makes as she pumps my fingers in and out of her are driving me wild.

“I'm not thinking right now,” I say between labored breaths.

“Then tell me what you want...and I'll give it to you.”

The sultry promise in her voice pushes me to the edge. I'm going to crack. I'm going to jizz all over myself before I even get inside her. If that's not bad enough already, she bends slightly to kiss my neck.

“I want...” I take a moment to collect myself enough to form a coherent sentence. “I want you on your knees in front of me, and then I want your sexy lips wrapped around my cock. I want you to take me so deep, deep enough to feel the back of your throat.”

She doesn't hesitate. She removes my hand from between her legs and drops to her knees in front of me. “Stop me before

you cum.”

There’s something so erotic about not being able to see her. It sends my other senses into hyper-drive. I feel her smooth skin against my thighs, and my body zings in anticipation. I don’t know what she’s going to do or when she’s going to do it.

She leaves me waiting, my impatience building with every second, so much so that I jolt at the first flick of her tongue. She circles it around my tip before the heat of her mouth engulfs me. A gravelly groan rumbles in my chest. I weave my fingers into her hair, gripping it tight as I move her head up and down the length of me. She moans, the vibration adding another layer of sensation.

Not even a minute in, and I’m about to explode. “Stop,” I say, the words coming out as a low growl.

She slowly stands up and eases me back against the bed. “Keep them closed.”

Again, she makes me wait, and I’m tense and edgy by the time she crawls on top of me. First, I feel her hair drape over the side of my body. Then the spongy firmness of her nipples caresses me as she places open-mouth kisses up my chest. The second my brain registers the warm wetness coating my dick, I lose it.

One hand is already on her ass, the other is positioning my tip at her entrance.

“No,” she whispers. She gently takes both my hands and clasps them above my head. “No touching.”

What the fuck is this?

Her supple tits are pressed against my chest. Her pussy is wet and ready for me. And she doesn’t want me to touch her? There is no worse form of torture.

She rocks her hips, grinding on my very eager cock. She moves her hand between our bodies, gripping me tight and rubbing my tip along her slick folds. It is the most tantalizing sensation, but only adds to my growing frustration. I thrust

upwards, desperately seeking entry, but she lifts her hips an inch, denying me.

“Li, please.” My voice is thick and gruff. “A man can only take so much.”

She kisses me as if that will somehow ease the pressure building within me. My hands clench into fists. This vixen continues to tease me, taking me in an inch, then moving away when I try to push in deeper. She’s driving me insane, and the only reason I don’t flip her over and fuck her raw is because I don’t know how rough I can be with her.

I keep telling myself that she’s carrying some precious cargo and I need to be gentle. But my God, is she making it difficult.

Just when I’m about to snap, she slams her hips down hard enough to knock the wind out of me. My breath catches in my throat as I try to adjust to the feeling of being inside her. The absence of a condom heightens every sensation. She’s hotter, wetter. The waves of pleasure are torrential, washing over me until I’m almost delirious.

At this point, her rules are irrelevant. I’m done playing these games. I grip her hips and rock her back and forth, dragging her off my dick slow and pushing her back hard. Spreading her ass cheeks to go deeper, I thrust up in the same rhythm, hitting that spot that makes her lose her fucking mind. Her nails dig into my chest, and I wince when they scrape down my abs. Despite her languid pace, she rides me with vigor, voracity, her breasts bouncing with every up and down movement.

My heavy breaths mingle with her high-pitched moans, the sounds echoing our need and lust. She orgasms with my name on her lips, an aching whimper that pushes me off the edge into blissful oblivion.

Watching this woman unravel on top of me is a sight that imprints on my brain. I was doubting whether I could commit to one woman, but looking at her now, I know that no one else is ever going to hold a candle to her. She collapses limply against my chest, and my arms coil tightly around her.

“At least we got through Sunday *and* Monday this time,” she says with a satisfied sigh.

The fact that I couldn’t even get to day three without touching her proves how much I want her. “We gave it our best shot, Li.”

“That was our best? We’re pathetic.”

“What are you talking about? I was ready to give myself a gold medal for practicing that amount of restraint.”

She looks up at me, resting her chin on my chest. “You want a medal for two measly days?”

“It wasn’t two days.” I stroke her hair away from her face. “It was three weeks...that felt like an eternity.”

“Ugh! It’s official.” She fakes a gag even though a pink tint colors her cheeks. “It pains me to say this, but I think I’ve just acquired a taste for Hustler University graduates.”

“And don’t forget immortal fuckboys.”

“Yes, that too.”

“And now you shall spawn my offspring, and he will carry on my great legacy.”

The widest smile takes over her face. “Imagine this little grape grows up to be a mini you. He’s gonna go around wooing women and breaking their hearts.”

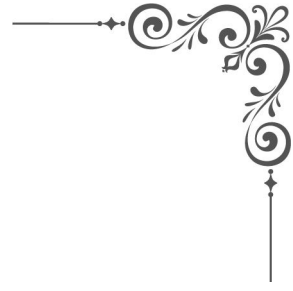
“The greatest player of all time.”

“Or imagine if this little grape grows up to be a *she*.”

“I’ve stopped imagining.”

She giggles. “You’re going to be a great dad, Peter.”

Dylan always used to chastise me, saying that I was living a meaningless life with no purpose. I dismissed it as hogwash because I thought the pursuit of purpose was overrated. But Lia’s words strike a chord inside me, sinking down to my bones, to my soul. The thought of being a dad still terrifies me, yet at the same time, it brings a new meaning to my life.



11. Lia

“So, I’ve been thinking,” Peter says, rubbing my back. “We should name him Ambrose.”

“We don’t know if it’s a boy.” My late lunch comes hurdling up my throat and into the toilet. It took me forever to get it down and just the car ride back home from work was enough to upset my stomach. “And I hate that name.”

He makes himself comfortable on the bathroom floor beside me and holds my hair back. “It’s definitely a boy.”

“I still hate the name.”

More vomit is violently ejected from my body, but he’s so used to this that he just continues the conversation. “Li, it’s a great name. Just think about it. We can call him *Bro* or *Brody* for short.”

“That sounds like the frat boy who’s in charge of getting the beer.”

“Already cool.”

“No.” The word is barely out before I have to make another deposit into the toilet.

“And it means *immortal*. That name was meant for him.”

I finally feel like my stomach is empty and sit back, slumping against the side of the bathtub. Peter shifts and sits next to me, stretching out his long legs. He hands me a stick of gum before draping his arm around me to pull me to his chest.

“Just think about it.”

“There’s nothing to think about. It’s a terrible name,” I say, and I can hear the weariness in my voice. I’m tired. I feel like crap all the time. “When is this going to end?”

“Well, they say it’s only for the first trimester. We’re already at eleven weeks. So, hopefully, in a week or two, you’ll start feeling like yourself again. Maybe that’s when the pregnant glow comes in.”

After popping the gum into my mouth, I look up at him with puffy eyes. “Am I not glowing now?”

“I mean...of course. Every time I walk in here and see you hurling over the toilet bowl, I am just enamored by your... radiance.” He snickers, then quickly clears his throat to cover it up. “Such poise. Such elegance. The beauty of it almost brings me to tears.”

“I can see you’re really choked up about it.”

He shuts his eyes and nods with the conviction of a melodramatic C-grade actor. “The raw emotions are just too overwhelming for me.”

“That was moving.” I put on my best presenter voice. “And the Oscar for the most believable display of bullshit goes to...” I pause for dramatic effect. “Peterrrrr Danahay!”

He chuckles. “Thank you. Thank you.” With his arm still around me, he clasps his hands together, shaking them twice to the right and twice to the left as if he’s won an award. “I’d like to thank the academy and my co-star, Lia. Without you, none of this would’ve been possible. You made it easy to stay in character because even on days like this when you feel like death, even when you are sitting on the bathroom floor, hugging the toilet bowl...” He brushes the hair off my forehead before dipping his head to kiss the tip of my nose. “You’re still the prettiest girl I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

If he throws in a grin, I’m literally going to turn to mush.

Ugh! And there it is. His lips quirk up, and it’s like someone switched a blender on inside me. I’m puree.

This is why I find him impossible to resist. He hits me with these playboy lines, but he says them with so much sincerity that I believe him. I had my doubts and reservations about actually entering into a *real* relationship with him, but these last two weeks have allayed all my fears.

He meant what he said about making me and our baby the priority. He proves it with actions and words. He still gets messages from random women to hook up, but he leaves all of them on read. I have to acknowledge that as a sign that he

meant what he said. And he hasn't done one thing to make me think that he's doubting or reconsidering his decision. In fact, every day he leans in more, which makes me lean in more. Every day, I let go of a little more skepticism and allow myself to believe that he won't break my heart.

But it's days like these that make me realize I made the right choice with him. He doesn't have to sit here and hold my hair back while I puke, but he does it every time. It's not just sweet, it's intimate somehow, a bonding moment.

We've had a few of them in the last two weeks. When he held my hand the whole way through Scott and Catalina's wedding. When he slipped his arms around my waist and kissed my neck while I was cooking dinner last night. Even sex doesn't feel like sex anymore. This man makes love to me with such exquisite tenderness.

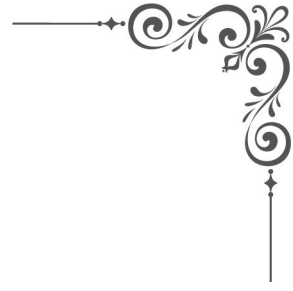
He told me he'd come all the way over to my side if I just stopped pulling away. He's fulfilling his side, but I've been slightly hesitant to fully put my trust in him because I've been hurt before. But Peter proves to me every day that he's nothing like Teddy. Protecting myself has become second nature, and I think I pull away without even thinking sometimes. I'm going to make an active effort to change that. I need to stop being scared and lower my guard. If the last few weeks are anything to go by, we could be amazing together if I just give this my all.

So, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to take the leap and trust that this manwhore catches me.

"Wow, you're blushing," Peter says, curling his arm tighter around my neck. "So, now that I've softened you and made you susceptible to my charms, I'm going to ask this again... Can we name him Ambrose?"

"Still a no."

"Dammit."



12. Peter

“Thank you, Mrs. Diaz,” I say, swallowing the last bite of food. “That was amazing.”

Our basketball game earlier was intense and left us absolutely famished. We always come over to Keith’s house for lunch after we leave the court because Mrs. Diaz’s cooking just hits the right spot. I think I scarfed down two helpings in less than five minutes.

“It’s Mrs. Hart,” Keith corrects from across the dining table.

He says that every time, but I keep calling her that just to annoy him. “I met her before you married her, so she’ll always be Mrs. Diaz to me.”

“That’s it?” Keith asks “No inappropriate comments? No overly flirtatious innuendo? Just a compliment about the food...and that’s it?”

His comment makes me realize just how much I flirt with his wife, because the absence of it is definitely noticeable. I look over at Mrs. Diaz, who’s sitting beside him.

“Mrs. Diaz,” I begin somberly, “it breaks my heart to say this, but I waited years for you. From the first day we met, I told you that if things didn’t work out with the hotshot lawyer, the option to date a younger, hotter guy was available to you. Since then, I have waited quietly in the shadows—”

Scott snickers beside me. “I wouldn’t say quietly. You’ve flirted shamelessly out in the open in front of everyone, including Keith.”

“The details don’t matter now,” I say with a dramatic sigh. “I waited, and you never came. I was forced to move on.”

She giggles and wipes away a fake tear. “I’m devastated.”

“Your tears and heartbreak are not enough to sway me. I’m a one-woman man now. I’m sorry, Mrs. Diaz, but you had your chance...and you lost it.”

Keith laughs. “Wow, it’s almost incredible to see how this baby has changed you.”

“Speaking about the baby, how is Lia doing?” Mrs. Diaz asks.

I tell her about Lia’s mood swings and fatigue, and she gives me advice on what to do to help where I can. The rest of the guys carry on talking, but I get wrapped up in an entire conversation about scheduled C-sections versus natural births. Both options scare the hell out of me, but I listen to every gory detail so that I’m adequately equipped to handle whatever birth option Lia decides on.

After we help clean up, Scott, Dylan and I say our goodbyes and walk back to our cars.

“Hey, Scott,” I say as he opens the door to his car. “You remember when Cat was working for that one client where she did those amazing 3D murals in the lobby of their office buildings?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think she’d be able to do something like that in the baby’s room but...we want the characters of Hotel Transylvania.”

Dylan’s grin spreads from ear to ear. He gets so excited about stuff like this. “Why Hotel Transylvania?”

“Well, it’s an inside joke. We...we have a thing about vampires.”

“*We?*” Scott stresses the word to make sure I’m aware of how my vocabulary is also changing. But that’s about all the shit he gives me today. “I’ll ask her for you, Pete. I’m sure she’ll love to do it. She’s working at a bakery now, but she doesn’t find it challenging enough. She wants to get back into her art again.”

“Okay, tell her to give me a call, will ya?”

“Sure.”

We get into our cars and drive off in separate directions. I stop off at the grocery store, then drive to Tori’s house to pick

Lia up. She's still trying to figure out how to navigate her way through her friendship with Tori and Shontelle. They're friends, but they're not really friends. Lia hangs out with them after work sometimes, but she still doesn't open up to them much. She's the same with Isabella and Cat when we hang with them in a group. She's friendly and approachable. She chats and giggles, but there seems to be an invisible line she doesn't want to cross, so all those relationships are very surface-level.

Thankfully, that kind of behavior is restricted to them. I get to see a totally different Lia. She tells me about her fears. She shows me her vulnerabilities. The mask of stoicism has been packed away. I personally never want to see it again. I love witnessing these different sides of her that used to lie hidden beneath the mask.

She shows affection without restraint. She laughs without inhibition. That playful side of her is what I like most. It's silly and immature, and when mixed with her inexperience and a mild element of naivety, she sometimes reminds me more of a high schooler than an adult. But that's my favorite thing about her because it takes the pressure off somehow. Everything doesn't seem so serious.

She's chatting with Tori outside on the driveway when I pull up to the curb. Tori has a toddler in her arms. The kid must be about three or four, and Lia is gushing over how cute he is.

Eventually, she ends the conversation with a hug that looks kinda stiff and awkward and walks over to my car.

"Hey," I say when she gets in.

"Hi." She twists my cap from front to back to kiss me. "You look cute today."

"Thanks." I wave goodbye to Tori and pull away from the curb. "I got you more of those pickled artichokes," I say.

We're officially in the second trimester, and boy, does she have her appetite back. She's hungry all the time, but my God, the stuff she eats nauseates *me* on most days. She craves the

weirdest things. If it's bitter or salty, she goes through it like water.

Her eyes light up. "Oh, good. Can I have some?"

"Right now?" I glance over at her. "In my car?"

"Is that a problem?"

Well...yeah. I don't want my Bugatti smelling like pickled artichokes. That's gross! But she looks so eager to get her hands on them that I can't say no.

"Nope. It's on the floor on your side. Knock yourself out."

I ignore the stench that fills the car as she opens up the jar. When she dips two fingers into that pickle water and pops one into her mouth, I suppress a gag and just focus on the road. But my attention is drawn back to her when I hear sniffles a few minutes later.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Fine."

The change in her voice is a clear indication that she's on the verge of tears. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!"

"Just tell me."

She plucks out another artichoke, then drops it back into the water with disappointment. "They don't taste the same."

"What? The artichokes?"

"Yes!"

"They're the same ones I bought last week."

"I know. And I don't want to be mad at you because you look so cute today...but they don't *taste* the same, Peter."

Wait. Is she somehow blaming me for this? I glance over to check and she's actually crying. Genuine tears are rolling down her cheeks. "Why..." I pause, hesitant about how to broach this. "Why are you so upset about this?"

"Because!"

That's the only explanation she offers before closing the jar and dropping it back into the bag. She uses both hands to wipe the tears off her cheeks. I am so confused right now. I just saw her laughing with Tori five minutes ago.

God, she's as volatile as the weather sometimes. On the upside, her sex drive is through the roof. I can barely keep up. This woman is draining me dry. I don't think I've had this much sex. In. My. Life. It's incredible. But then, on the downside, there's...*this*. I can't even describe what *this* is, but it's the unsubstantiated meltdown over seemingly nothing.

"Because what? Li, I don't understand."

"Because I wanted it...and now they're making it different."

Yeah, that still doesn't make any sense. I feel like I stepped into the Twilight Zone because there are a million things wrong in the world right now, but she's crying over pickled artichokes.

"I don't think they did it on purpose."

"Why did they change it? It wasn't necessary. They were perfect the way they were."

"You had it with ice cream the last time. I don't think that's a manufacturer problem. Do you want me to get you some ice cream?"

She sighs like she's slipping deeper into the pit of her own disappointment. "No."

I'm still trying to think of other ways to soothe her when she lets out another loud wail.

"And they took his son, Peter!"

The outburst is so loud, I would've swerved the car had I not been alert.

"Whose son?" I ask, sounding panicked. "Are you talking about Tori? Tori doesn't have a son."

"No. Marlin."

Who the fuck is Marlin? "Is that some guy from work?"

“No. On the TV.”

I glance over at her again. She is devastated. Like, tropical storm level of tears. She usually hides her emotions, so I have no idea how to handle this.

“Did you watch this on the news?” I ask. “That guy’s son got kidnapped?”

“No!” she shrieks, becoming more frustrated because I don’t understand what she’s trying to say. “Marlin, Peter. You know Marlin.”

“I really don’t.”

“You do.” She lets another pain-filled wail. “They just took his son so unexpectedly.” She hiccups through her sobs, reaching into her bag for a tissue. “He searched the whole... the *whole* ocean looking for his boy, and he overcame so many ob...obstacles just to find him.”

I pull over on the side of the road, and for a few moments, I just stare at my steering wheel as my brain sifts through this information. “Are you talking about Nemo’s dad? That Marlin?”

“Yes.” She blows her nose. “I watched it with Tori’s nephew today...and it just broke my heart.”

“I see.” I pull my lips in to stop a laugh, and when that doesn’t work, I rub my hand over my mouth. “I couldn’t before, but now I fully understand why you’re so upset. It’s absolutely warranted in this case. There is no greater tragedy...” My voice betrays me, and I clear my throat to maintain my somber tone. “...and hardship than what Marlin had to endure on his quest to find Nemo.”

She abruptly stops crying midway through wiping her nose and narrows her eyes at me. The scrutiny of her gaze makes it harder to keep a straight face, but I bite my lip and lock every feature in place.

“You’re mocking me,” she says.

“I’m not.”

“You don’t think Marlin is a real hero, do you? You don’t even care that he swam through shark-infested waters to find his son.”

He’s *always* in shark-infested waters. He lives in the fucking ocean...in *Australia*. “Of course, I care. As soon as we get home, I’m gonna start a GoFundMe page to find all the clown fish who have ever been kidnapped off the Coral reef by dentists.”

She glares at me.

“And right after that, I’m gonna write a letter to those scoundrels who make the pickled artichokes and tell them to go back to their original recipe or...” I pause to think of a brutal consequence. “Or...*else*. I’ll say it in a more threatening tone than that, though. No one messes with you and gets away with it.”

“I don’t think you’re giving this the seriousness it deserves.”

“No, I am. I assure you I’m going to harness my inner Karen for this, Li. Management will be called. Complaints will be filed. Tiktoks will be posted.”

She’s torn at this moment, not knowing whether she wants to laugh or cry. A part of her acknowledges how ridiculous this is, but the other part is genuinely upset and looking for ways to justify the ridiculousness.

She lets out a heavy sigh of disappointment. “That tiny morsel of respect that I’ve been growing for you has died a slow and painful death.”

“Yeah,” I concur with a somber nod. “Just like Nemo’s mom.”

“Peter! That’s taking it a step too far.”

The tears start up again in earnest, and I can’t contain myself. I crack up, laughing so hard I almost start crying. “Come here.”

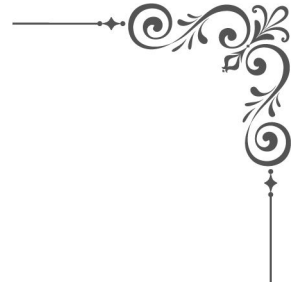
She hates any kind of affection when she’s annoyed, so she resists at first. “No. Just leave me alone.”

I reach over and pull her into my arms to comfort her. I press my mouth against her hair to muffle the sound of my snickering, but my shoulders still quake. I don't understand how she can bawl her eyes out over *Finding Nemo*. Objectively, it is not a sad movie. I have no idea how it could generate this extreme level of waterworks. Dr. Cheng told me she'd go through mood swings and become emotional from time to time, but I was not expecting *this*.

"Stop laughing," she says, slapping my arm. "It's not funny."

"It's kinda funny."

I tighten my grip and kiss the top of her head. God help me. If this is week fourteen, what do the next twenty-six weeks have in store?



13. Lia

“So, it’s official,” I say, holding an avocado against my belly. “We moved from a grape to a lime to an avocado at lightning speed.”

We had another appointment with Dr. Cheng today and she confirmed that our little guy or gal is about eight inches and six ounces, right on track for seventeen weeks. We also did all the prenatal tests for birth defects and all of them showed that our baby is in good health.

I turn from one side to the other so Peter can take a few pictures from a different angle. His eyes widen. “Hey, it looks like you’re finally getting a bump.”

“Really? Maybe it’s just gas. It always looks like a pooch at night and then it’s gone by morning.”

He sits down on the edge of the bed and tilts his head to the side to get a better look. “Nope. I can see a distinct bump.”

“Well, it’s about time. Caroline from our prenatal yoga class was showing at twelve weeks and here I am at four months with nothing.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re tall,” he offers with a shrug. “But it’s definitely starting to pop out. Don’t forget to send me one of these pics for the fridge.”

I smile. He’s so cute. Our weekly progress pic and all our ultrasound pics are stuck up on the fridge in chronological order. He’s such a doting dad.

“Eeek!” I give a gleeful clap and walk over to the bed. “I’m so excited.”

“Yo, what’re you doing?” Peter asks when I lift the covers.

I stare at him, dumbfounded. “I’m getting into bed.”

“Not wearing that, you’re not.”

I look down at my mauve two-piece pajama set. It’s got little black hearts and black lace trimming along the bust and

bottom of the shorts. It's adorable. This is my favorite pair of pajamas and he's scoffing at it like I'm wearing a trash bag.

"What? These are so cute...and I feel kinda sexy in them."

"I don't care. It was just for the photos. You're not sleeping in that."

I glare at him because he can be so unreasonable at times. "Peter, they're not gonna fit me for much longer, so I just want to make the most of them before my belly gets too big."

"I still don't care. Take them off."

"You're being ridiculous."

I lift the covers again, and he pushes it back against the mattress. I look up at him and don't even encounter a flicker of a smile. He's dead-ass serious, staring me down like I've offended him in the most heinous way. I refuse to cave to this level of immaturity and try to lift the covers again.

"Don't play with me, Li." His tone is stern, but I hear the tiniest hint of humor. "Let's not do this the hard way. Just take them off."

"Stop being a child," I say, placing my hands on my hips. "I'm wearing these to bed and there's nothing you can do about it."

"What?" And just like that, a challenge ignites in his eyes. "Oh, you did not just say that to me."

He grasps my waist and tosses me onto the bed.

I manage to escape his hold and scamper away, holding my finger up to stop him. "I warn you. I'm a master in Eskrima."

"You're a blue belt. That's hardly a master."

Even though he barely uses any force, he overpowers me in a matter of seconds.

His fingers trigger an eruption of giggles when he catches the hem of my top. I curl into a ball, trying to shove his hands off. "You're tickling me!"

"Then hold still." He snickers as we roll all over the bed.

“Uncle!” I scream. “Stop tickling! I said uncle!”

“Why are you yelling?” He’s laughing so hard he can barely get a proper hold of the material. “You don’t need to say uncle. Just let me get this off.”

“Never!” I shout as one last act of rebellion. “Monsieur, I put it to you...” I switch to a French accent to make it more dramatic. “...that the *résistance* shall never surrender.”

“What the fuck are you even saying?” He doubles over with another peal of laughter, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his contagious mirth filling the room. “I’m just trying to get these pajamas off, and you’re starting a revolution.” He almost collapses on top of me, and for a moment, all I can focus on is the sheer delight dancing in his eyes. “Hold. Still.” His voice is a mixture of amusement and mock exasperation as he tries to catch his breath.

Somehow, he gets a good grip on my top, and in a swift motion, it’s off, leaving me slightly stunned. But before I can even react, he’s grabbing the back of his own T-shirt and yanking it over his head, his movements almost too quick to track. He drapes me in it the next second, the fabric warm from his skin, his smell still lingering on it.

“There.” Breathlessly, he drops over on the bed beside me. “That’s better.”

I accept defeat and throw myself back against the fluffy pillows. “You hate my pajamas that much?”

“More than I let on.” He grabs the offensive top and chucks it out of the bedroom as if exiling it. “I’m burning them all tomorrow.”

“You can take my pj’s, but you will never take my freedom!”

“Your Scottish accent is worse than your French accent,” he says with a playful grin. “No more *Braveheart* for you. No more war movies in general.”

“Just last week, you were nagging me to watch it with you, and you insisted it was a classic that I absolutely had to watch,

and this week you're complaining about the very same movie."

"Well, I didn't realize that it would have a real-world impact and make you so confrontational."

"Maybe if you didn't resort to these barbaric caveman tactics, I wouldn't need to be confrontational."

He raises his eyebrows as if shocked by my choice of words. "Caveman?"

"Yes. A caveman. I said what I said. I don't understand this need men have to mark their territory. But let's just make it clear. I, sir, will not be claimed or marked by you or any other man."

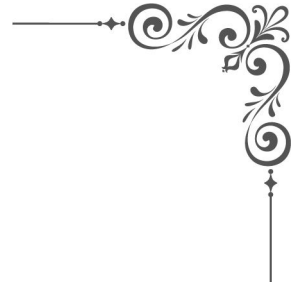
"Is that right?"

Again, he rises to the challenge. Quick as a flash, he pounces on me, manacled both my wrists together above my head. With his knee, he forces my legs apart and settles between them.

With featherlight softness, he uses one hand to trace his fingers from my wrist to my elbow. I quiver when it moves down my arm and along the curve of my breast. My breathing quickens when he tugs up the hem of his T-shirt. Keeping those jade eyes locked on mine, his hand sneaks past the waistband of my pajama shorts.

He groans when my wetness coats his fingers. "You feel this, dollface? This is the claim I have on your body. It's mine for the taking." His fingers dip inside me and I gasp, a husky moan pervading the space between. A naughty grin quirks his lips up. "Now, you can be sassy about it, deny it all you want, but let's just make it clear." He runs his tongue seductively over my lower lip. "The resistance always surrenders to me."

As the words hang in the air, the charged energy between us intensifies. The playful atmosphere transforms into something more potent. He kisses me then, filling my veins with molten heat, and I melt into him. I give in. I surrender.



14. Peter

“So, Kelly-Anne called me into her office today,” Lia says between sniffles. “And she told me that due to poor performance...they’re gonna have to let me go.”

I put my arm around her to rub her shoulder. “That doesn’t make any sense. You’re the hardest working person in that store.”

“Tori says she fired me because I’m pregnant.” She points to her belly. “I’m getting bigger now, so I’m sure she noticed. But she can’t fire me for being pregnant because I could take her up for discrimination, so...she just chalked it up to poor performance.”

“Do you want me to get a lawyer? We could fight this.”

“It’s pointless because I can’t prove anything.” Her shoulders slump with defeat. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do now. How am I going to get another job? No one’s gonna hire a pregnant woman halfway through her pregnancy.”

If I had to be perfectly honest, I’m happy about this news. I didn’t like her working there in the first place. It’s a dodgy neighborhood. It’s long hours. And she’s on her feet all day. She didn’t need to work, but I didn’t want to tell her to quit because it wasn’t my place. Even though it wasn’t much, she enjoyed earning her own money and being somewhat independent, and I didn’t want to ask her to give that up.

But now that this has happened, there’s no need for her to get another job right now.

“Why don’t you just put a pause on everything?” I suggest. “Don’t worry about trying to find a job. I’ll take care of everything. And after you give birth...when you’re ready... you can start looking for another job then.”

“I can’t leech off you, Peter.”

“You’re not leeching off me, Li. And maybe this is a blessing in disguise. Now you can enjoy the rest of your pregnancy with no work stress, and after little Ambrose is

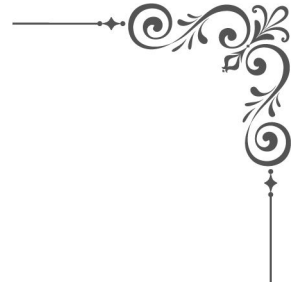
born, you can bond with him instead of worrying about going back to work.”

She glares at me with an unimpressed scowl. “We’re not naming him Ambrose, Peter.”

“We’ll debate that later,” I say with a chuckle. “And we’ll figure out a proper plan in a few months. For now, let’s just focus on the positives. I can tell you that a big plus for me is that you won’t be seeing Rafael every day anymore.”

I get another disinterested eye roll. “You’re the worst.”

“I know.” I lean closer to kiss her nose because any form of affection is only going to annoy her more. “Now, get your tights on, and let’s go for yoga.”



15. Peter

The loud clanging of pots jolts me from my sleep. My head pops up like a meerkat, and I listen closely to see if I imagined it. Nope. There it is again. I check my phone and groan when my brain registers the time.

The only person who's ever up and busy at this ungodly time is Dylan, but he doesn't live here anymore. I toss over and see that the spot beside me is empty. With a tired groan, I kick off the covers, pull on a pair of sweatpants, and head downstairs to see what all the commotion is about.

I walk in just in time to see Lia dump the entire drawer of cutlery into the sink. "What are you doing?" I ask, squinting to protect my eyes from the harsh fluorescent light.

"Just washing up."

The cutlery was clean before she dropped it in the sink. "Everything?"

"Yes."

"You know, Meghan and her *entire* cleaning crew come in five times a week to do exactly that."

"I know...but she doesn't clean everything."

I nod. "Yeah, she tends to focus on the things that are dirty. She's generally not gonna wash something that's already been washed."

"Exactly!" she replies sprightly, filling up the sink with soapy water. "That's why I'm doing it."

I remind myself that she doesn't have a personality disorder. This is just the nesting phase. She isn't crazy. Just a little hormonal. Slightly erratic. It's all part of the process. And I'm loving the process. I love how everything evolves from week to week, from her appetite to her reactions. I love how her body's changing. Our little guy is approximately the size of a mango, and he's making his presence known. She's got

the cutest little bump now, and I'm enjoying every little experience with her.

Except this one. I could do without this kitchen clatter before dawn.

“Li, it’s five-thirty in the morning. Just come back to bed, and I’ll help you with this later.”

She shakes her head and starts washing the clean cutlery. “I have so much to do.”

“You really don’t.”

“Peter, it’s Thanksgiving tomorrow. I gotta prep the turkey. I gotta make the condiments. And this house has to be spotless. Your friends will be here. Your parents are coming. I can’t—”

“My parents aren’t coming.”

She freezes, her head twisting so fast in my direction I’m surprised she doesn’t sprain her neck. “Did you invite them?”

“Well...no.”

Her expression changes from chirpy to slightly hostile. “Why not?”

“Because they’re...busy.” I shrug. “They wouldn’t have come even if I invited them.”

“But how do you know if you never asked?”

“Because I know.”

This is not a satisfactory response because her hostility morphs into anger. “This is the third time I’ve asked you to invite your parents over, and every time there’s some excuse. Time is running out. I’m almost at twenty-five weeks. I would like to meet them before the baby comes, but it’s like you don’t even want me to meet them. Are you scared they won’t...approve because we’re not married? Do you think they won’t like me?”

“You’re overthinking again.” I cross the kitchen and grasp her shoulders. “My parents would love you. There’s no question about that. But I gotta be honest, Li, you probably

won't meet them anytime soon. My sister's studying in London. My parents are always flitting around the globe for premieres and red-carpet events. They're...busy."

She's horrified by this. "So, what you're saying is that they just don't care. How can they not care? About you? About their grandchild?"

"You're getting worked up over nothing." I give her shoulders a quick squeeze before leaning down to kiss her forehead. "It's not that they don't care. They just have other priorities. When I told my dad we were having a baby, he sent me a thumbs-up emoji. That seems callous, but I know that means he's happy for us. That's just our family dynamic. We care, but...from afar. There's nothing wrong with that."

"How can you say there's nothing wrong with that? So, you expect me to be fine with our baby just having absent grandparents?"

"Yes. Now, let it go." I turn to walk out of the kitchen, and she follows me.

"Please, just ask them to come."

I let out a groan as I head up the stairs. "Thanksgiving is tomorrow. It's too short notice. They're not gonna come."

"I'm asking you to ask them."

"And I'm asking you to let this go."

"Peter, I would like to build a relationship with your parents, and I would like for our baby to know them. I want him to know his grandparents."

"Then why don't you ask your parents, Li?" I snap. "Our baby doesn't only have one set of grandparents, so quit nagging me about this. If you want him to know his grandparents, pick up the phone, call your dad, and ask him to come over for Thanksgiving lunch."

She goes as still as stone, the color draining from her face. She doesn't even breathe for a few beats. Tears brim in her eyes, and she blinks rapidly to stop them from falling. "Forget I asked."

She turns on her heel, goes back down the stairs, and returns to the kitchen, leaving me standing there feeling like the biggest jerk in the world. That was a low blow. It wasn't my intention to upset her. I just wanted to point out that the lack of parental involvement wasn't only coming from my side. But family is the most important thing to her. It's a fundamental part of who she is, and throwing her broken now broken family dynamic in her face when they were once so close was shitty thing for me to do.

I spend about ten minutes debating if I should go talk to her. Maybe it's better if I just give her some time to calm down. My plan for today was to sort out the crib. I can't go back to sleep, so I might as well get started on that. I walk down the hall to the room that stands on the opposite side of the bedroom that was once Lia's (for a grand total of two days).

My resolve weakens as soon as I open the door. Cat did a phenomenal job with this room. She incorporated every tiny detail we wanted and then added her own artistic twist. The burst of vibrant colors makes it an enchanting playground of imagination, which she meticulously designed to showcase all the characters. The 3D mural she sculpted has Mavis and Jonathan holding Dennis in the foreground with Drac, Frankenstein, the Mummy, the Invisible Man, and Wayne the werewolf all doing random things in the back.

Against the opposite wall, we set up a changing station adorned with bat-winged accessories and a diaper genie disguised as a mini version of Blobby. Cat custom-made that for us, too.

It hits me hard every time I walk in here because this room is a product of us. Our likes. Our tastes. Our inside joke. And we designed it for this tiny person who's a product of us too. This room is so deeply personal to me because every detail allows me to envisage our future. Me changing his diaper. Lia rocking him to sleep in the chair near the window. This was never the future I imagined for myself and now I can't picture it any other way.

My eyes drift to the box in the middle of the room, and I can't even bring myself to walk over and open it. We were supposed to do this together, and it doesn't feel right to do anything in this room alone. I march my ass straight back down the stairs to the kitchen.

Lia's hunched over the counter, weeping so bitterly that I want to punch myself in the face. I'm a dick. That was such an insensitive thing to say. I cross the kitchen to stand beside her.

"Hey, Li," I say, and I can hear the shame in my voice. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Her head snaps up, and she quickly swipes the tears off her cheeks. "No, Peter. It's not you. It's...it's me."

I'll be the first to admit that she has been an emotional mess throughout this pregnancy, sometimes bursting into tears over the smallest of things. But this time, I have to take full accountability. "No, it's definitely me. I know how important family is to you. And I know how hard this whole situation with your dad has been on you. I shouldn't have said what I said."

"Listen to me, okay?" She swallows, struggling to get the words out through her sobs. "There's some...some things you don't...know, and that's why you...you...you don't understand why it...hurts me so much."

I've always had this internal gripe about how stoic and withdrawn she can be. And while she's softened substantially over the last few months, there always seems to be an invisible barrier between us, a certain side of herself that she's reluctant to show me.

But today, she's so defeated she doesn't even have the strength to keep that barrier up. I watch her crumble in front of me. Seeing her like this makes me feel like more of an asshole.

"Shit...I really fucked up. I'm...sorry." I say again, but it doesn't seem to remedy anything because the word is simply insufficient.

"Peter! Listen!" The shriek is high-pitched, loud enough to show that she's becoming frantic. "When I tell you this..."

about my dad...you can't hate me."

I grip her shoulders to calm her down. "Li, I could never hate you."

She stills. Her breath stops. For that split second, even the tears seem to freeze on her cheeks. "You promise?" Her hazel eyes lock on mine, searching for any kind of confirmation that I mean it. "You promise you won't hate me? Because..." The tears start up again and her erratic breaths return almost instantly. "Because...Peter...I can't...I can't cope with you..."

"Hey," I say, rubbing her shoulders again. "You're being a little extreme, don't you think?"

My attempt at using humor to lighten the mood fails hopelessly because tears continue to stream down her face.

"Promise me."

Does this woman not understand how far on the other side of the spectrum my feelings for her are? It would take something cataclysmic for me to ever hate her. "I promise I'm not going to hate you."

"Okay." She nods, taking a deep breath to steady herself. "That day...that day at the country club...that argument you witnessed after...I kissed you...it wasn't... it wasn't... it wasn't..."

She's damn near hysterical, almost on the verge of hyperventilating. And the more panicked she gets, the more worried I become. She places one hand on the counter for support, the other rubbing the side of her stomach.

"Are you okay?"

"It's...ah, it's just a cramp. I'm fine."

And that's my cue. It's time to put an end to this. I gather her into my arms and pull her to my chest.

"You're not fine. You need to calm down, okay?" I whisper, gently stroking her hair. "This isn't good for the baby."

"Peter..."

“Just breathe.” I inhale and exhale the way our yoga instructor taught us, and she mimics me. I wait for her breathing to slow before I step back to look at her. “A bit better?”

She gives me a halfhearted nod.

I don't know what transpired between her and her dad that day, but whatever it is, I'm sure it's not as bad as she thinks it is. And it's definitely not worth putting my baby under any form of distress.

“Lia, whatever you need to tell me can wait. We're in this for the long run. I'm not going anywhere. You're not going anywhere. So, this conversation can wait until you're ready to have it...whenever that may be. And trust me when I say this. No matter when we have it, I'm not gonna hate you, okay?”

Uncertainty is still encompassed in her eyes. “I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of.”

It's her tone that causes an inkling of doubt to creep in, and I want to press her on it. But I quickly stomp out the feeling and remind myself that this is the same person who's so wholesome that the prospect of a one-night stand totally freaked her out. She's probably just blowing this whole thing out of proportion. I'm sure whatever caused the argument I witnessed is not as bad as she thinks it is.

Besides, it's not about me. It's about her wellbeing. As long as she and my baby are fine, nothing else matters.

“That's okay,” I say. “I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of, too.”

She stares at me for a long time, contemplating if she should let it go for now. “I will...I will tell you, okay? I will... but maybe it is better to wait until I'm not so...emotional.”

“Yeah. There's no rush.”

“And you promise—”

“I promise, Li.” I use both thumbs to wipe the moisture off her cheeks. “I don't think...anything could...change...” I stumble with my words because I don't usually articulate my

feelings like this. Probably because I've never had feelings like this. "...the way I feel about you."

"How..." She hesitates as the latent awkwardness hanging in the air ticks up a notch. "How do you feel about me?"

I get why she's asking me this. She's emotional and slightly insecure. She wants some kind of reassurance, but I'm so bad at this. I can barely admit anything to Scott and Dylan. I don't even know what to say...or how to say it. Keeping my head down, I rub the back of my neck as I try to collate my thoughts into an articulate sentence.

"I mean...I like you...a lot." Not my smoothest moment, but at least it's out.

The sadness she felt a moment ago melts away, and the light returns to her eyes. That smile. That adorable smile tugs at her lips. The one that deepens her dimple because she's trying so hard not to smile.

"Wow. That was so...beautiful." She clasps her hands together and pretends as if she's swooning. "It transcended space and time. I feel like I've been transported...right back to the eighth grade."

I roll my eyes. "I tried, okay?"

"I like you too, Peter."

"Shut up."

"And yes, I will go to the dance with you on Saturday."

I snicker. "Give me a break, will ya? I'm not used to this sort of stuff."

She loops her arms around me and nuzzles her nose against my neck, her bump brushing my stomach as she pulls me closer. She lets out a deep sigh of relief when my arms curl around her.

"I love how it feels when you hold me," she mumbles against my skin. "You know, there were times when I used to feel so alone. Even when I had everything a girl could want. Jewelry and a fancy car and a penthouse – none of those things took away that feeling." She sniffs, and I'm not sure if she's

on the brink of tears again. “But when I’m with you, my heart feels so...so full.” She tightens her arms around me. “This feels like home, Peter.”

I lightly caress her back, planting a kiss on the side of her face. “Yeah, it does. And you—” I stop when something lightly thumps my abdomen.

Lia’s eyes widen. “Did you feel that?” She grabs my hand and places it on her stomach. “It usually feels like bubbles, but that was a proper kick.”

“Was that a kick?” I look down at her stomach. “Was that you, little guy?”

She places her hand over mine and we both wait patiently to see if it happens again. And it does. One little thump against my palm and then a few seconds later, there’s another one. It’s an incredible feeling.

Pure elation spills out of me in a kind of awe-struck laugh. “Oh, my God. That’s so cool.” He responds to my voice by kicking again. “That’s a solid kick right there. He’s gonna play football like his dad.” I look up at Lia again. “He’s probably kicking me for being such a jerk to you.”

“You’re not a jerk.”

“I sure feel like one.”

I decide not to dwell on our argument. She doesn’t seem to be holding any animosity toward me or the situation, so it’s best to just drop it until she’s ready to tell me about her feud with her dad. I wait for the tap dancing on my palm to stop before I remove my hand.

“So...we were supposed to put up the crib today,” I say, changing the subject. “You wanna come up and help me?”

“Why don’t you help me down here first, then I’ll come up and help you?”

I glare at her. “You want me to help you wash dishes and cutlery that were already washed by the cleaning service two days ago?”

“I already told you. They didn’t wash everything. That’s why I’m doing it now.”

“We also have a dishwasher.”

“Which also doesn’t clean very well.”

I realize then that she’d be a lot more annoying if she weren’t so cute. This is how twisted she’s got me that I don’t even fight her on her illogical actions. I relent and walk over to my music station on the other side of the kitchen.

“Fine. You wash. I’ll dry. But let’s at least listen to some feel-good music while we work.”

She groans. “Please don’t play anything from the sixties, Lestat. Can we do something from, like, the early two-thousands?”

“Let’s compromise and play something from the eighties.” I flip through my CD case and find the perfect album, smiling when I insert the disc and *Hungry Eyes* comes floating through the speakers. “This song just hits different, doesn’t it?”

“I’ve never heard it before.”

This earns her another patronizing glare. “Excuse me. You don’t recognize this from *Dirty Dancing*?”

“What’s *Dirty Dancing*?”

I force myself not to cringe and answer as calmly as I can. “You’ve never heard of *Dirty Dancing*? How is it possible that you love dance movies so much and yet you’ve never watched *Dirty Dancing*?” I don’t wait for a response. “That movie was the foundation of all dance movies. Johnny and Baby crawled so that the crew of *You Got Served* could run.”

She pulls her lips in to stop a laugh, then proceeds to antagonize me further. “Johnny and Baby?” She shrugs as she sinks her hands into the soapy water. “Sounds like a bunch of amateurs to me. I don’t think they could even compete with a dance crew from LA.”

“Show some goddamn respect, woman. Tonight, you’re gonna put a hold on binge-watching *Supernatural* for the *third*

time and we'll watch Dirty Dancing instead. I guarantee you'll be eating your words by the end of it."

"We'll see."

We continue talking as we busy ourselves with the pointless task of washing and drying clean dishes. She then cons me into helping her with the preparation of Thanksgiving lunch tomorrow. I make salads while she makes the stuffing for the turkey.

After a light lunch, we head upstairs to the nursery. I set up a speaker in here last week that's linked to my music station in the kitchen and Lia rolls her eyes when I switch the music on here because I go right back to the sixties and play *My Girl* from the Temptations.

"You know, this is all our kid listens to," she says as we shake open a large plastic floor covering. "When he finally arrives, these old tunes will be the only music that calms him down."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

We lay plastic over the floor and get to work painting the wooden frames and railings of the crib in matte black zero-VOC paint. This should've been a quick process, but it gets held up when Lia paints a cloud on my chest and then an oddly shaped cat down my arm. I'm supposed to believe that patterned brushstrokes are all accidental because of the *Ooops* and the surprised gasp that follows. I even get two thick black streaks across my cheeks like I'm about to go into battle.

And I do. I don't hold back on my retaliation. Not gonna lie, she puts up a hell a good fight, but I win in the end. I prove that I'm the caveman she keeps saying I am and paint a different letter of my name all over her clothes. These are the moments I can't get enough of.

Ever since she lost her job, we've been pretty much inseparable. Apart from bro time with Scott and Dylan, I spend almost every waking hour with Lia, so moments like these are in abundance, and yet I can't get my fill of them...or her. She's like a beacon, constantly drawing me into her sphere

because she's so damn infectious. Her laughter fills the room, fills the house, fills my life. I love the sound of her voice. I love the warmth she brings. I love her presence.

She asked me earlier how I feel about her, and I couldn't really answer because I'm not sure about it myself. But watching her as we do this, as we build a life together, is slowly solidifying all those emotions that have just been floating around for the last few months. I definitely think I'm exiting the *like* territory and entering something...deeper. I don't say anything about it, though. I can't embarrass myself like that twice in one day.

We're both splotchy, smudgy messes when we return to the actual task we set out to do. We do two coats, then use stencils to paint on glow-in-the-dark stars on the crib that match the ones we painted on the walls and ceiling last week. However, she breaks the theme by painting a butterfly on the headboard.

"Why a butterfly?" I ask.

She shrugs, the melancholy I saw earlier returning to her eyes. "My mom always used to tell me that a butterfly in the house isn't just a butterfly. It's the spirit of our ancestors saying hi. She used to have this bracelet..." She clears her throat when her voice becomes unsteady. "...with this beautiful clasp. Her mother gave it to her on her deathbed as a reminder that she'd always be with her. My mom told me that when she leaves this earth, I could have it, and that way...that way, she could always be with me. But that bracelet got lost..." Maybe it's because she's already emotionally strained from our argument earlier, but her breathing elevates like it did before and she takes a minute to calm herself down again. "And I guess... if I can't have that...then this will have to suffice."

She shakes off whatever she's feeling and smiles, her happy glow returning when we turn our attention back to the crib. While the paint dries, I get a star painted across my jaw too because apparently my war face isn't complete without a star.

“I want you to know that the star totally undermines the purpose of the black stripes,” I say. “No one fears a warrior with a glow-in-the-dark star on his face.”

“Well, I happen to think that the glow-in-the-dark star is exactly the weapon to take down the rogue members of the pajama résistance. Such a warrior would definitely make me weak in the knees.”

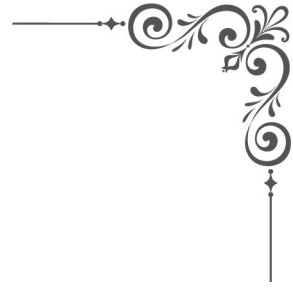
She smiles, and I can't resist. I can't be that close to her without kissing her. My lips find their way to hers, and we end up making out on the floor. It's better than literally watching paint dry. And the paint is dry when we finally pull away from each other.

We assemble the crib, and the joy on her face as she watches it come together is indescribable, making her prettier than she already is. I secure every screw and bolt tightly before setting it upright. Once I'm done, Lia attaches a cloud-like canopy to the side rails. She wanted something that was reminiscent of the enchanted fog that swirls around the hotel, and when it's all done, we clear out the plastic, polystyrene, and cardboard and stand at the door to admire our work.

“Not bad, Drac,” she says, high fiving me. “We make a good team.”

“Damn right, we do. This looks incredible.”

I throw my arm around her and slap a kiss on her temple. There's a simple pleasure in seeing the final product. Our baby's nursery is complete. And she's right. Having her beside me makes it feel like home.



16. Lia

I get out of the car and stretch my legs, basking in the late afternoon sun. I'm always grateful for weather like this. It's a nice, cool day, slightly overcast with just the right amount of sun. The crisp January air is exactly what I need. I now understand why people call it a bun in the oven. I feel like a literal furnace is constantly burning inside me, and the cool breeze hitting my face is highly appreciated.

I've grown substantially in the last five weeks. Most days, I feel like a beached whale. I'm becoming more impatient as my due date creeps closer. Although I love being pregnant, I can't wait to have my body to myself again. I'm exhausted because it's so difficult to sleep. Peter's role as my nighttime cuddle partner has been usurped by my pregnancy pillow. It is currently my most prized possession. I would fight off a mountain lion for it.

Peter has also changed in the last five weeks. He's become so protective, annoyingly so. I can't bend over or lift anything without him freaking out. He's so overbearing sometimes. He even got people in to reroute the footage of all the security cameras around the entire complex, so he can also *keep an eye* on things as if the four security guards aren't enough.

But I love that he does stuff like that. I appreciate all the little things he does for me, from the foot rubs to the late-night runs to the store when I'm craving ice cream. He's incredible, a complete one-eighty from the man I met just seven months ago.

I guess he's always been the type who cares about the people around him. That hasn't changed, but he didn't have any goals or sense of purpose when I first met him. He was enjoying single life with no responsibilities, and now he's the poster boy for a responsible dad.

He set up all the baby gates this week and got covers for every wall socket in the house. And while I definitely think that he goes overboard sometimes, I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't absolutely smitten by everything he does for our baby.

Like, I am in a constant state of swoon just watching him. The excitement on his face every time we go for an ultrasound. The way he smiles when he feels our little guy kick. The way he props himself on his elbows next to me to talk to my belly each night. Sometimes he even sings. Off-key, but I still love it. So, yeah, it's everything. Everything turns me to mush inside.

I'm falling for him so hard and so fast that sometimes I have to pinch myself as a reminder that it's real. And it is real. Everything is perfect.

Well, not everything. I still have this one stupid secret hanging over my head. I've tried to tell him three times now and every time, I got so worked up that I couldn't even get any words out. My reaction each time was instantaneous. My throat clogged up and I couldn't breathe, no matter how many breaths I inhaled. My heart went into hyper-drive, feeling like it was going to burst right out of my chest. And then that dreaded cramp in my stomach started.

I don't know if it's the pain of losing my parents or the anxiety of admitting that Teddy is my ex and not my father that causes such a visceral reaction, but I still haven't been able to tell Peter the truth. Each time we sat down to talk about it, the conversation ended with him telling me to calm down and leave it for another day.

The last time it happened, I decided I would just wait until the baby was born. It causes too much stress, and I don't want to put my baby through that for a stupid lie. And it's a stupid lie that has no impact on our lives. Teddy's in the past. I have no feelings for him whatsoever, so I don't think Peter will have a problem with that part of the lie. Yes, it's embarrassing that I dated a forty-six-year-old married man for over a year, but everyone has a past, and that part of my life is over. Peter's reasonable enough to not let that bother him.

It's admitting that Teddy is not my father that's the issue. And then telling him about what really happened to my parents...that's the part that might be difficult to swallow. But at the end of the day, that part sadly also has no impact on our

lives because telling him won't change the fact that my parents are gone.

So, I'm choosing to put the well-being of my baby first for now, and I'll have this discussion with him after he's born. Peter's right. He's not going anywhere. I'm not going anywhere. This can wait.

Peter grabs our bags from the trunk, and I follow him as he walks to the door of his beach house. With only twelve weeks to go, we decided to enjoy a weekend away before we lose our freedom. He's brought me here a couple times, so I know the drill. I pick up the case disguised as a rock that contains the key and unlock the front door.

"I think I'm going to have a long soak," I say as we walk in. "Do you wanna join me?"

"We're gonna be here the whole week. We have plenty of time for that. Let's do something different tonight."

"What did you have in mind?" I ask, intrigued.

Instead of taking our bags upstairs, he walks straight to the glass sliding door on the opposite side and exits the house again.

Our feet sink into the sand as we walk across the beach to the pier. It's then that I realize where our true destination is. I spot it off in the distance.

"Oh, my God! Is that a yacht?" I ask in awe.

"Yep."

"You own a yacht?"

"Nope. It's my dad's, but he lets me use it whenever I want."

Excitement is pumping madly through my veins as we head down the pier. My walk is more of a waddle now, but not even that slows me down. A smaller boat is waiting at the pier to take us out to sea. The late afternoon sun has begun its slow descent toward the horizon, and the yacht, christened "*Sea Serenity*" casts a shimmering reflection on the calm waters of

the bay. It's a vessel of elegance and luxury, its sleek white hull glistening in the warm, golden light.

Peter holds my hand and keeps me steady as I climb onboard. On the upper deck is a collection of plush sun loungers and padded seating overlooking the breathtaking seascape. Decorated with soft, seafoam-colored cushions and pristine white canopies, it's the perfect escape for our weekend getaway. A gentle breeze whispers through the sheer drapes, carrying the scent of saltwater and anticipation.

"This is incredible," I say, my hair flitting over my shoulders.

A man carrying a tray of orange juice greets us, and after we've taken our drinks, he relieves Peter of our bags and disappears.

"C'mon," Peter says, nodding his head toward a short flight of stairs. "Let me show you around."

We take the stairs to the upper level, and I hear faint whispers before a big, "SURPRISE!"

The boisterous shouts shock me, stopping me dead in my tracks.

It takes a few seconds to process everything before I recognize what this is. The pink and blue balloons. The chairs are draped with pink and baby blue satin ribbons. The gifts. The snacks. All our friends.

My heart is so close to bursting. They threw us a gender reveal party. Peter was dying to find out, but I wanted it to be a surprise, so we settled on finding out at twenty-eight weeks, which is this week. Dr. Cheng was going to tell us at our next appointment on Friday. Cat was the only one privy to those conversations. We bickered about it many times while she was at the house working on the mural in the nursery, so I'm guessing she's the one who put all this together.

I walk to her first and pull her into a tight hug. "Thank you so much," I whisper into her ear. "This means so much to me."

"You don't have to thank me."

As she steps back, Scott comes up behind her, looping his arms around her waist before he dips his head to kiss her on the neck. “She went a little overboard,” he says to us.

She leans back against his chest. “I missed out on so much while I was gone, so I feel like I have to make up for it with all these special moments now.”

She continues to talk to Peter while Tori and Shontelle come up to hug me next, broad smiles on their faces. I’m glad they’re here. It was a struggle to maintain a friendship with them when we saw each other at the store every day. I’ve been even worse at keeping in contact with them after I got fired. Thankfully, they’re not the high-maintenance type who get offended when I only answer their texts three days later.

Catalina ushers us to sit down on the two stools near the bar before she walks over to Scott and seats herself on his lap.

“Good day, ladies and gentlemen,” Isabella says in her radio presenter voice. “And thank you for joining us onboard the *Sea Serenity* on this gorgeous afternoon. Thomas and I have volunteered to be your hosts on this glorious occasion.”

“Pete, we’ll be sending you the bill,” Tommy adds.

Peter chuckles. “How am I getting charged for volunteer work?”

“It’s the price you pay for abandoning me,” Tommy fires back. “You were supposed to be my plus one for life. Now I’m forced to spend all my free time with cute brunettes who shop at Goths-R-Us.”

That gets Dylan’s attention. “I know you’re not referring to my sister.”

“Do you know any other cute brunettes?” Tommy continues as if he doesn’t see the subtle warning Dylan shoots his way. “But before I get killed, let’s get on with the show. Peter, as we all know, you were very disappointed the night of Dylan’s bachelor party because you didn’t get to see any tits.”

Peter’s enough of a gentleman to not correct him on that statement because the night ended with me naked in his arms. It was that night that got us into this position.

“I personally wanted to go with a dick-in-the-box type theme, but my decision was vetoed. So, instead, I have for you today, sir, not one, not two, but three tits.” Tommy unbuttons his floral Hawaiian shirt to reveal three large beige balloons filled with some type of liquid taped to his chest. At the tip of each one, he’s drawn on the most grotesque-looking red nipples.

Scott groans with disgust. “Tom, if boobs looked like that, nobody would have sex.”

“You don’t like my titties, Scotty?” Tommy shouts, doing his best impersonation of Fat Bastard and then he rubs them the same way Fat Bastard did in Austin Powers. “I’m dead sexy.”

“Tommy, behave yourself,” Isabella says with the sternness of someone who has reprimanded those types of comments a million times. “Tori and Shontelle are not accustomed to your filth.”

“Fine.” He turns his attention back to Peter and I. “Okay, so this is how the game works. These sexy breasts are going to reveal the gender of your baby. We’re going for two out of three.” He sticks out his chest, displaying the options to us like a magician would. “Pick a tit. Any tit...Choose the one on the left.”

And because Peter hates being told what to do, he chooses the one on the right.

Tommy makes a small hole in the balloon and pink liquid sprays out. “It’s a girl!”

“It’s not a girl,” Peter retorts adamantly.

“Line up, ladies.”

Isabella seems to be the most adventurous because she goes up first, and Tommy sprays some into her mouth. “Is that strawberry schnapps?”

“I looked everywhere but couldn’t find pink gin,” Cat replies before opening her mouth to get her shot.

I smile to myself. She really put so much effort into this. I watch as the other ladies drink up, and Tommy makes some questionable sounds as his boob slowly deflates.

He thrusts the remaining two into my face. “Alright, Lia, you’re up. Which one?”

“I think...I’ll go for the one in the middle.”

“Excellent choice.”

“Please don’t let it be pink. Please don’t let it be pink,” Peter whispers beside me.

Tommy punctures the balloon and an excited whoop bursts out of Peter when blue liquid gushes out. “C’mon, gents, it’s your turn.”

Dylan, Scott, and Peter each take a sip of the blue Zappa Sambuca until it’s deflated as well.

“Okay, can I get a drum roll, please,” Isabella says dramatically.

Scott and Dylan tap their hands against the table, starting slowly before gaining momentum. The build-up is electric. Anticipation heightening with every passing second.

“Close your eyes,” Tommy says to Peter. “You’re gonna drink this straight without looking.”

“Then how will I know?”

“We’ll tell you what color your tongue is.”

Peter isn’t happy with this arrangement but doesn’t argue. He closes his eyes and Tommy pokes a hole in the balloon.

Dylan starts a chant. “Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!”

Everyone joins in. I’ve never been to college, but this kind of makes me feel like I’ve at least experienced a frat party.

Peter slurps down every drop, then sticks out his tongue. “What color is it?”

“It’s pink,” Dylan shouts out.

“It is not!”

“It’s blue,” Tori and Shontelle say in unison.

“It’s pink,” Cat and Scott yell.

Peter turns to me. “Li, you wouldn’t lie to me. What color is it?”

I cup his face with both hands and kiss him. “It’s blue.”

“I knew it!” This man loses it. The widest grin takes over his face before his arms curl around me in a tight bear hug.

Someone pops champagne to celebrate. The staff bring out a whole buffet for dinner. As the evening turns into night, lanterns and fairy lights cast a warm, ethereal glow across the deck. Tommy and Isa remain our ever-entertaining hosts, playing songs that are perfect for a beach party.

DeBarge’s *Rhythm of The Night* blasts through the speakers, and Catalina grabs Scott’s hand.

“C’mon, Soldier. This is our kind of song.”

In one smooth motion, Scott pulls her arm around his neck and their feet are in sync from the first second. These two are fire on the dance floor. It looks like they’ve danced a thousand dances together. They stare adoringly at each other as they laugh and spin around.

Dylan and Isabella, on the other hand, are apparently going to be babysitting little Neymar tomorrow, and they’re arguing about who’s on diaper duty.

I love watching all of them together. At Dylan’s wedding, I felt like an outsider. I watched them with envy because I wanted what they had. I was craving a sense of belonging. And here I am, just a few months later, feeling like this is exactly where I belong.

I take pictures of all of them with the fairy lights contrasting with the blackness of the ocean in the background. I want to capture the magic of this moment in photographs so I can hold on to this perfect night forever.

Isabella asks to see a few of my pictures and gushes about how amazing they are. Tori chimes in and tells her about the pictures I took at her and Dylan’s wedding, so I end up

spending about twenty minutes showing her all the pictures I have on my phone.

“These are stunning,” she says, scrolling through my phone. She holds it up to show Dylan. “De Lorenzo, look at these. They’re better than the ones the wedding photographer took.”

“Wow, those are amazing,” Dylan agrees.

“Send them to me,” she orders. “I want all of them.”

Unlike Cat, Isabella has an abrupt way of speaking, but I’m getting used to her. The way she interacts with me, I think she’s getting used to me too. It’s these little things that give me the warm-and-fuzzies and make me feel like I truly am part of the group now.

We end up leaving the party early because I can barely keep my eyes open. Cat and Scott are *still* dancing while the rest of them play blackjack. But my feet need rest and I just want some quiet time. Peter guides me down a corridor to the cabins on the lower deck. The yacht’s interior, with its rich, polished wood and ambient lighting, leads to a cozy retreat on the far end.

At the bow of the yacht is the main cabin with a secluded outdoor Jacuzzi. The crystal-clear waters mirror the changing hues of the sky. And he’s made it more romantic by adorning it with floating rose petals and delicate, flickering candles.

“You did this for me?” I ask.

“Nah, it comes standard with the yacht.”

I giggle at that. He has such a hard time admitting how he feels, which makes moments like this even cuter.

We wind down the evening by drinking orange juice in the Jacuzzi with the stars twinkling overhead. I couldn’t ask for a more perfect night, and as we get ready for bed, he ends it the way he always does.

Propping himself up on his elbow, he lifts the T-shirt I’m wearing to reveal my bump. “And how are you doing in there,

little man?” He looks from my stomach to me, then back again. “You had quite an eventful day.”

“What if Dr. Cheng got it wrong? What if it was just the umbilical cord that she saw on the scan? Or what if she accidentally told Cat the gender of someone else’s baby? There’s a chance it could still be a girl.”

He rolls his eyes and goes back to talking to my belly, gently stroking his fingers over my navel. “Tell your mom to stop talking crazy. I’m already making plans to take you camping and fishing...you know, male bonding time.”

I thread my fingers through his hair and listen as he talks about all the things he wants them to do together. The sound of his voice is deep and soothing. I could listen to him for hours.

“When you’re old enough, I’ll teach you how to surf and play football. I can’t do that with a girl.”

“Of course, you can.”

Again, he rolls his eyes. “She doesn’t get it, Ambrose.”

“We are *not* naming him Ambrose.”

He ignores me. “Tell her if she wants a girl, she’s gonna have to wait until number two.”

My hand freezes in his hair. “Number two?”

“And now she’s pretending to be surprised when she knows she told me she wants four kids.”

“Uh...” I try to act as if those words have no impact on me, as if my face isn’t heating up, as if I’m not melting on the inside. “You mean that?”

His attention moves from my stomach to my face again. “Yeah, I mean that.”

“So, you would do this all over again?”

“Maybe not the same way, but yeah, I’m loving every second of this. I could do it a few more times.”

I’m on the verge of bursting with excitement. “Really? What specifically are you...loving?”

I don't even know if that sentence makes sense, but he understands it.

"I love every appointment we have with Dr. Cheng because we get to see him on the ultrasound."

"I love that, too."

"The crying took a bit of getting used to because that's not how you operate, but...I've grown to love that, too."

"Not so much for me. I hate crying."

He grins, though he looks nervous. "And, uh, and then there's also...you...as a whole...being...person. I kinda...I kinda love that, too."

Is it weird that I love how awkward it was for him to say that? My smile stretches so wide my cheeks begin to hurt. "You do?"

"I do."

"*Awww*. I kinda love you as a whole being person, too."

"Shut up." He chuckles. "Why do you always have to give me so much shit?"

"Listen, Lestat, I don't give you half as much shit as I give me. Despite my repulsion and the red flags and the warning bells, you still got me here fawning all over you. I've internally admonished myself a million times already."

"What did you say to yourself?"

"I said: Self..."

"That's a great name for internal admonishment."

"...don't fall for this guy. I know he seems like a good whole being person..." I giggle when he lets out an annoyed humph. "...but it could be a façade. Cheetahs – but it was more like cheaters – never change their spots."

Sarcasm keeps his tone dry. "That is atrociously cliché. I hope Self told you to come up with something more original."

“Players gonna play, you know. And hustlers from Hustler’s University are inevitably gonna hustle.”

“Profound advice. I’m still waiting for Self’s rebuttal.”

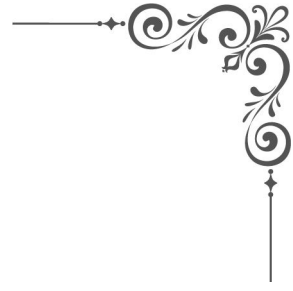
“Self said: ‘What the fuck are you talking about? You’re already neck-deep in love with this guy.’”

He nods. “Is that right?”

“Yep. Self is unfortunately a sucker for a charming smile and eyes stolen from the Jade Palace. So, then we had to have ice cream together to make ourselves feel better about our poor life choices.”

“Well, I did tell you that I’d be the best mistake you ever make.”

I smile, running my hand through his hair again. “You are...and I’d make it a million times over.”



17. Lia

I'm not emotionally castrated (as Raf once told me). I'm not anti-social. I'm not being a bitch. I just want to be left alone and do nothing. I'm busier now than I ever was when I was employed, and I've finally reached my limit on social interaction. Peter seems to have some sort of bucket list of all the things he wants to do one last time before the baby arrives.

We've been to art festivals and theater productions and museums and baby fairs. We've enjoyed nature walks and picnics and chocolate tasting. He even took me to a cozy cabin in Montana over Christmas. He went skiing in the morning, we made snow angels in the afternoon, and then we roasted marshmallows and made love beside the fireplace at night. It was magical. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would experience such incredible things. And I enjoy the good life. I really do, but I am maxed out.

I can't do it anymore. I haven't reached the point where I have to walk around constantly supporting my back, but I'm uncomfortable. My feet are swollen, and it feels like my bladder is about to drop out of me at any moment.

On the topic of bladders, mine is officially broken. I can't sneeze without peeing anymore, so that's been fun. But that's not the reason I bailed tonight. In all honesty, I'm just tired and grumpy and I want to veg out on the couch while doing absolutely nothing. The radio station that Tommy and Isabella work for hosts charity events throughout the year, so they're always involved in community initiatives. They often get invited to different galas and dinners.

They asked Peter and I to join them today for one such event, a fun run during the day, ending with a carnival later tonight. I'm thirty-two weeks pregnant. Walking is already strenuous for me, so running is out of the question. I just couldn't muster enough gumption to go. Especially on a Wednesday. Who goes out during the week, anyway?

I told Peter to go without me, and my plan for this afternoon is to just laze in front of the TV. I struggle to get

comfortable, and after flopping around a few times on the couch, I finally find the perfect angle. I scroll through the endless array of movies on every streaming service we have and still can't decide on anything to watch.

I can't even settle on a genre, so I just mindlessly flip through the selection.

Free Guy

Avatar

Jumanji

Scroll. Scroll. Scroll.

When in Rome

Just Married

27 Dresses

Scroll. Scroll. Scroll.

I smile to myself when I see *Step Up*. I remember the night we watched it together. Peter hated every single second. *Magic Mike* pops up right after, and my smile grows wider as the memories of that night play in my mind.

"I think it's very possible for you to still see tits tonight."

"Oh, yeah?" Even in his drunken state, he rolled on top of me, sliding his hand up my T-shirt. "Please tell me you're talking about your tits and you're not suggesting that we watch Magic Mike."

This is the problem with being pregnant. My hormones are all over the place. I'm so uncomfortable, but now I'm also... horny. I close my eyes and indulge in the memory...

The warmth of his mouth as he kissed me. The way his hand cupped my breast. When that wasn't enough, he stripped off the T-shirt and took my nipple into his mouth. He was hasty, reaching into the drawer for a condom. He laughed when his impatience caused him to topple the box and condoms everywhere. His lips claimed mine again, and I closed my eyes, enjoying the feel of his mouth.

“Lia?” he said, tapping my cheek.

I opened my eyes. “What?”

“You fell asleep.”

“I wasn’t...” I slurred. “I wasn’t sleeping.”

He grinned. “Yeah, you were...for almost a whole minute.” His words are also slow, and he drops down lethargically beside me. “Maybe we should try this again tomorrow.”

“No.” I slung my leg over his, trying to entice him. “I want to...I really want to.”

“Me too...but we’re very...drunk, Li.” His tiredness dragged each syllable out one at a time. “One...or both...of us are going to fall asleep in the middle of...doing it.” He tossed the sealed condom onto the pile on the floor. “If you don’t...have any regrets tomorrow...we can try this again.”

“Okay,” I agreed, my eyes drifting closed.

“Promise me you’ll still be here when I wake up in the morning.”

I smiled. “I promise.”

And then everything went black.

I sit up. That didn’t happen, right? That wasn’t how the night ended. The night was filled with heated kisses and drunken passion. We had wild, uninhibited sex that night.

Didn’t we?

Of course, we had sex that night. The product of that night is nestled comfortably in my belly right now. That wasn’t a memory. That was just my mind manifesting something weird. I drop back against the couch and continue flipping through the movies on the screen.

The problem is now that I’ve thought of this weird alternate ending, I can’t unthink it. It keeps playing on my mind, invoking more thoughts and prompting more questions.

If we didn’t have sex that night, how did I fall pregnant?

We were even more cautious after that night because we realized how reckless we'd been, so we made sure we always used a condom. We only had sex on one occasion before that, which was on the night we met, and we definitely used condoms that night as well.

So, how did I get pregnant? Maybe one of them broke, and we didn't realize it. I get my phone out and after some searching, I find out that condoms are only, like, ninety-seven percent effective.

I must be that three percent statistic.

Tossing my phone aside, I continue scrolling through movies, but not even two minutes later, I stop and sit up again. This manifestation – I don't want to call it a memory because I'm not sure it's even real – is really bugging me.

That one night is the foundation of my entire relationship with Peter, and this information is an earthquake that has totally shattered that foundation for me.

If I didn't fall pregnant that night, then—

“Sorry, Dr. Cheng. The math is not mathing. We don't even know each other for eight weeks.”

I remember thinking the same question Peter had voiced at our first appointment, and Dr. Cheng explained it. She said we needed to add on a couple weeks for the ovulation process. We had known each other for five weeks, plus a couple weeks, and that's how we got to about nine weeks.

That proves that we had sex that night, and this is just a weird thing my imagination conjured up.

I grab my phone again. I'm just going to put this thing to rest. It's 16:45. I'm sure Dr. Cheng is still at the office. I pull up her office number on my phone and call her.

The receptionist answers and tells me that Dr. Cheng is busy with a patient, but she'll ask her to call me once she's done. The next eighteen minutes are the most excruciating wait I have ever experienced. I'm so stressed and anxious that I answer the phone as soon as it lights up. It doesn't even ring.

“Hi, Dr. Cheng,” I say, my heavy breaths already giving away my trepidation.

“Hi, Lia. Is everything okay with the baby? Meryl said you sounded panicked.”

Did I? “Yes, everything is fine. I just wanted to ask you something.” I had eighteen minutes to think about this, but I still pause to figure out how to best articulate my question. “So, that day in your office...our first appointment with you, you told us we should allow a few weeks for the ovulation process, so that would’ve started about—”

“Two weeks before conception,” she fills in.

That sounds more finite than I thought. “Just two weeks? Not three or even four weeks before?”

“No. Just two weeks.”

“My cycle was irregular, so that should allow for more time, right?”

“That doesn’t affect how we count the weeks. We assume the fetus is two weeks old *on* the date of conception, regardless of how many weeks your actual ovulation cycle was.”

My heart rate shoots up. “But in your office, you told us to add a couple weeks. Not just *two*.”

“Lia, a couple weeks *is*...two weeks.” The pause in the middle there makes it seem like she’s being careful to not insult my intelligence. But it’s fine if she does because I feel incredibly stupid.

“What do you mean?” I shout. I don’t want to be rude, but I am utterly panicked now. “In what universe does a couple mean just two?”

Again, she pauses as if I’m dumb. “That’s the literal definition of the word couple. It *means* two.”

“Yeah, but nobody uses it like that!” I take a deep breath and try to calm down. “Okay, Dr. Cheng, if I was about nine weeks pregnant when we came in, around when would our baby have been...conceived?”

“Hang on. Let me get your file.” I wait for her while she calls the receptionist to bring my file. “Okay...let’s see.” Papers shuffle in the background. “So, you came in on August, twenty-fourth...Based on the development of the fetus at your first appointment...if we go back...the date of conception would have been around...the second to the sixth of July.”

I go stone cold, and it feels like my stomach just bottomed out. I was still with Teddy then. “Like...like the Fourth of July weekend?”

“Yes. About then.” There’s dead silence for a moment. “Lia, are you okay?”

“Yes,” I squeak out. “Thank you, Dr. Cheng.”

I immediately hang up the phone before she asks any more questions. Restlessness is building up inside me, and I start pacing up and down the living room to get rid of it. It can’t be. It just can’t be. Teddy and I were also always safe.

Well, relatively. There were times when he couldn’t get it up...or keep it up, so we did it without a condom because he said the condom numbed the sensation, but he always pulled out. *Always.*

I go back to the trusted internet and find out that the *pull-out* method is not an effective method of contraception...at all. Some articles even say that you’re looking for trouble if you use this method. That’s how ineffective it is.

Oh, God!

Oh, shit!

What am I going to do? How am I going to tell Peter?

I call him, then hang up. Call him again, then hang up. I need to talk to him, but I don’t know what to say or how to say it. I shouldn’t say it over the phone, right? I should tell him in person.

Oh, my God. He’s going to hate me.

No, he won’t. He loves me. He loves our baby.

Fuck, it’s not *our* baby!

I call him then hang up, then call him again...and hang up again. I walk to the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea to calm down, but I feel physically ill. I don't even know if I'm going to be able to drink it. I turn to get the tea bags from the cupboard, but I'm upstairs in our bedroom.

How did I get up here? I don't even remember climbing up the stairs, but it's clear that I can't get my feet to stop moving. I walk back downstairs, but as I pass through the foyer, the front door swings open.

"Hey, Li," Peter calls out before he's even inside. "There you are. Is everything okay?"

I swallow hard, struggling to find my voice in my panic. "Why...why are you home so early?"

He looks at me like I'm deranged. "I saw fourteen missed calls from you. I tried to call you back, but you didn't answer, so I came home."

"I called you fourteen times?" I remember the first few, but fourteen? When did I do that? "I didn't hear my phone. It's in the living room."

He walks over to me, cups my face, and tilts my head up so he can study me. "Are you okay? You seem...frazzled. Should I take you to the doctor?"

"No." I shake my head. "I need to tell you something."

"Li, we talked about this. I don't want you getting worked up over...whatever it is you want to tell me, it can wait."

"It can't." I feel the familiar cramp on my side, but I don't say anything about it. I don't even rub it because if he sees any discomfort, he'll put an end to the conversation the way he always does. And I can't let that happen today. Instead, I just breathe through the pain. "We have to talk about this. Now!"

I walk back to the living room, and he follows me in. We sit down, but I stand back up almost immediately. I'm too restless. I toy with my fingers, twisting them in my T-shirt as brace myself to break this to him.

"I don't...I don't..."

“Li, take a breather and calm down. We can talk about this in a few—”

“No. You need to listen.” I don’t know how to tell him. Should I ease him into the discussion or just give it to him straight? Peter has always been straightforward, so I opt for the latter. “I don’t...I don’t think...the baby is yours.”

“What?” His eyebrows furrow together. “Wait. Back up a second. What did you say?”

Saying it the first time was hard enough. Saying it again with him looking at me like that drives a dagger right into my heart. “I said...it’s not your baby.”

Barely a whisper, but the impact of those few words is cataclysmic. The world, the life we’d been building, falls apart around us as if it’s been hit by an earthquake.

He’s shocked and confused, staring at me to see if this is some kind of cruel joke. When my face confirms that it isn’t, he just sits there, looking blankly at nothing as he tries to absorb the shock and recover from the blow. He’s so still. Not moving. Not even breathing.

“Peter, please say something.”

The silence stretches on for another full minute before he’s able to speak.

“If...” He clears his throat because his voice is strained. “If I’m not the father...who the fuck is?”

The words are soft and measured, and it’s his calmness that lets me know how livid he really is.

“It’s...it’s my ex.”

“Your ex.” He drops his head, raking a shaky hand through his hair. “So, what?” He keeps his eyes on his shoes instead of confronting the betrayal I know he sees on my face. “Did you and him hook up when...you left here and went back to the motel? Was it then? Or were you still seeing him while you were staying here wi—”

“No,” I say quickly. I know he’s asking that because both of us were under the impression that was the general time of

conception, yet we were so off. “It happened, like...*before* you and I even got together. A few weeks before. I had no contact with him after we hooked up. The last time I even saw Teddy was the day we met.”

His head snaps up to look at me. “What do you mean, the day we met?”

Oh, crap! I didn’t mean to blurt that out. I just wanted to deal with *this* today and then get all *that* out at another time... after he’d come to terms with this news. But now that it’s out, I can’t keep lying about it.

“This is what I’ve been trying to tell you.” Again, I breathe through the cramp in my side. “That day at the country club... that guy...the man you saw...that wasn’t my father...That was Teddy...my ex.”

He’s flabbergasted, visibly reeling from shock. “That guy’s, like...twice your age. That’s your ex?”

I nod and silence falls upon us again. He’s so still it’s unnerving. I’m waiting for the explosive reaction. I can see the tightness of his jaw, the way the cogs are turning in his head as he processes all this information.

“So, you’ve been lying to me since day one?”

I let out a helpless sigh because I have...but I also haven’t. “It started off as a...miscommunication that I didn’t want to rectify because...because I was so humiliated that you saw him speak to me like that. But I didn’t lie. I told you that very first day that I was coming out of a bad relationship.”

Those jade eyes lock on mine, and he is seething. “When you said you were coming out of a bad relationship, I thought you meant you guys broke up, like...a month before. Not that I just witnessed the fucking breakup six hours before I had sex with you, Lia!” The anger I’d been waiting for is surfacing, and he runs both hands through his hair to keep calm. “Knowing that tiny tidbit of information would have made me question whether this kid was mine at the beginning of all this.”

This kid. The words are abrasive, so cold and unfeeling. It's not like him to talk this way.

“That night you went to *Grit*...you were there to get him back. But like an idiot, I stepped in and messed up your whole plan...and then everything became my problem. Fuck, why did I stop you? None of this shit would've happened if I'd just...”

He leaves the sentence hanging, but he doesn't need to complete it. It's obvious that he regrets everything that happened between us. The dagger in my heart twists another ninety degrees, ripping me open.

Tears run down my cheek. “I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry?” That question is laced with enough acid to dissolve my apology into nothingness. “You've been lying to me for *months*. You knew all along that he wasn't mine, and you didn't—”

“No, Peter. It wasn't like that.” I rush toward him but stop dead in my tracks when his icy glare pins me in place. “I swear, I didn't know. I only found out this afternoon when—”

“Don't,” he whispers, standing up. His jaw tightens and his hands clench as he tries to keep his rage from spiraling out of control. “Don't fucking lie to me.”

“I'm *not* lying.” My voice is high-pitched, desperate for him to listen. “You can even call Dr. Cheng. I spoke to her this afternoon...and she told me that we...we somehow miscounted the weeks, so—”

“No, *I* miscounted the weeks. You knew from the beginning exactly when the fuck you screwed him.” He says it with such disgust, such disdain. He can't even look at me anymore. “And you should've alerted me to this possibility when we found out at the motel. But you didn't. You just continued to lie to me and string me along in this mess. Why? Because he dumped you, and you were looking for another sucker to take on his responsibility? Because you thought if you kept it a secret, you could extract whatever you wanted out of me?”

“No!” I shriek. “Peter, you’re making it seem like I knew all along and purposely manipulated you into believing you’re the father. That’s not true. I didn’t even consider the possibility that you might not be the father. I was so sure it was you.”

“Well, it isn’t. It’s some rich asshole who owns...” He throws his head back when the realization hits him, clasping his hands at the back of his neck. “You know, Scott told me he wasn’t your father. He tried to warn me about you so many times...and I point blank refused to listen. I defended you *every* time.” He sneers, shaking his head at his stupidity. “You were sleeping with a guy twice your age, so I’m seeing a pattern here. This...using men for money is not a new thing for you.”

“I wasn’t using you!” My voice still has that screechy pitch because I’m trying to get through to him, but he’s just not listening. “And I didn’t use Teddy either. I genuinely thought I was in love with him, but now I can see that it was just...infatuation. I just wanted someone to...to...” I pause because it sounds pathetic. “I just wanted someone to love me. I was young and so *so* stupid. I was only nineteen when we met, and so naïve and...and when I look back at our relationship now...I realize it was a mistake to get involved with him in the first place.”

“Oh, you realize it was a mistake *now*?” He smirks sardonically. “When he was splurging on you and gave you a penthouse, then it was okay? You lived off him quite comfortably for five years, using him for everything you needed, but now that it’s over, that’s when you see it as a mistake.”

I’m not sure if I’m too emotional or he’s too angry, but he’s not making any sense. “I wasn’t with him for five years. We were only together for fourteen months.”

This throws him for a loop. “The math isn’t mathing, Li. You just said you met him when you were nineteen. That was five years ago.”

Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Oh, shit!

How did I forget about this? This lie is such a fundamental part of me that I completely forgot it was a lie. He hates me anyway. I might as well just tell him everything.

“It wasn’t five years ago,” I say, my voice small and meek. “I’m not twenty-four. I’m...I’m twenty.”

The color drains from his face. His whole body stiffens. “You’re what?”

I don’t respond.

“Say that again. How old are you?”

I don’t look at him. I can’t, so I just focus on the dark fibers on the rug in front of me. “I’m twenty.”

“You’re twenty?” His breathing elevates, and I assume it’s the compounding effect of me continuously dropping bombs on him today. “You’re *twenty*? And that’s not something you thought I needed to know? Fuck! Do you know how young that is?” He paces the room, trying to burn off the restless energy building within him. “Once again, this is something you should’ve told me from the beginning, because I never would’ve left the country club with you if I knew you were only fucking twenty!” The look on his face is unmitigated horror, showing how repulsed he is by this revelation. “So, all this time...*all* this time I’ve been screwing someone who basically just graduated high school.”

I shut my eyes, bracing myself for the next detonation. “I never graduated high school.”

That shocks him enough to stop pacing.

“My parents...my parents died a few days before my eighteenth birthday, so I just dropped out.”

I’ve been trying to get this out for so long, and it caused me so much anxiety that I couldn’t even put a sentence together, but now I’m utterly numb inside.

“Wait. What? Your parents...” Confusion muddles his expression again. “Your parents are dead?”

It’s not that he said it in a callous way. It’s the fact that hearing it out loud reinforces my loss, reinforces just how

alone I am. The wall of strength I've been battling to keep up disintegrates, turning to dust in a few short seconds. I collapse inside, dropping my head into my hands. Tears stream endlessly down my cheek, and I can't seem to stop them.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," I say between sobs.

He doesn't rush to comfort me the way he usually does, and that only makes me feel more isolated. He just stares at me as if he's looking into the eyes of a stranger. His eyes search mine, trying to find some semblance of someone he recognizes. He doesn't find her because his expression becomes cold and hard.

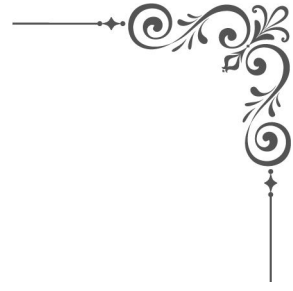
"Pack up your shit and leave," he says, his tone acrid but deathly calm. "I don't want you here."

Somehow, I was so focused on telling him the truth that I never even thought about what the consequences might be. I open my mouth to protest, but I can't even find any form of defense because deep down, I know I deserve this.

"Peter..." I say as some last-ditch effort to get him to – I don't know – reconsider. "I...I have nowhere to go."

"That's not my problem." He turns and heads back to the foyer. "Why don't you go back to the guy who put you in this position and ask him to help you out for a change?"

He takes his car keys out of his pocket and walks out the door.



18. Peter

My hand is clutching the steering wheel so tight I think I've cut off all blood circulation to my fingers. They feel numb. I feel numb. My whole body feels like it's been pumped with lead. It's heavy, and all its weight has settled in my chest, making it impossible to breathe.

I've been driving in circles for almost two hours. I don't know where I am. I don't know where I'm going. All I know is that I needed to get out of that house. I couldn't look at her for one more second. The face that I once found so beautiful was marred with betrayal and deceit. How could she do me like that?

I trusted her, and yet she was lying to me from the beginning about...pretty much everything. Her parents. Her ex. Her fucking age. Who lies about their age? It makes me wonder what else she lied about. How much of our relationship was fake? When I look at it, all of it was just cheap manipulation tactics. That's the reason she always withdrew from the conversation any time I asked her about certain personal things. She purposely hid her past from me so I wouldn't question the most important thing.

The paternity of the baby. Why didn't I ever question it? She told me about her ex. Why did I just assume that he'd been out of the picture for a while before we met? The fact that she was at *Grit* to get him back should've raised some concerns that the breakup was more recent than I suspected, but I was so into this chick that I blinded myself to all the red flags, all the warnings from Scott.

How could I have been so stupid? I've spent my life avoiding women exactly like her. I should've been more aware, and yet I ignorantly invited this fucking succubus into my home without questioning anything. I slam my hand against the steering wheel, forcing myself to keep my anger right there on the surface. I want that to be front and center. I want that to be the only thing I feel, the only thing I focus on.

Because the second I allow myself to think about my baby...

Don't.

Just don't.

He's not your baby.

And with that thought, everything crumbles around me. I pull over on the side and drop my forehead against the steering wheel. I don't even know what it is I'm feeling. If it's grief or heartache, but the force of it is devastating. I think about the ultrasound pictures on the fridge, and the collection of fruit we were using to track him. I was watching him grow every week, and now I'll never get to meet him. The loss is immeasurable, consuming me from within. It's like I'm being engulfed by a black hole, spinning at terminal velocity. Yet no matter how much I try to stabilize myself, I just slip deeper. I can't escape its grasp.

I feel like I've just been hit by a freight train. My airways are clogged. The crushing weight on my chest stops it from expanding enough to take in another breath. I sit there, choking on my own anguish.

How could she do this? I trusted her, and she played me for a fool every step of the way. She's been lying to me for months. She's thirty-two weeks pregnant, and—

That thought slaps the shit out of me, sobering me instantly.

She's thirty-two weeks pregnant, and I just told her to pack up and leave.

Fuck!

I shift my car into gear, and my tires squeal as I slam my foot on the accelerator. My heart pounds wildly as I zip through the traffic, and with every streetlight I pass, I realize how dark it is.

"She wouldn't have left," I tell myself in my most reassuring voice.

It's dark. She's pregnant. She'd do what's best for the baby, even if that means having another argument with me once I got home, right?

And we'll have the argument. She can't stay with me anymore, but I'll call Carl and ask him which one of my apartment buildings has a vacant unit. She can live there for a month or two. After she gives birth, she can find her own place and then I never want to see her again.

Rubber screeches as I slam brakes, bringing my car to a dead stop in the driveway. I hop out and race back into the house.

"Lia," I call out as soon as I open the door. No response. "Lia."

I take the stairs two at a time, fully expecting to walk into my bedroom and find her packing. But she's not there.

"Lia!"

Panic begins to escalate inside me as I run from room to room and find nothing. From the bathroom to the kitchen to the living room and then back up to my bedroom. I check my closet and her clothes are still in there, so where the hell is she?

I whip out my phone and call her. It rings twice, then disconnects. I try again, and the same thing happens. With shaky hands, I go into my messenger app to tell her to answer a phone and encounter a message from her instead.

Lia: Peter, I'm really sorry for everything that I've done. I never should've lied to you, but it was never to use you or trick you. It was a stupid circumstance that I allowed to get out of control. I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you, and I hope that one day, you'll be able to find it in your heart to forgive me.

Lia: I took a few things I shouldn't have. Some of the maternity clothes you bought for me because those are the only things that fit me now, \$200, and some food. I promise I'll pay you back as soon as I get back on my feet again. Thank you for everything.

That second message shatters me. I mean, absolutely destroys every fucking thing inside me. I kicked her out, and she has nothing. No family. No money. Nothing!

I need to find her. A few weeks ago, I asked the security company to give me access to the footage of all the cameras installed across the complex. I tap on the app icon and pull up the various cameras linked to the DVR. I select the one closest to my house, then scroll backward until I see her on the screen.

She left at 20:06. I check the time. That was almost forty-five minutes ago. She could be anywhere by now. I watch her walk away; her steps unsteady. She's carrying one trash bag over her shoulder, so she left the same way she got here...but with less.

As she moves out of the view of one camera, I swap to the next and rewind to the right time stamp to find her again. I track her as she moves through the complex toward the exit.

A few feet away from the main gate, she drops the trash bag and falls to her knees as if her legs give out from underneath her. She stays there, crouched over, crying bitterly. After a minute or two, she slowly drags herself back up. It takes a few tries because her stomach is an added strain, but eventually, she gets back up on her feet. She dusts herself off and continues to the gate. As soon as she leaves the premises, she turns left and disappears from view.

I rewind and watch it again, pausing the video when she falls to the ground. I zoom in and the look on her face wrecks me. She looks utterly defeated...lost. But worst of all, she looks scared.

I did that to her. With one reckless statement, I stripped her of a safe space. She deserved my anger and my rage, but I should've handled it better because I don't think she deserved that. The weight of my shame and my guilt are too heavy to carry. I slump down against the wall.

“What have I done?”

I try calling her again, and this time, it goes straight to voicemail. My knee-jerk reaction is to fling it across the room,

but I take a breath and call Scott instead.

“Hey, Pete,” he says when he answers. He’s still at the charity dinner, so I can hear music in the background. “What’s up?”

“I need you to come over.”

That’s the only thing I need to say before he replies, “Coming.” And hangs up the phone.

I’m already waiting in my driveway when I see his headlights pull up in front of my house. He and Dylan jump out at the same time, and they wait for an explanation because they know something is wrong. They watch me expectantly, but I don’t even know what to tell them. Where do I even start?

The result of the argument is more important than the argument itself, so I start there.

“Lia and I had a fight, and...uh...I told her to...” My jaw ticks because I’m riddled with guilt, but at the same time, I am seething right now. “I told her to leave...and she did. And now she won’t pick up her phone or—”

“What?” Dylan looks like he’s ready to punch me in the face. “What the hell is wrong with you, Peter? She’s pregnant!”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I bite out.

“Clearly not if you kicked her out in the middle of the fricken night!”

Dylan may seem nice on the surface, but he’s a loose cannon. His temper can spiral into violence with very little provocation. And he gets ten times worse if there’s ever a damsel in distress somewhere. He punches first and asks questions later, so I’m not misinterpreting his body language when his hands clench into fists. I know exactly how this is going to escalate.

“Dyl, I didn’t call you guys over to get a lecture, so save your holier-than-thou bullshit for—”

“Okay, both of you need to calm down,” Scott intervenes, stepping between us. He looks over at me. “C’mon, get in. Let’s go look for her.”

I nod, then get into the front seat, slamming the door shut.

“Do you know where she could’ve gone?” Scott asks.

“No, but we can start at...at this motel she used to stay at.”

He waits for Dylan to get in the backseat before he drives off. A thick cloud of tension settles in the car. Scott keeps glancing over at me. Dylan is shooting daggers at me from the backseat. It was too much to ask him to keep his mouth shut and his opinions to himself because five minutes into the drive, I get another outburst from him.

“I still don’t understand how you could just tell her to leave like that. It’s nine o’clock at night, and now she’s walking around the streets by herself. Do you know what could happen to her, Peter?”

The panic I hear in his voice resonates with me on the deepest level because he’s echoing every fear and worrisome thought running through my head right now. “Shut up!” I snap. “Just shut the fuck up.”

“Why would you do that?” he shouts. “There’s absolutely no justification that could—”

“You wanna know why?” I shift in my seat so I can look at him. “Today she told me she realized – just out of the blue – that I’m not the father of her baby.”

Scott slams the brakes hard enough for all of us to fly forward. “What?”

“Yeah,” I reply, keeping my eyes on Dylan. “And the guy who owns the country club is, in fact, *not* her father, but her ex-boyfriend. *He’s* the one who impregnated her. She also told me that her *real* parents died before she turned eighteen, so she never graduated high school. And as the perfect cherry on the top, she informed me that she also lied when she told me she was twenty-four. She’s actually only twenty. She was lying to me from the moment we met. So, forgive me if I was less than thrilled when I found all this out. Forgive me if I lost my shit

and all rationality and told her to fuck off. I wasn't exactly thinking clearly." The silence that ensues is loaded, pensive. I look over at Scott. "And if you want to throw in an *I-told-you-so*, now is not the time."

"I figured."

"Good. So, now that we've cleared all that up, can we please stop talking and focus on finding her?"

Dylan nods, still angry but fully understanding my reasons. "Sure thing, Pete."

We go to the motel, and the manager informs us that no one has checked in tonight. Next, we go to Tori's. She hasn't heard from Lia since the gender reveal party. She calls Shontelle, who also hasn't spoken to Lia in the last few weeks. I even suck in my pride and call Rafael just to make sure I don't leave any stone unturned. That phone call ends with me hitting yet another brick wall.

Dylan calls about a dozen hospitals in the area as we drive around. I call every police station. No luck there either. We drive to every homeless shelter we can think of. We drive all the way to my beach house. Nothing. No sign of her. It's like she disappeared off the face of the planet.

It's almost six in the morning when Scott stops in front of my driveway again. The early morning sun peeps through the clouds in the distance. I say nothing as I drag my weary body out of the front seat and shut the door.

Scott opens the passenger window and lowers his head so he can see me. "You okay, Pete?"

"Fine."

"I'll call you later."

"Don't bother. I won't answer."

"Okay."

He says something, but I ignore him and walk toward my front door. I hear his car pulling away once I'm inside. An echo reverberates off the walls when I shut the door,

reminding me of just how empty this house is now. I stand there for a long time, motionless.

I can still smell her. The last remnants of her perfume linger in the air. I still can't believe that this has happened. Yesterday, I went to a charity event, and when I left here, my life was perfect. Yet here I am, not even twenty-four hours later, and everything has turned to shit.

With heavy legs, I walk to the kitchen to get a bottle of water, and my heart sinks when I get to the fridge. I knew they were there, yet somehow, I was completely unprepared to see them. My eyes move over the ultrasound pictures, eventually settling on the very first one we took in Dr. Cheng's office.

"That's his heartbeat? Doc, that's my baby in there?"

"Yes, Papa, that's your baby in there."

My hands tremble as I lift them. Slowly, I remove the pictures one by one, each memory adding more weight to my chest. My throat is so tight I can barely swallow. By the third one, I give up, turning away from the fridge because it's killing me to do this. It's like I'm erasing them entirely from my life, and I'm not ready to do that.

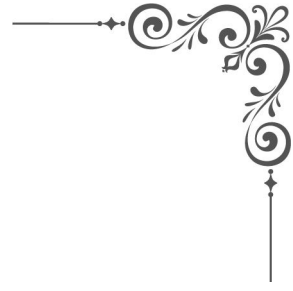
After a few steadying breaths, I resume the task, forcing myself to push through it because having this staring at me every day is just going to be a constant reminder of how this woman fucked me over.

When I'm done, I collect the pictures into a neat pile and take them upstairs. It's almost indescribable what happens to me when I walk into the nursery. My heart plummets into my stomach and my blood cools so quickly I lose all feeling in my hands. I look around, taking in every detail. The 3D characters on the wall. The black crib with the glow-in-the-dark stars. I once saw my future in this room, and now all I can see are the ashes of my dead dream.

I want to go on a rampage and destroy everything in here, smash it with a baseball bat, and leave nothing in my wake except shattered glass and splintered wood. But I can't bring myself to do that, and that only infuriates me more.

I want to scream. I want to climb up the highest mountain and shout out all my frustration to the world. Yet at the same time, I want to be swallowed by the silence. I want to fade into oblivion. I want to disintegrate into a million tiny pieces just so I can escape this pain.

But in the end, none of those options are available to me. All I can do is shut the door on the life I'll never have...and move on.



19. Lia

“You can use this one, Dalisay,” Stella says, leading me to the last bed in the far-right corner.

I used my mother’s name to get in here, and I should’ve thought it through because it makes me even more depressed. Now, more than ever, I want her with me.

I drop my bag on the bed and take in my surroundings. The communal living area is modest, with rows of neatly made beds, each separated by a small nightstand.

“Camilla has the one next to you,” Stella explains. “She’s in the kitchen helping with dinner. I’m sure you’ll meet her shortly, but you can make yourself comfortable in the meantime.”

I give a watery smile. “Thank you.”

I walk into the small room and drop my plastic bag on the single bed next to the window. I wait for Stella to leave and close the door before I sit down on the bed and scan the room, acquainting myself with my new living quarters. The walls of the women’s shelter are painted in soothing pastel shades, probably to create a sense of calm and safety. Yet somehow, the atmosphere is filled with a mix of emotions – relief, uncertainty, and a lingering sense of vulnerability.

Some of the women living here have been through hell. I can see the despair on their faces. Some of them have escaped abusive homes. Some are recovering drug addicts who are trying to get their lives back on track. And some like me. Pregnant and abandoned, with nowhere to go.

It’s kind of depressing seeing tragedy everywhere I turn, but I’m so very grateful that I found this place. It’s a safe haven, a sanctuary, and the staff and the volunteers working here genuinely want to help ease the hardships. They welcomed me with open arms when I arrived earlier, offering me a hug and juice to calm my frazzled nerves. Stella told me they could also assist with prenatal care and weekly check-ups with a doctor who volunteers here.

It's the best situation I could find myself in considering the circumstances, so I consider this a blessing in disguise. I rummage through my trash bag to find a set of pjs and my toothbrush, but I don't unpack. I don't want to get too settled anywhere. Things can change at any given moment, so it's best to not get comfortable.

"Guess it's just you and me now," I say, rubbing my stomach. "I was so stupid. I should've told him the truth earlier."

Finding all that out at once must've been a shock to the system. It was all little white lies that seemed so insignificant at the time, but they culminated into such a clusterfuck. Now he thinks I was just using him, manipulating him from the beginning. Those little white lies make it seem like our entire relationship was fake when it's the only real thing I've known since my parents passed away.

I hate myself so much for hurting him that way. He didn't deserve it. He was amazing, and he took care of me without ever expecting anything in return. The least I could've done was tell him the truth.

But even if he knew the whole truth before tonight, nothing would've shielded him from the blow of finding out the baby isn't his. The impact was devastating to me, so it must have been exponentially worse for him. I can still see the betrayal on his face, the way he looked at me like he didn't even recognize me. And then his eyes darkened, and he turned so cold.

The sheer disappointment on his face is vividly imprinted in my mind and will live there forever. I would give anything to go back in time and change the entire course of events just so I wouldn't have to see him looking at me like that.

But I need to push that out of my head. Lamenting about what could've been is not going to help my situation. I thought I'd hit rock bottom when Teddy kicked me out, but I guess life isn't quite done with me yet. It's proving that it has a shovel and is willing to drag me to the depths of despair. A point so

low that oxygen is in short supply, and my lungs feel like they're collapsing from the lack of air.

I just want to take in a single breath and not feel this ache in my chest. I just want to blink once and not feel the tears collecting behind my eyelids. I just want to have one fleeting moment where I don't feel like I deserve everything that has happened to me.

I'm so stupid. I fell in love with a married man who didn't love me back. And I let that love blind me in so many ways. I allowed myself to be financially dependent on him, trusting that he would take care of me. But one explosive fight and I was out on the street. I should've learned my lesson, but I made the same mistake again.

I fell in love with a man who doesn't love me back, not really anyway. Peter cares about me, but tonight he proved that our relationship was solely based on the baby. There was no regard for me or my well-being. I told him I had nowhere to go, and it didn't matter to him. Once the baby was removed from the equation, he didn't give a shit about me. And the worst part is, I made the same mistake all over again. I allowed myself to be financially dependent on him, trusting that he would take care of me. He was the one who told me not to get another job.

And then for him to turn around and accuse me of using him. How could he possibly think that? The scathing way he threw those words at me made me want to avoid any further interactions. That's why I couldn't bring myself to answer the phone when he called me earlier. He was probably calling to cuss me out about stealing from him. He'd just accused me of using him. I denied it, then proceeded to steal food and two hundred dollars from his drawer. I didn't have a good case or any form of defense, so I just ignored the call then blocked his number.

I know I'm the one at fault. There were so many things I lied about when I shouldn't have. I wasn't expecting him to forgive me. I wasn't expecting us to resolve this and continue as one big, happy family. But I also wasn't expecting him to

tell me to leave, at least not tonight anyway. I wasn't expecting him to discard me so callously without a second thought.

Like I meant nothing.

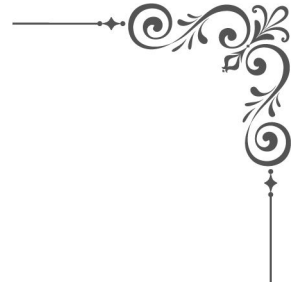
The thing that hurts the most is that I completely opened myself up to him. After Teddy dumped me, I was wary of getting close to anyone. I kept everyone at a distance. My friendships were all superficial. But I wasn't like that with Peter. He told me he would come over to my side if I just stopped pulling away...so I stopped. I threw caution to the wind and gave him my whole heart, only for him to throw it right back in my face. And that hurts a million times more than anything Teddy ever did to me.

My mother always used to say that when people show you how they feel about you, believe them.

Both Teddy and Peter have shown me I'm dispensable. It was a hard lesson that needed to be taught to me a few times, but I think I've finally learned it.

That is the last time I trust a man to keep my heart safe. That is the last time I trust a man. Period.

From now on, there will be only one man who has my undivided love and devotion. And that man is my son.



20. Lia

T*hree months later...*

The soft cries of my very demanding little man wake me from my sleep. With only one eye open, I shift on the tiny bed, sitting up so I can feed him. Even through my exhaustion, I smile at the tiny suckling sounds he makes. He's so cute. In the dim light peeping through the faded curtains, I make out that there are two other moms, Camilla and Dimika, also up for the midnight feed.

Camilla ran away to escape her abusive husband, while Dimika's mom kicked her out when she found out she was pregnant. She's only sixteen. Life at this shelter isn't easy. It lacks all the creature comforts and luxuries I've grown accustomed to. But even though I'm not in the best of circumstances right now, every day I'm reminded of how grateful I should be. I have never faced the kind of hardships some of these other ladies have experienced.

I wouldn't say we're friends. I don't have the energy to emotionally invest in anyone other than my child at this moment. But I would say that I've developed a sort of camaraderie with the other women here. We share chores. We cook meals together. We help each other with the babies. They showed me how to bathe him and burp him and so many other things. The communal space somehow makes single motherhood slightly easier. Given my situation, coming here was the best decision I could've made.

This place has become a sanctuary in the turbulent storm of my life, a haven that has kept me safe for the last three months. But I know it's not a long-term solution. Because of the demand and shortage of funding, most women are only allowed to stay for three months, while moms and expectant moms can stay for six months. My time here is running out, and I have no idea what I'm going to do. I have no plan. I know I need to get a job to support us, but I can't get a job until I can put him in a proper daycare, but I can't put him in

daycare unless I have a job. It's the kind of catch twenty-two that's causing me a run-on of sleepless nights.

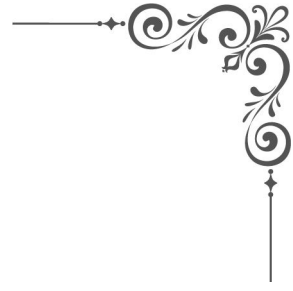
The stress and anxiety are overwhelming. I actually pinned that as the root cause of why I went into labor early. My tiny bundle of joy came on March, fourth. A full three weeks before his due date. Although a little underweight, he was perfectly healthy, and I'm so grateful for that.

I was overly paranoid and worried about that at first, but he's grown so much in the last six weeks. His cheeks have filled out, and he's got those adorable cellulite dimples on his thighs now. He's perfect.

I lift him up over my shoulder to burp him, nuzzling my face against the soft hair on the side of his head. I love the way he feels, the way he smells, the small sounds he makes. It's weird how my heart can feel so full yet so shattered at the same time. One man smashed it into pieces and my little boy has put it back together.

There are days when I miss Peter so much. We were supposed to be experiencing these things together. The sleepless nights. The diaper changes. The vomit. And now I'm doing it all on my own. It just doesn't feel right. I think about it constantly because he would've been a phenomenal dad. He would've rocked him to sleep and sang lullabies in that off-key voice. He would've talked to him every night before bed. It's a tragedy that my son will never know all that. It feels like he was robbed of an opportunity to be loved by a great man.

But at the end of the day, it's my fault that I am where I am. This is my life now and I have to figure out a way to do this by myself.



21. Peter

Dylan had always told me that my hobbies were unproductive, and I always strongly disagreed. But this time, I have to say, he may have a point. This hobby is a colossal waste of time. There's no end goal. Nothing is achieved. It's pointless. Yet I do it every day, some days for hours at a time.

"Hey, Pete," Cat greets as she enters my kitchen.

I do my best to hide my annoyance. I need to have a chat with the security guards. There are only five people they allow into the complex to see me without an ID or an actual reason. It's Scott, Dylan, their wives, and Lia. Lia's never coming back, and the other four seem to be taking advantage of this arrangement because they keep popping in without an invitation. I need to scrap the entire list, and as soon as I can bring myself to do anything productive, I'm going to call Dave at the guardhouse and do just that.

"Staring at your fridge again?" she asks idly.

I don't answer because it's obvious that my new hobby entails having endless bonding moments with my fridge. She drops two grocery bags on the counter then busies herself packing the contents into my kitchen cupboards. I don't say anything. I barely spare her a glance because my eyes stay focused on the empty spot on the fridge.

See, I may have taken the pictures down, but my brain knows they're supposed to be there, so now it just fixates on that spot. It knows something is missing. It knows the sequence ended before it was complete. At thirty-two weeks, he was the size of a cabbage, and my brain keeps obsessing about how much bigger he would've gotten. How big he was when he was born. If he's doing okay now.

If there's one thing I hate, it's worrying. And that's all I do twenty-four-seven. Logically, I know this woman was a snake who lied to me from day one. I shouldn't give a fuck about

her. Logically, I know the child she was carrying isn't mine, so I shouldn't care a damn about him either.

But logic seems to be an irrelevant concept to me because the two of them occupy my every thought, every waking moment. And the most frustrating part is that I can't even call her to find out if they're okay. She blocked my number. She blocked everyone in my whole damn friendship circle. She won't even respond to messages from Tori or Shontelle, so I have no idea where she is or what happened to her.

I've called every hospital, hostel, and shelter, and all I get told is that they can't give out personal information. The cops won't help or even treat her as a missing person because *I'm* the one who told her to leave. One asshole even told me that based on all the information, it looks like she doesn't want to be found, so I need to let it go. And I know he's right, but I can't seem to shut my brain off. What happened to her?

My best guess is that she went back to her ex. If she's not reaching out to anyone she knows for help, she's gotta be with him, right?

And this is the conundrum of emotions I have to work through every day. On the one side, I am absolutely enraged by the very thought of her going back to him. I mean, it sends me into a turbulent death spiral of fury, then flings me into a toxic cesspit of raw, unmitigated jealousy. But then on the other side, that anger turns and is directed solely at me because I'm the one who kicked her out. I'm the one who left her with no other option but to swallow her pride and go back to him.

And then slowly, anger turns to guilt, and guilt turns to worry, and worry turns into irrepressible panic. And right before I go insane, I remind myself that she's been lying to me since day one, and the anger returns. I tell myself that it's good riddance. I got out early enough, and I'm better off without her. She's out of my life, so I should just forget about her and move on.

I remind myself that it's not my baby, and that's when every coping mechanism I have collapses. My body switches off, and I just sit here numb, staring at the fridge.

I'm convinced it has magical powers. Sometimes when I stare at it long enough, it traps me in a time warp, and I find myself stuck in the past, analyzing and dissecting every moment we spent together. The signs were there all along.

The first day we met, I asked her age.

"Before we leave, I need to ask you something. Don't take offense, but you look kinda young, and I just want to make sure I'm not doing anything illegal when we leave these premises. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-four. I mean, I'm twenty..." She paused and reconsidered her answer. "Uh...four. Yeah, twenty-four."

It all makes sense now, but it just shows that it was a conscious effort to lie to me continuously.

"I didn't get the job," she said. "I don't have the necessary skills, experience, or qualifications."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I was sure you had that one in the bag. What qualifications are they talking about, though? That one just required a high school diploma."

"I'm not sure. They didn't give me any details."

But she knew exactly why she didn't get it. She just chose not to tell me. And that was something she did all the time. Like, that night I brought her home after Dylan's bachelor party, we spoke about her dad.

"It sounds like you really miss your dad."

"I miss him so much."

"Why don't you just reach out to him? I don't know what happened between you two, but maybe you should give him a call...and try to talk it out."

"Peter..." Her mouth opened like she wanted to say something, but again, she reconsidered. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because...no matter how hard I try, my dad will always be out of reach to me."

The butterfly she painted on the crib was another sign.

“My mom always used to tell me that a butterfly in the house isn’t just a butterfly. It’s the spirit of our ancestors saying hi. She used to have this bracelet with this beautiful clasp. Her mother gave it to her on her deathbed as a reminder that she’d always be with her. My mom told me that when she leaves this earth, I could have it, and that way she could always be with me.”

She was so tearful when she told me that, even more so when she told me it got lost. Why didn’t I question it more?

And even that day she cried after watching *Finding Nemo*. I thought she was emotional because of her pregnancy hormones, but it was because that movie resonated with her, reminding her of her own parents and her own loss.

Fuck, why didn’t she just tell me? What reason could there possibly be to lie about such arbitrary information? Is she just a pathological liar? Does she just build all her relationships on a web of lies?

Unfortunately, my refrigerator’s powers are limited. It is merely a mystical time warp machine, not an oracle. It can only provide me with the memories to conjure up these questions, but it can’t give me any of the answers.

My thoughts are interrupted when Cat opens the fridge door to pack away the lettuce and tomatoes.

“I thought it was Dylan’s turn today,” I say.

She pretends to be confused by my observation. “What are you talking about? We don’t take turns.”

“Every Wednesday and Saturday, one of you will come over with food or groceries or whatever you think I need. Dylan and Isa do Wednesdays. You and Scott do Saturdays. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Her shoulders slump in defeat. “We worry about you, Pete. You’re not eating. You’re barely sleeping. I don’t even know if you shower anymore.”

“Of course, I shower.”

“Well, you don’t look like it. Have you done anything besides mope since the last time I saw you?”

“I did, actually. On Monday, I threw all of Lia’s clothes out.”

“Out, as in you threw them out in the trash?”

“No, out as in I put them into trash bags, which had a nice symmetry to it because that’s how they came in here, but there were so many that I got lazy and just sort of...put them in the guest bedroom across the hall from the nursery.”

She raises an eyebrow and sighs her disappointment. “Do you not see that you’re slipping further into depression? You don’t even go out anymore. You only leave the house to go to the gym with Dylan and Scott. But the rest of the time you just sit here, rotting away in front of this fridge.”

“That’s not true,” I reply, shaking my head. “I went out last night.”

“Oh, really?” she asks, her tone rife with skepticism.

“Yes. And I met an incredibly beautiful woman. Sexy. Funny. Sweet.”

“Name?”

I throw out the first thing that comes to mind. “Cam.”

“That’s not a real name.”

I meant to say Sam, but I guess I have to work with this now. “It’s short for Camryn. And she’s a delight. We went back to her place for some dessert after dinner, then humped like rabbits all night. I mean, we burned up the sheets. It was incredible. I don’t smoke, but I felt like I needed a cigarette after.”

She glares at me, resting bitch face on full display. “What a crock of shit.”

Well, I tried.

“Do you know how dire the situation is if I’m secretly wishing that were true?” she continues. “Like, I just want you to go out and be a manwhore again. *That’s* the better

alternative here. I'd prefer that to you wallowing in depression all the time."

"I'm not depressed. I'm...I'm grieving. I'm grieving the loss of my baby." It takes everything in me to not cringe as I say that. "I'm grieving the loss of a woman who...I loved and trusted. And it's a bit of a mind fuck because how can you grieve someone who never existed? She wasn't who I thought she was. Everything about her was a lie. It's a little hard to come to terms with all that, Cat." And because I got nothing from my mystical fridge, I turn to her for answers. "Why would she do that to me?"

Cat remains silent for a long time, giving careful thought to her answer. While she mulls it over, she fixes two cups of coffee for us. "I know she lied about a lot of things, but I don't think she was...malicious in her intent. She just doesn't strike me as the type. I don't think she did it for financial gain. I just think she was...stupid. She's young, Peter. Do you know how many stupid decisions I made when I was her age?" She hands me a cup before walking around the island to sit down on the stool beside me. "One of them led to Scott and I breaking up for *five* years. When you're young, you're trying to find your feet, find your place in this world, and sometimes you're self-focused because you're finding *yourself*. And that can blind you to the consequences of your actions. You make bad calls because it's beneficial in the short term, and you have no idea how you've just fucked yourself over in the long term. That's what growing up is about. And when it comes to Lia, I think she was alone and in survival mode, and she said and did what she needed to...I don't know...hide her vulnerability, I guess. But that doesn't mean she's a bad person."

I shrug, shaking my head because I don't necessarily see it that way. "I just don't know what to believe anymore. She lied to me about so many things. Stupid things *and* important things. So, I don't know if she genuinely believed the baby was mine or...if she knew the truth all along and seized the opportunity when I assumed I was the father. Her ex didn't want to have anything to do with her, and I was there, ready and willing to take on this responsibility. Of course, she's gonna jump at the chance. What would you do, Cat?"

She slowly sips her coffee, still carefully choosing her words. “I think it kinda looks like that, but I don’t think that’s what happened. She genuinely cared about you. You guys were already living together, so I’m sure it was just the next logical step in your relationship.”

She’s saying that because I didn’t tell anyone that Lia just up and left after Dylan’s wedding.

“But we weren’t together,” I say. “When we found out, she didn’t want a relationship. She even told me we should go on living our own separate lives, and she’d call me if she needed something for the baby.” I scoff. “She just wanted the money, but I...I insisted that she move in with me...and now I’m not sure if anything that happened between us after that point was even real. I don’t know if she really wanted to be with me...or if she thought it’d be easier to...dupe me if we were together.”

“If that was her plan all along, why did she come out and tell you everything a few weeks before the baby was due?”

“Maybe she felt guilty. Maybe her ex called and wanted to give it another try, and she—” I drop my head, trying to recover from the dizzying blow of being flung into that cesspit of jealousy again. “*Aaah...my brain hurts.*” I rake a heavy hand through my hair before looking up at her again. “I blame Dylan for this. This whole sordid mess is his fault. He was in my ear, talking shit about how I should do this properly, and I was already committing, so why not cash in on the good stuff, too? Why did I listen to him?”

She giggles at my exasperation.

“Cat, you don’t understand. Scott told me not to trust her. Dylan told me to put a ring on it. I went with the latter option. I took relationship advice from the most sentimental fool on the planet. You know the one who’s still sad about Justin and Selena breaking up, the same one who’s now in his *second* marriage? Yeah, that one. I listened to *him.*” I groan, shaking my head at my own stupid choices. “Where the hell is he, anyway? It’s his turn, and I want to give him a piece of my mind.”

“He’s babysitting Neymar again.”

“This seems like it’s becoming a habit.”

“Yeah. Neymar’s mom is really struggling. She’s only fifteen, and Dylan’s parents gave her a job at the restaurant, but it’s still hard for her to make ends meet. Dylan and Isa try to help where they can, but she’s taking so much strain that she’s thinking about putting Neymar up for adoption to—”

“Please stop talking,” I interject, my elevated breathing doing nothing to hide my panic.

“Are you okay?” she asks, studying me with concern.

“No. That statement hit too close to home, and I...uh...I’m just not coping with that possibility.” I stand up, rubbing a hard hand over my jaw. “Cat, thanks for stopping by. I appreciate you coming over to check on me and...for the chat, but I really want to be alone right now.”

“Are you sure? Can I do anything?”

“No. I just need some time...please.”

“Okay.”

She stands up, but she’s hesitant to leave me like this. I assure her I’ll be fine, and after a quick hug, she grabs her handbag and exits the kitchen.

Not for one single second did I ever consider the possibility that she would give him up. She wouldn’t, right? No matter how desperate she got, she wouldn’t do that. I console myself with the fact that she loves this kid more than anything, and she always wanted a family. But that does nothing to settle me because love takes a back seat if she doesn’t have a proper support structure to help her look after him.

That was me. I was supposed to provide that...and I failed.

What the hell have I done?

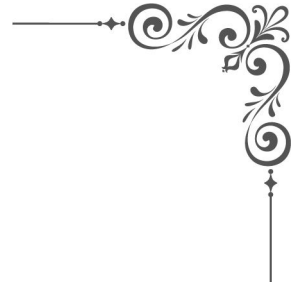
It was a stupid knee-jerk reaction, and I should’ve thought about it before I opened my mouth. I used to pride myself on being composed, remaining cool under pressure. I kept my anger in check, kept my temper under control. There’s a reason why I did that. Because words spoken in anger can’t be

taken back. And that's exactly the situation I now find myself in.

I grab my phone and try for the fifteenth millionth time to get hold of her. She blocked me, so it doesn't even ring. The second I hear the busy tone, my phone goes flying across the kitchen, shattering into a thousand pieces when it slams into the opposite wall.

This guilt and helplessness keep gnawing at me. It's fucking relentless. Day in and day out, nagging at the back of my mind, and I can't take it anymore.

For the sake of my own sanity, I'm just going to believe that she went back to her ex and I'm going to make a nice, comfortable home in the toxic cesspit of jealousy because at this point, anything is better than this shit.



22. Lia

“I’m so stupid!” I whisper-shout into the empty room.

It took me almost an hour and a half to get him down for a nap, so even though I want to scream in frustration, I keep my voice as low as possible.

I grab the baby clothes that Stella gave me and stuff them into a small backpack. I have to leave. I can’t stay here. It’s too risky. But where do I go? And how do I keep my baby safe in the process? He’s so precious. He doesn’t deserve any of this.

This is all my fault. I poked a sleeping bear, and now he’s awake and angry and ready to attack. See, this is why I can’t be trusted to make important decisions, because if there’s even the slightest potential to mess things up and make matters worse, that’s what I’ll end up doing.

I never should’ve contacted Teddy, but even with hindsight, I don’t know what other choice I had. My time here is running out. I need to find a job. I didn’t know what else to do than to reach out to the father of my baby and ask for some help. But the whole thing backfired and blew up in my face. And now I’m in a worse position than I was just two days ago.

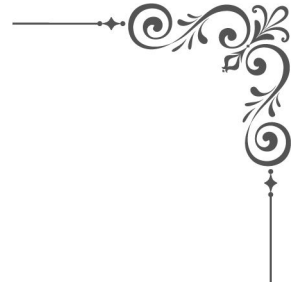
I grab the rest of my belongings and shove them into my bag as well. I look down at my baby boy sleeping peacefully. He doesn’t have a clue what’s going on. All he knows is me and this place, and now everything around him is going to change. He won’t understand.

I lay down on the bed beside him, gently stroking his hair. Stress and panic have forced me to be strong, but knowing what’s going to happen, what I’m about to do, makes it impossible to keep it together.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, tears spilling from my eyes. “I tried...I tried to do my best for you, but it’s not enough. I need to go away for a while.” I completely break down, my words cracking and squeaking as they come out. “But I promise...I promise I’m gonna come back for you. It’s just for a few weeks.” I wipe the tears off my cheeks and kiss his forehead.

“It’s tearing me to pieces inside knowing that I won’t be cuddling with you tonight...and I won’t see you tomorrow... or the next day. But I’ll be back before you know it, so don’t forget about me, okay? And don’t forget that mommy loves you. I’m not leaving you...I just got into some trouble, and as soon as this all blows over, I’ll come get you...You are the most precious thing to me, so I need you to be safe. You can’t bear the brunt of something stupid *I* did. You understand that, right?”

I know he doesn’t, but this is something I have to do. And I’m just praying that for once in my life, I’m making the right decision.



23. Peter

I shut my eyes and listen as Carl rambles on. At one point, I even pull the phone away from my ear to give it a break, but he's still talking when I lift it up again.

“It's the Watson Building on Park Avenue. We've been having recurring plumbing issues that are affecting not just one tenant but several on the same floor. It's causing quite a disruption.”

“So, get some plumbers in to fix it,” I reply irritably. “This is what I pay you for, Carl. To manage these problems effectively. This is an inconvenience that you can handle on your own without any involvement from me.”

“I know. But we've sent plumbers in multiple times to address the issue, but it keeps resurfacing. It's not just the inconvenience; it's also affecting the reputation of the property. I'm calling you because I think we might need to consider a more permanent solution here. Repairs can become costly in the long run.”

The doorbell rings, but I ignore it. It's Wednesday, so it's Isabella's turn to check on me. Why she's ringing the bell is beyond me because she knows she can just walk in.

“So, what do you propose?” I ask Carl.

“Given the nature of the problem, it might be time to invest in a comprehensive plumbing overhaul for that building. Fixing the root cause can prevent these issues from recurring and improve the overall living conditions.”

Shit, that's going to cost me a pretty penny, but I don't care right now. I just want this conversation to end. “Fine. Just get it done.” The doorbell rings again, and I grit my teeth to not take out my growing frustration on Carl. “Make sure you vet the company first because I don't want overruns or sloppy workmanship. If we're gonna spend on this, let's do it right the first time.” The doorbell rings again. “Listen, Carl, I gotta go. Call me when you have a few quotes so we can see which one is most beneficial to us.”

“No problem, Mr. Danahay. Have a good afternoon.”

I hang up the phone and walk downstairs. I’m not going to snap at her. I’m just going to tell her very politely that I’m fine, and they all need to back off and stop coming to check on me because this is getting ridiculous now.

I swing the door open and see...nothing. She’s gone. The bell rang just a few seconds ago. How did she disappear so fast?

“Isa,” I call out and get no response. I step outside, looking right, then left, and she’s nowhere to be seen. “Weird.”

I’m about to go back in when my shoe taps against something. I look down and my heart jumps into my throat.

“No.” My hands find their way into my hair as my blood pressure shoots through the roof. “No way.”

It must be the lack of sleep that’s making me hallucinate because I know for damn sure that’s not a cardboard box on my front step with a fucking baby sleeping in it. I turn around and face the foyer, inhaling deep breaths to center myself.

“It’s not real. It’s just your imagination. It’s not real.”

I turn back, and yeah, there’s a box there...with a baby in it. He’s swaddled tightly in a blanket and nestled comfortably in a pile of her old maternity clothes. Right next to it is a small backpack, and I’m too scared to look inside. The only person I know who’d have a baby this small is Lia. And she wouldn’t just leave him on my doorstep here, right? She has to be around here somewhere. I rush down the driveway and she’s not there. I check around the side of the house, and she’s not there. Where the hell is she?

I grab the backpack first, then as gently as I can, I lift the box, take it into the living room, and slowly place it on the floor. He’s still asleep, so I race upstairs to get my phone. My fingers fumble to get into the security app. I pull up the footage and scroll back until I spot her.

She walks up to the house, rings the bell a few times, then runs to hide behind a hedge. The second I open the door, she bolts, running at the speed of light. I swap cameras and watch

her bullet through the complex before stopping at the security gate to chat with the guard. He opens the gate, and she runs out. Did they not think that was suspicious? Did they not ask her why she came in with a box and left without it? They're fired. All of them are fucking fired!

I take a moment to collect myself. It wasn't that long ago. I'm sure I can catch up to her. I race down the stairs and out the front door, but as I get to the end of my driveway, I hear a wail.

“Shit!”

My feet stumble to a halt. There's a fricken baby in my house. I can't leave him alone to chase her down. I call the guard house and tell them to go out and find her before I rush back inside.

There's no sound when I shut the door, and I approach the box slowly, cautiously. He's still sleeping. Maybe he was just having a bad dream. I know I'm living through one right now and I want to scream, too.

Maybe she didn't leave him here. Maybe she just needed something from the store, and she was running because... because she needed to get it before he woke up. And she didn't wait for me to answer the door because there's still that underlying tension between us, and she didn't have time to get into it with me because she knew we'd probably have an argument and that would delay her from getting to the store.

That makes sense.

Whatever she's getting must be urgent because she wouldn't just leave him here...right?

I sit down on the edge of the couch, anxiously tapping my foot. I maintain a safe distance from the box, barely looking at him...because I can't. It's too much to take in.

After fifteen minutes, I make peace with the fact that she didn't go to the store. That's when I call Scott. He's about to go into a meeting with the dean at the university but cancels it when he hears the distress in my voice.

It feels like an eternity passes before I hear the front door open.

“Hey, Pete. Is everything okay?”

He slams the door shut, and it must shock the baby because he jolts in his sleep.

“Shhhhhh!”

He enters the living room and stops dead in his tracks. “Yo, what is that?”

I throw him an unimpressed glare because he’s supposed to be the smart one. “It’s a baby.”

“Yeah, whose baby?”

“Who else do you know that recently had a baby?”

“But I thought you guys were, you know...because he wasn’t your...” He scratches his head, looking uncomfortable to ask these questions. “Are you guys gonna try to work it out...even though...”

“Not exactly,” I reply, resting my chin on my clasped hands. “It’s kinda hard to work anything out when she’s not here. She just dumped him on my doorstep and fucked off.”

“Wait.” He looks around in horror, processing this information. “So, you’re telling me you’re here...with this baby...alone? What if he wakes up?”

“That’s why I called you, genius.”

“You don’t call *me* for shit like this,” he says, sounding as panicked as me. “I have a wife. Why didn’t you call her?” He huffs out a few breaths. “It’s okay. Dylan said Isa had a meeting today, so he’s supposed to come check on you. I’m sure he’s already on his way.”

During the endless wait for help to arrive, the security guards call me back only to inform me that they weren’t able to catch Lia. I ask Dave about the box, and apparently, she told him we had broken up, and she was just returning some of my things. He, just like me, ate up her lies without question. If he

only knew that the main item in the box was never mine to begin with.

Dylan walks in. “Honey, I’m home,” he yells from the door.

“Shhhhh!” Scott and I hiss out.

“What’s going on?” he asks as he enters the living room. He’s less shocked and more appalled when he spots my new visitor. His eyes narrow at me like I’m the bad one. “Why is there a baby in that box?”

“That’s the way I found him.”

“And you just left him like that? In a box?”

“I didn’t know what to do with him.”

He rushes over and kneels beside the box. “I’ll give you a hint, Pete. It’s to not leave him in a fucking box.” Very gently, Dylan cradles his head and lifts him out. “Come here, little guy.”

Scott sits down beside me and nudges my arm playfully. “See? I told you we’d find a use for him one day.”

“Ah, you’re so tiny,” Dylan coos, lightly rocking the bundle. “And so cute. Do you want to hold him, Pete?”

“I can’t even look at him, Dyl.”

“That’s okay,” he says, still cooing in the same soothing tone. “We understand, don’t we? He’s going through the most right now. Let’s give him some time.”

“Alright, let’s see what we’ve got here.” Scott reaches over to grab the backpack. “We’ve got four...no, five diapers.” He takes them out and places them on the couch. “We’ve got a blanket, some clothes. What’s this?”

He takes out a plastic bag that contains about six small Ziplock bags filled with some partially frozen white stuff. Lifting one out, he turns it from side to side to figure out what it is.

“I think it’s breast milk,” Dylan offers.

“Ew!” Scott flings the bag, and it hits me in the face before landing on my lap. “Shit, sorry, Pete. I’m a little uncomfortable touching something that came out of your girlfriend’s—” He stops himself short when my eyes narrow at him. “Never mind.” He goes back to rummaging through the bag and pulls out a folded piece of paper. After dropping the empty backpack on the floor, he unfolds the paper. “It’s his birth certificate. Looks like he was born on March, fourth, so he just turned two months on Monday.”

I let out a slow breath, and Scott must sense that I’m taking strain because without looking at me, he lightly taps me on the back.

“Looks like there’s another piece of paper here.” He moves the birth certificate behind the other piece of paper. “It’s a letter...uh...” He glances at me, and I give him a subtle nod to read it out loud. “Dear Peter. I know it must come as a surprise to hear from me after all this time.”

“Well, would you look at that?” I add sarcastically. “I just found out something new about her. She’s an undercover mind-reader.”

He ignores me and continues. “And I know that I’m probably the last person you ever wanted to see again, but it seems like Fate has other plans. A lot has changed since we last saw each other. I’d like you to meet Ambrose. I—”

“What?” I cut in. “What’s his name?”

“Ambrose.”

I don’t believe it. I snatch the birth certificate from his hand to check for myself, and there it is in black and white. *Ambrose.*

My body turns to ice, and I can literally feel the blood draining from my face. I stand up so fast I almost stumble. “Just...uh...just give me a minute.”

On unsteady legs, I walk to the kitchen. I’m not sure what I want, but I need...something. I open my fridge and the strongest thing I have in there is beer. With trembling hands, I pop off the lid and gulp down half the bottle.

Why would she name him that? He's not my kid. She left with every intention of never seeing me again, so why would she name him that? It's going to take an army of psychotherapists to help me figure out how this chick's mind works.

I know I need to pull myself together, but I am so fucked up right now I don't even know where to start. After gulping down the rest of the bottle, I inhale a few breaths to brace myself before returning to the living room. I sit down again, and Scott resumes reading as if I never left.

"I need to go away for a little while. Hopefully, I can talk some sense into Teddy and then I'll come back to get him. I'll be back in a week. Two weeks at most. Please don't report me to the authorities. I can't lose my baby, which is why I'm coming to you. Please know that I wouldn't drag you back into the chaotic mess of my life if it wasn't necessary. I don't have any other options. He is the most precious thing in the world to me, and there is absolutely no one else I trust more than you to keep him safe. I know I messed up. I know I hurt you, and I'm so sorry for everything I've done. I have no right to ask anything of you, and you're already taking on so much because of me, but can I ask for one more thing? Please tell him I love him every day. Eternally indebted to you...Lia."

I slump back against the couch, the weight of those words making it impossible to sit upright. The reality of the situation hits me like a ton of bricks. This is not a dream. This is really happening. She really just left her baby here with me.

There's dead silence for two solid minutes before Dylan releases a heavy sigh. "So...I think we need to take stock of what you already have...and then we need to go shopping for what you don't."

"No," I say, my voice hoarse. "He can't stay here."

Dylan's jaw clenches. "And what do you suggest we do with him, Pete?"

"I don't know! This is not my problem. He's not my responsibility."

That instantly sparks Dylan's ire. If he didn't have a baby in his arms, he would've punched me for that. "This is a living, breathing tiny human. He's not some ragdoll you can just discard or hand over to someone else. She has put her full trust in you to do what's best for him, so you need to—"

"I don't need to do anything. I-I can't keep this kid. I can't...look after him by myself." I sound like I'm utterly panicked...because I am. This is something I am in no way prepared for. "We were supposed to do this together, Dyl. This isn't a one-man show. I have no idea what to do."

"Well, you're gonna figure it out. And Scott and I are gonna help you. Isn't that right, Scott?"

Scott nods, but only because he doesn't want to piss Dylan off more. "Yep. We're with you all the way, Pete."

"Okay, so let's make a list of—" Dylan is cut off by a small cry coming from the bundle. "Oh, hey there. Have you decided to join the land of the living?" He gets another wail in response. "Are you hungry? You must be starved." He walks over to the couch and grabs one of the Ziplock bags before looking over at me. "Do you have some bottles?"

My ears remain fixated on that tiny cry, and I simply nod. They know me so well that they just continue working around the various stages of my emotional breakdown.

"I'll get it," Scott offers. "It would be in the nursery, right, Pete?"

I nod again, and Scott leaves the kitchen. I silently watch Dylan as he tries to settle him, but his cries just get louder and louder. Eventually, the wails reach a level where it feels like my brain is about to explode.

I stride over to Dylan. "Let me try." I carefully take the tiny bundle from him. "C'mere, bud." I lift him to my shoulder, and he's so small my hand spans over his entire back. It's uncomfortable at first because he seems so fragile, and I have to consciously focus on being gentle. "Food is on the way, okay? We're just waiting for Scott to get his ass in

gear.” I’m not sure if I startle him, because he quietens almost instantly.

“I think he recognizes your voice,” Dylan says.

“You think so?”

“Yeah.” He tilts his head so he can see Ambrose over my shoulder. “It looks like he’s following the sound...like he’s looking around for you.”

Hearing that wrecks me inside. One part of me is completely overwhelmed with joy, while the other part wants to hand him back to Dylan and pretend as if I don’t know what it feels like to hold him in my arms.

Scott returns with more than just bottles. He’s brought down the car seat and a baby carrier. “I figured if we’re going shopping, we’re gonna need this stuff.”

Dylan has learned a lot from babysitting Neymar because he spends the next few minutes sterilizing the bottles before pouring in the milk. He talks me through the whole process, but his voice is drowned out by the sloppy sounds of Ambrose sucking his fingers. Dylan warms it to the right temperature, and after testing a few drops on his wrist, he hands me the bottle.

When I move Ambrose away from my shoulder to cradle him in the crook of my arm, there’s spit everywhere. On his fingers. Down his chin. And there’s a big wet blob on my T-shirt.

“How did you produce so much saliva in such a short space of time?” I ask him.

“Get used to it, Pete,” Dylan says.

We walk back to the living room and Dylan makes a list of things we need to get while I feed Ambrose. I get a good look at him then, and yeah, he’s a really cute kid. Dylan gives me some tips on how to burp him, but that burp ends up with a quarter of what I just fed him running down my T-shirt. A wild wave from Ambrose sends a spatter of rogue, curdled milk drops into my face.

Scott finds this hilarious. He's enjoying every moment of watching me trying not to gag at the vomit that now covers my entire right side.

Dylan helps me clean and change him before I dash upstairs to change as well. I douse myself in cologne to mask the sour milk smell that's probably still lingering on my skin. We strap Ambrose up into the backseat and head to the store.

"Wait. I brought this along," Scott says, stepping out of the car. He takes too much joy in tying the baby carrier around me, and the asshole has the nerve to grin at me once Ambrose is comfortably nestled inside it. "Precious." He whips out his phone and takes a picture. "Like a momma kangaroo."

"Fuck off."

Dylan laughs. "Not in front of the kids, Pete."

We take our time walking down the aisles, going through the vast array of every kind of formula and baby lotion and pacifiers and burp cloths (It looks like I'm going to need those the most).

But I learn quite quickly that time is now a luxury and should not be taken for granted. About ten minutes in, I hear the delightful sounds of what can only be bowel movements. And just like every other noise that comes out of this little person, it sounds...wet. Just a few seconds later, I get the smell that confirms the sound.

"Uh...Dyl. I think he just...let out a fresh one."

He looks around. "I'm sure there's a changing room somewhere."

"Okay." I carefully take Ambrose out of the carrier. "Do you wanna take him and—"

"No, I'm not changing him."

"Why not? You know how to do it." I sound like the Karate Kid, begging Mr. Miyagi to show him the ways of his craft, because I know Dylan has the wisdom and skill to perform this particular task.

“This is me giving you some tough love, Pete. You gotta learn how to do these things on your own.”

It’s clear from that statement that Dylan is going to be just as selfish as Mr. Miyagi and subject me to days of unsupervised torture before he helps with anything.

“Fine. I’ll do it myself. Wax on, wax off, motherfucker.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Nothing, Dyl.” I look at Scott. “Did you bring the backpack?”

He looks confused. “Was I supposed to?”

“Yeah! All his diapers were in there. How did you remember to bring this stupid sling but not the diapers? Where are your priorities?”

“Sorry. But look, we shouldn’t be too much longer. Just wait until you get back home.”

My first response is a scathing scowl. “Do you honestly expect me to walk around here smelling like shit...just inhaling these toxic fumes?”

He pulls his lips in, but he’s on the verge of bursting. “I don’t smell anything.”

I grab him by the neck and yank him closer. “How ‘bout now?”

“Oh, shit, yeah. That smells bad.”

They are the best and worst friends I could ask for because they crack up when I grab a pack of wipes from the shelf, then rip open the plastic cover of the diapers to take one out. I pivot on my heel and go in search of a changing room.

Once I find an empty one, I place him on the changing bed and gently tug off his pants. The smell gets stronger, but I tell myself to persevere the same way Daniel-son did. I undo both sides of the diaper and as soon as I pull it down, the loudest retching sound rips from my throat.

“Oh, God!” I immediately cover it up again and take a moment to settle my stomach. I pull it down again and fresh

bile rises in my throat. “Why is it so wet?” I gag again, simultaneously grabbing about eight wipes. The smell is noxious, causing tears to collect in my eyes. I force myself to breathe through my mouth as I try to wipe it, but it only smears it across his bottom. “What did you even eat?”

I grab more wipes, and after he’s finally clean, I have the joy of trying to figure out how to put on the new diaper. I get it right on the third try, and I have to say, once his pants are back on and I’ve washed my hands, I feel some sense of accomplishment. I’m not the same person I was five minutes ago.

“I see why they call it a changing room,” I say as I lift Ambrose again. “Because I am walking out of here a changed man.” I chuckle. “That was my first dad joke, and I know what you’re thinking. I’m not your dad, but given all events and circumstances...I think it fits.”

By the time I join the other two again, Dylan has already filled the cart halfway, and he’s nowhere near done. He’s so pedantic about anything I select. He checks every label to make sure it’s BPA-free or hypoallergenic. His expression is a mixture of excitement and longing. I know he has fertility issues, but it’s obvious he wants to have kids.

“These diapers aren’t the best, especially for a boy,” he says. “It kinda leaks out the side—”

“Dyl, you’re broody as fuck. You’re worse than Lia was during her nesting phase. You need to start looking at options.”

“I will...when I’m ready.”

As sentimental as he is, he rarely opens up about things that get him in the feels. He says nothing further on the matter and continues talking about the absorbency of diapers.

While Dylan has been very practical with what he’s put in the cart, Scott is off the chain. He’s tossing in robots and building blocks. He even tries to get an electric car before I remind him that there’s no way Ambrose is going to grow enough in the next few weeks to even use it.

That's the heavy thought that stays with me as we leave the store, and I carry it with me all the way home. Dylan and Scott unload all the baby products once we get back to my house, but it's only when they leave that I realize just how overwhelming it is to take on the full responsibility of looking after a tiny human by myself. I don't know if Lia did this on her own. Maybe she dumped him here because it was just too much. But the very thought that I have to care for this child until she gets back is absolutely daunting.

I carry this tiny bundle upstairs and stop outside the nursery door. I haven't stepped foot inside it in three months. Opening the door unleashes all the memories I had trapped in there. They were all exiled to this room, locked up tight while I went about my business. But now those memories have been released from their prison and roam freely.

I see the excitement in her eyes as the mural started coming together. I see us painting the crib and making out on the floor. On the edge of the changing table are the pictures I took off the fridge and seeing those brings back more memories. Us watching movies together and play-fighting on the bed. Me talking to her belly every night.

As the images float through my mind, I start to wonder how much of it was a lie. How could I not have known that our entire relationship was one-sided? How could I have gone through so many months never suspecting that she was conning me into being a stand-in?

And she's doing it again now. I'm the stand-in while she's off somewhere, probably trying to make amends with her ex. What did her letter say again? She wants to talk some sense into Teddy and then she'll come back and get him. As much as I'd like to be spiteful and tell her to get lost and find some other chump, I can't do that if she's not here, and more importantly, I can't use Ambrose as a pawn in a sick game to get back at her.

I walk over to the changing station and gently lay him down. "Well, that was an exciting day, huh?"

He kicks and throws his hands to show just how excited he is.

“Now, if you and I are gonna be rooming together, we gotta discuss some house rules. Lights out at nine o’clock. No girls allowed here. I always had that rule because if a chick goes psycho, she won’t know where I live. I broke that rule with Lia, and it led to me finding a baby on my doorstep. For obvious reasons, I think you can see why that rule must be reinstated.”

He makes a small coo, which I assume is him agreeing to that.

“Next rule. No wild parties. I don’t want you up at midnight, drinking and throwing up all over the place. Even if it’s milk, it’s unbecoming, and that’s not how we behave.”

He gurgles, his hands still moving wildly up and down as if he likes the sound of my voice.

“You think I’m kidding? I’m not kidding. I run a tight ship here.”

He gives me the widest smile, showing me nothing but gums.

“Ah, shit. You just had to have a dimple, didn’t you? Right there on your cheek...just like your mom. I mean...of course that would happen. Here I was, ignorantly thinking that the situation couldn’t get any worse, but you sure showed me, huh?”

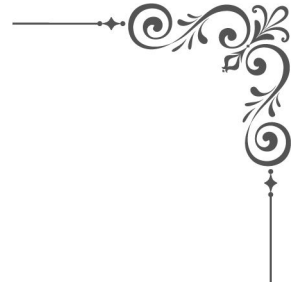
I reach out to gently touch his cheek, and when his tiny fingers wrap around mine, something cracks inside me. I’m going to give myself some credit because, despite everything that has happened today, I battled through and kept myself together. But it’s at this point that I cave. It’s at this point that I feel how truly hollow I am inside. I feel the gaping hole she left in me because now, for the first time in months, I’m getting a glimpse of what’s been missing in my life, the substance that initially filled the hole.

“What in the world made your mom think this was a good idea?” I ask softly. “She’s gonna leave you here for who

knows how long, then just swoop in and take you? Does she not know the depth to which that will fuck me up?" I pause and recompose myself. "Sorry. I need to stop cussing in front of you, but you gotta understand my frustration here. This woman is gonna drive me nuts. See, what she doesn't understand is that I loved you like you were mine from the beginning. I'm looking at you now, and I can tell you that knowing the truth doesn't change a damn thing." I release a heavy sigh. "So, what am I going to do when she comes back for you?"

Maybe it's because I just reminded myself that I only have a short amount of time with him. Maybe it's because I want to feel close to him. But I lift him up again and kiss the side of his head, loving the softness of his hair against my face.

"You know what, Bro?" I smile even though it feels like a thousand pounds of pressure is crushing down on me because that name is legendary. "Let's just take each day as it comes and hope to God, we come out fine on the other side."



24. Peter

I hear the soft murmurs on the baby monitor but keep my eyes closed, hoping it won't escalate to more than that tonight. It's a foolish hope because it escalates to inconsolable crying *every* night.

I check my phone. It's 2:42 a.m. With my eyes still partially closed, I wade down the corridor to the nursery.

"Morning," I grumble, my voice gruff with exhaustion.

Lifting him out of the crib, I secure him in the crook of my arm, then head downstairs to make him a bottle. I already know how it's going to go down. He's going to cry the entire time it takes me to get his bottle ready. He'll take a short break to guzzle it down, then resume crying for the next hour or so.

I've read a million articles to figure out why this happens. Some say it may be because he's colic. Some say it's reflux. Some even say he may be teething. But it happens like clockwork every single night, so I've ruled out all those suggestions. Especially because I think I've identified the problem on my own. He misses his mom. She said she'd be back in a week, two weeks at most.

But two weeks came and went, then three weeks, then four. Now five. Ambrose doesn't understand why everything changed in a day, and I think he's just restless. She was his primary caregiver, all he knew, and she just left him here in this unfamiliar environment. He misses her. He's probably craving her smell, her body heat, the softness of her skin.

I can completely relate on this front. I'm also restless. I crave those very same things, and it keeps me up late at night too. So, I understand why it's almost impossible to comfort him. I get why he needs to be held constantly. He wants something that he can't have, and he can't even express what he wants so badly.

I can try my best, but I can never give him what she gave him, and it's so draining trying to be both mom and dad to him. I've had about five nannies already to help me with him

just so I can get some rest, but I just can't seem to let go of the responsibility and leave him in the care of someone else. They don't feed him right. They don't give him enough tummy time. They don't read to him as often as I'd like. None of them can do it right, so I do it myself.

Being so anal about this comes with snags. I don't go out much. I can't go to the gym. The downstairs bedroom that I converted into a makeshift gym when Dylan moved in has proven to be useful because Scott and Dylan come here to work out now. We've got li'l Bro sitting in his rocker, watching us while we do push-ups and bench presses. It is what it is.

I've perfected the art of making a bottle with one hand. I can even do it with only one eye open. Wax on. Wax off. I'm a master now.

We go back upstairs, and I make myself comfortable in the rocking chair to feed him. I enjoy the few minutes of peace as he quietly slurps down every last drop. I lift him to burp him, and not even two minutes later, he starts crying again. Rocking him doesn't help. I stand up and gently pat him as I walk the length of the room. It doesn't help. He spits out the pacifier. He rejects the second bottle I make. Nothing helps.

And then it hits me. A memory comes to mind, something Lia said to me when we were setting up the nursery.

"You know, this is all our kid listens to. When he finally arrives, these old tunes will be the only music that calms him down."

I'm so desperate for a solution right now that I'll try anything. "How about something from the sixties?" I tell the screaming baby in my arms. "This song I wholeheartedly dedicate to your mother." I put on Solomon Burke's *Cry To Me*. "It's a classic. Released 1962. It was in *Dirty Dancing*, and for all the shit she gave me, she genuinely loved that movie."

The sound catches his attention, and he looks around to see where it's coming from. The wails don't cease but become more sporadic.

“When your baby...leaves you all alone,” comes through the speakers.

“Catchy, right?” I say, swaying him gently. “And very appropriate.”

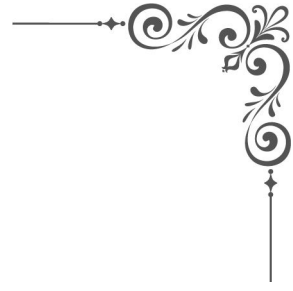
I sing along, and I’m not sure if it’s the sound of my voice, the vibration of my chest, or the song itself that soothes him, but he finally stops crying.

“Please don’t say this was all I had to do to get you to calm down. You put me through hell for the last few weeks, lil Bro. Is this really all you wanted?”

I guess it makes sense. Somewhere in his little brain, he remembers these songs, he remembers me, and how I used to sing to him all the time. In a world where he doesn’t recognize anything, the familiarity of this must bring some sense of comfort.

I settle into the rocking chair and the first rays of sunlight are already peeping through the curtains when he finally falls asleep. I don’t put him down, though. I read somewhere that babies sometimes feel separation anxiety. If that’s what he’s going through, I guess it couldn’t hurt to show him that I’m not going to leave him. So, with him nestled on my chest and his tiny face nuzzling the side of my neck, I fall asleep listening to the short puffs of his breath.

And it’s the best sleep I’ve had in weeks.



25. Peter

“So, how bad is it, Doc?” I ask, looking worriedly at Ambrose. “Do you think I need to take him to a chiropractor or another specialist? Is there something wrong with his spine?”

Dr. Mason stares at me for a long time with a befuddled expression on her face. She looks down at Ambrose on the examination bed. Her lips twitch, and for a split second, she seems amused. That’s not very professional, but she looks quite young, so I’m going to blame that on inexperience. I’m also going to forgive that smirk on her face. This is a serious issue, but Ambrose is giving the cutest gummy smile, so I kind of understand. She clears her throat and wipes that grin off her face.

“Excuse me, Mr. Danahay,” she says, walking over to the door. “I think I need a second opinion.” She opens it to call her assistant. “Grace, would you come in here, please?”

Grace looks like she’s in her early sixties, and she moves like it too. She slowly stands up and shuffles into Dr. Mason’s office.

“Grace has six children, fifteen grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren,” Dr. Mason says as she shuts the door. “I trust her opinion on these types of issues. Can you just explain the situation to her the same way you explained it to me?”

I try not to get irritated with having to regurgitate all my concerns for the second time. “So, I think there might be something wrong with Ambrose. I’m not sure what the problem is. If it’s his legs, his hips, his spine.”

She covers her mouth and clears her throat again. “Can you elaborate on why you think there’s a problem?”

“I told you. I’ve read a few websites that said at four months, babies should be rolling over on their own. He’s four and a half months, and he’s still not rolling over.”

Dr. Mason snickers before glancing at Grace. “Uh...Grace, what, um...” She snickers again. “What’s your take on this?”

Grace’s first response is a giggle, which progresses to her doubling over and all out guffawing. That makes Dr. Mason crack up, too.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, confused. “There’s something wrong with him, and you’re taking it like some kind of joke.”

“Nothing’s wrong with him,” Dr. Mason assures me between spurts of laughter. “He’s perfectly fine.”

Grace comes over and pinches my cheeks in that annoying way grans do. “You’re absolutely precious.”

“They may be called milestones, but they’re not literally cast in stone,” Dr. Mason explains to me. “Babies develop at their own pace. He’s a happy, healthy little boy.”

Ambrose confirms this by gurgling.

“He’ll start turning soon,” Grace adds.

I’m still skeptical. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure.” She scoops him up off the examination bed. “Tell your dad not to worry so much.”

She hands him back to me, then walks over to her desk and scribbles something down on a Post-it note. “Here’s my number. If you have any other concerns...or if you just want to...call to ask...anything...” She exchanges a glance with Grace before her eyes return to me. “Just call.”

I take the note and stuff it into my back pocket. “Okay, thanks a lot.”

“You’re a very involved father,” Grace says. “Your wife is lucky to have you.”

“Uh...I’m not...I’m not married.”

“Your girlfriend,” she quickly corrects.

“Don’t have one of those, either.”

“Oh!” Her eyes light up, and she exchanges another glance with Dr. Mason. “Well, that’s surprising, because you seem

like a real catch. It must be hard doing this all by yourself, but...Dr. Mason is available for whatever you need. You can call her anytime, day or night. She also makes an incredible chicken casserole, so if the little one is ever too crabby, and you don't get a chance to...get dinner, just ask her to bring some over."

Dr. Mason subtly nudges her as if the offer is a step beyond her call of duty. Grace nudges her back, but their smiles stay perfectly intact, so perfect it borders on fake.

"Uh...thank you. That's great customer service." I adjust Ambrose in my arms so he can look at them. "Alright, li'l Bro. Say bye to the nice ladies."

"Bye," they sing in unison as I walk out of the office.

"You know, you could've said something last night," I scold Ambrose as I walk with him back to my car. "You saw me panicking while I was going down that internet rabbit hole, but you didn't say one word." I strap him into his car seat. "Then you let me embarrass myself in front of those ladies. She called in someone else to laugh at me. You could've at least faked, like, a leg spasm or something so that my concern seemed legit, but you just hung me out to dry."

He babbles and coos the whole way home. I love that sound. I could listen to it all day, which is why I'm constantly talking to him...or rather arguing with him. And he gives as good as he gets. It gets heated sometimes. We've had discussions where I was a hundred percent certain that those goo-goo-gaa-gaas were his way of hurling insults at me. I can see it on his face because he's so expressive now too.

If I had to be completely honest, this is my favorite phase. He's finally sleeping through the night (at least eight hours on most nights). A few sixties tunes, and he's out like a light. Generally, he doesn't cry as much, so it doesn't feel as draining or demanding anymore. We've settled into a comfortable routine of eating, playing, and sleeping. We're doing great, and Dr. Mason was right. He's a happy kid. Just full of smiles and giggles. It's fricken adorable. The downside is he puts anything he can grab into his mouth and slobbers

over everything. But that's a handful of cons on a very long list of pros.

I park my car in the driveway, then retrieve him from the backseat. He grips onto my T-shirt and starts sucking on it as I walk into the house. I don't even stop him because I'm so used to smelling like spit all the time.

I grab the small baby rocker and place it on the kitchen counter. After strapping him in, I walk to the fridge. "So, what are we having for lunch today? That chicken casserole sounded good, didn't it? Maybe we should ask Dylan for a recipe—" I gasp when the realization hits. "Holy shit! She was flirting with me. She gave me her number. And her assistant asked if I was married and then she said Dr. Mason would bring dinner over. That's wingwoman of the year right there. I can't believe I just glossed over the entire interaction."

Ambrose smiles when I face-palm myself.

"How rusty am I that I didn't even notice a pretty blonde hitting on me? Now that I think about it, she was really cute." I take her number out of my back pocket. "She even put a little smiley face on here." I look over at Ambrose, who's just staring at me. "What? You think I won't call her? I mean...I will. Hot women are my thing...and I'm *very* interested. So, I'm definitely gonna call her."

He lifts his feet in the air and babbles a hostile string of cynicism as he grips his toes.

"Well, that was uncalled for, don't you think? Name-calling is unnecessary. Of course, I still have game. I can still charm the panties off any woman. I got the doctor's number without even trying, so what do you have to say to that?"

He gives me an earful of ba-dat-dat-dat-dat-da.

"I just told you I'm gonna call her. Not today...or even tomorrow...but I will call her...eventually."

Again, he calls out my bullshit.

"I'm not making excuses. I hate to break it to you, but looking after you is a full-time gig. Running off with pretty doctors isn't an option for me, so until your mom comes

back..." I shrug because I don't know what's going to happen when she comes back. "*If* she comes back. I gotta be honest with you, Bro. It's looking less and less likely. She said one or two weeks. It's the middle of July. That's two and a half months, so it might just be the two of us for a long time. I think..." I pause to ensure I don't get dragged into the rip tide sloshing around in the toxic cesspit of jealousy. "I think she went back to your dad. Her letter said she wanted to talk some sense into him, so I think her aim was to get him to...accept you. And when he didn't, I think she had to make a choice between you and her own well-being. Now, that seems out of character and not something she would do, but what do I know? This chick lied to me about everything. I don't know what she's capable of."

He squirms, flailing his hands wildly to grab hold of my T-shirt.

Placing my elbows on the counter, I lower myself to his eye level and give him my thumb to hold instead. "Is it weird that I still think about her every day? That's kinda your fault... because that dimple on your cheek...Fuck, it gets me every time." I remind myself for the millionth time that I need to stop cussing and let out a slow breath to release the pressure that constantly builds in my chest. "But...it's been *months*. Enough time has passed, and I think I'm pretty much over her now."

Spit covers my thumb when he starts gnawing on it, and that's a clear sign that he's skeptical of what I'm saying.

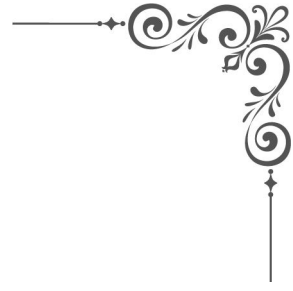
"I'm serious. Was I once stupid enough to believe that your mom was the most amazing woman on the planet, and no one was *ever* gonna hold a candle to her? Yes. Did I not have sex for months because I instinctively knew that it just wouldn't be the same with anyone else? Also...yes. But things have changed. I've moved on. Your mom's not the reason I'm hesitant to give the hot doctor a call because *that's* acting like a simp, and I'm not a simp, alright? That kind of cuck behavior is reserved exclusively for Dylan. I'm not like that. I'm tough. I'm unbreakable. You think a woman betraying me and ripping my heart out is enough to stop me? No. I could do

it again. In fact, I'm *ready* to do it again. I could call this doctor up right now and have her naked in my bed in the next hour. You're the roadblock here."

He runs his mouth again, and I can hear that he's judging me.

"Whatever. Save it. I know what my reasons are, and I'm telling you I don't want to call her... 'cause of you. That's it. I don't have time to date because *you* are a handful." I straighten and hold up the Post-it note. "I don't know if you know this, but our fridge has mystical powers, so I'm going to stick Dr. Mason's number right here." Turning around, I stick it on the fridge with a magnet. "The last woman who was on here threw me for a loop, and I could not get her out of my head. So, let's make a deal. If Dr. Mason crosses my mind even once in the next month, I'll give her a call. Now, can you quit nagging so we can get lunch ready?"

He squeals in delight, and we leave the conversation there.



26. Peter

“It really doesn’t taste bad,” I say, trying to push another spoonful of sweet potato into Ambrose’s mouth. He smacks it away, the dollop hitting his highchair before landing on the floor with a splat. “I don’t understand why you keep spitting it up. You literally tried to eat a block yesterday, and now you wanna pretend like sweet potato doesn’t meet your very high standards. Sorry. I’m not buying it.”

This has been my challenge for the last week. The books and websites I’ve read say that solids should be introduced at six months. That was this week, so I started him off with some cereal. He wasn’t having it. I then tried butternut. That didn’t work either. I’ve now progressed to sweet potato, and he is point-blank refusing to eat any of it. Dylan has some experience with making baby food, and because he’s so pedantic about processed foods, he’s made a few bottles of pureed vegetables for Ambrose to try.

But Ambrose isn’t even willing to try. He spits it out the second it touches his tongue. I’m not going to go into a panic. It’s only been a week. I’ll just keep trying.

I hear a jovial squeal before the frantic pitter-patter of small feet comes racing into my kitchen. We’ve got a playdate with Neymar and Dylan after our basketball game today. A boys’ day out at the park. The last month and a half have been a rollercoaster for Dylan. Neymar’s mom followed through with her plan to put him up for adoption. It was a choice driven purely by her circumstances, but Dylan and Isabella were so attached to him, so invested, that they couldn’t let him go. And so began the long, arduous process of legally adopting him.

On top of that, they also had to deal with a toddler who was going through the worst case of separation anxiety because his mom was there one day and not the next. From my own personal experience, I know that it’s hell, and it must be ten times worse with a toddler who actually understands what’s happening in the world around him. But Dylan’s been

handling it like a champ. He's tired, but wholeheartedly embracing the journey.

"Dyl, Ambrose doesn't think you're the gourmet chef you believe you are," I say when he steps into the kitchen.

"So, sweet potato is a bust too?"

"Yep."

Neymar comes over to assist me, but only ends up getting food all over Ambrose's hair and clothes. I listen as they babble to each other, probably devising a foolproof plan of how they're going to eat dirt the second we turn our backs. It's what happens nearly every time. One minute they're happily frolicking in the sandpit. I'll turn for a split second to get a wipe, and when I turn back, it looks like they've eaten about twenty metric tons of sand based on how much mud has accumulated on their chins.

"Hey, Scott," Dylan greets when Scott enters the kitchen.

"What's up, Dyl." He gives me a head nod. "Hey, Pete. You guys ready to go?"

"Well, I'm just going to take him out back and hose him down."

"Sure thing, warden."

I take Ambrose upstairs to give him a quick wash and change and stumble into the weirdest conversation when I return to the kitchen a few minutes later.

"So, you're saying that I can't hang out with you guys anymore?" Scott asks.

"Yeah," Dylan replies. "I'm sorry, but you just can't be part of our club. Access denied."

"And what exactly would I need to do to be part of the club?"

"Well, you'd have to care for and raise a child who's not biologically yours."

I chuckle, grab a dish towel, and fling it at him. "You're an asshole."

“I speak the truth.”

“Cat doesn’t want to have kids for at least another three years,” Scott counters. “So, can I at least get a temporary pass? I adopted a puppy last year, and that’s gotta count for something.”

They debate this point as we drive across town to pick up Keith. With the addition of our two young boys to our crew, we had to adapt our tradition for every second Saturday. We now leave them with Mrs. Diaz while we play a few games of basketball, and she’s all too happy to have a house full of kids again. Scott’s dad meets us at the courts, and we spend most of the morning shooting hoops.

After lunch at Keith’s house, we come back to my place, load the boys into their strollers, and push them down to the park. It’s a perfect afternoon, typical late August weather – warm with a cool breeze hitting my face.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever picture a scenario quite like this. Not once did I ever imagine that I’d be having playdates and pushing around a fricken stroller. But this is my life now, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

We enjoy a relaxing Saturday at the park. Well, Scott and I do. Dylan doesn’t rest for a minute. He’s playing catch and rough tumbling with Neymar on the grass. This kid has unlimited energy, and I already start mentally preparing myself because Ambrose will get to that level soon enough. He hasn’t started crawling yet, but everyone keeps telling me that the real work will begin once he’s mobile.

Once we’ve tired the kids out, we head back to my place. Dylan loads a sleeping Neymar in his car then heads out. As soon as we walk back into the house, I notice that he’s left Neymar’s diaper bag, so he’ll probably be back later or tomorrow to get it. Scott stays for beer but leaves half an hour later because he has a date night planned. I grab another beer before curling up with Ambrose on the couch to watch *Rocky*.

“This is one of my all-time favorite movies, so over the next few days, we’re gonna watch every Rocky movie,” I say, nestling him in the crook of my arm until he’s comfortable.

“This movie is legendary. It was the first sports movie to ever win an Oscar, and Stallone is pure gold in this one. You gotta see it for yourself.”

We watch the movie together, but he’s beat from earlier and dozes off. Midway through, I hear a knock at the door. Crap! It’s Dylan returning to get the diaper bag, but I’m in the perfect spot, and Ambrose is asleep. I don’t want to move. I should’ve just left it outside because I knew he’d come back for it.

“It’s open,” I call out, trying to keep my voice low.

He knocks again, and I groan my annoyance because I either yell and risk waking up Ambrose or just get up. I opt for the latter, carefully placing him in the rocker before walking to the door.

“Dyl, it’s open,” I snap, yanking the door open.

What I find on my doorstep is not at all what I was expecting. No. It’s not *who* I was expecting. I freeze, literally freeze. My heart screeches to a halt. My breath stops mid-exhale. I just stand there for a moment, trying to process the sight in front of me.

“Lia.” Even my larynx isn’t functioning properly because my voice sounds strained. “What...” I release the breath caught in my air pipes. “What are you doing here?”

“Hi,” she whispers, and the word sounds like it escaped rather than said with intention.

She pulls her lips in and clears her throat. I may be flabbergasted, but she’s a wreck. She doesn’t look like she used to. She’s paler than she was before. Dark rings encircle her eyes, and she looks like she hasn’t slept in weeks. Her hazel eyes once carried so much effervescence and humor, but they seem so lifeless now. Like they’ve witnessed the ugliest parts of hell and lost all hope in the process. A purplish-blue bruise covers her left cheekbone. What the fuck happened to her?

A part of me wonders if her ex did this to her. I feel my blood boiling, my temper spiraling, but I reason with myself to

calm down before I fly off the rails. Whatever happened between them is not my business, not my problem.

“What do you want?” I ask, keeping all emotion out of my voice.

“I thought...I could...” She releases a helpless sigh. “I wanted to...to see my baby.”

I’m not surprised to hear that at all. “You’ve been gone for four months, Lia. You can’t just show up like this and expect to—”

“Please. I know I don’t have a right to ask you for anything, but...”

“You damn right, you don’t.”

“I’m begging you to please let me see my son.”

I know it is *her* son, and between the two of us, she’s the only biological parent here, but hearing that just set me off. “Oh, now he’s your son? You didn’t give a fuck about him when you just *dumped* him here. You abandoned him for four months, and now you think you can waltz back in here—”

“I didn’t abandon him.” Her voice betrays her, but she swallows and quickly tampers down her erratic behavior. “I swear I didn’t abandon him.”

“Then where the hell did you disappear to?”

Her shoulders slump with the helplessness she’s feeling, and she looks around as if she can somehow find the answer in my front yard. “I just...I got caught up in a bad situation. I tried to work something amicable out...with Teddy, but he...um...it didn’t go how I wanted it to go.” She’s trying to keep up a façade of strength, but she’s crumbling beneath it. The first tear rolls down her cheek, but she swipes it away. “He did...something awful...something I never thought he would do. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn’t listen. I wanted to come back...I did...but I just...couldn’t. I was in...” She pauses, thinking carefully about what she wants to reveal to me. This wasn’t something that was apparent to me before, but I can see it now. The way she lies and manipulates is very purposeful. “It doesn’t matter where I was. I’m back now, and

that's what matters. That part of my life is over...and I just want to see my baby."

I'm trying. I am digging into the depths of my soul to not lose my shit here. Did she really just tell me that she tried to get back together with her ex, it didn't work out, and now she's back to see her baby? If she couldn't prioritize him even once in the last four months, then she shouldn't have the right to see him. She forfeited that right when she left him on my doorstep and ran off to be with some other dude.

"Lia, I don't think that's a good ide—"

A loud cry comes from inside the house, and she goes from zero to nuclear in 1.3 seconds. She hurls herself at me like a wildcat, trying to shove past me to get inside.

"Please let me see him," she screams. "Please!"

I grip her waist to stop her, but she's hysterical, thrashing against my hold.

"Peter, please! Just let me see him!"

She's kicking and screaming like a crazy person. The neighbors are going to think I'm killing someone over here. At the very least, they're going to report a domestic disturbance to the cops if I don't get her under control. I yank her inside and kick the door shut behind me.

"Calm down," I say.

She continues to fight me, so I grip her shoulders and pin her against the wall.

"Calm. Down. I can't let you see him if you're like this. You're gonna scare him."

That gets through to her, and she quietens.

"Okay, now take a deep breath."

I wait for her breathing to slow before I release her and take a step back. Despite my better judgment, I gesture to the living room, and she rushes in, dropping beside the rocker to scoop him up.

“Oh, my baby.” The façade collapses, and she showers him with kisses as tears stream down her face. “Look how big you are. I missed you so much. I promise I’m never going to leave you again.”

Even though she’s not as hysterical as she was a moment ago. Ambrose is still confused by her presence and cries louder.

“It’s me,” she says, disheartened. “Don’t you remember me? Even a little?”

She stands up, trying to soothe him, but he only becomes more upset. In turn, she becomes more upset because she wants him to recognize her, and I don’t think he does. It gets to a point where they’re both crying, and I have to intervene.

I walk over to them and take him from her. Although reluctant, she gives him to me without a fight. I check the time, then walk with him to the kitchen.

“He needs a bottle.”

She doesn’t follow me. She doesn’t take any liberties by thinking she can just prance around my house. Instead, she waits there until we get back. We remain absolutely quiet as I feed him. Not one look in my direction. She keeps her eyes pinned to the floor. Once I’m done, I put him back in the rocker in front of her.

“He doesn’t know who you are,” I say. “And I don’t want him getting upset, so you can sit here and play with him...but keep your distance.”

That hits her hard. A pain-filled squeak escapes, but she clamps it down immediately. I refuse to leave her alone with him, so I sit down on the couch furthest away from them and watch her silently from across the room. She’s not the person she used to be. Something happened that fundamentally changed her.

When we first met, she was so withdrawn, but I saw something special inside her. Something I thought her ex destroyed. I chased it relentlessly. I did everything I could to pull her out of her shell, and after months of chipping away, I

finally saw who I thought was the *real* Lia. But that woman is gone. The smiles. The giggles. The vampire jokes. All gone. She's not the same.

She went back to her ex, and the result was that she fully retracted back into her shell. The stoic mask is back in place. She's doing a piss-poor job of it, but she's trying to hide all traces of vulnerability from me.

Now, I know she's not the person I thought she was. She lied, and the woman I fell in love with was a mere fabrication. But fuck, seeing *this* version of her is grinding me raw. I can see that she's genuinely happy to be reunited with Ambrose, but her eyes are still so lifeless. And that bruise on her cheek...

What the fuck did he do to her? Again, I steel my emotions and reel that shit back in. It's not my business, not my problem. This woman is a liar, and I need to subdue my empathy and guilt to avoid getting caught in her bullshit again.

I leave her to play with him for almost two hours, and it doesn't take long for Ambrose to warm up to her. Her animated expressions while she's playing peek-a-boo even get a few heart-felt laughs out of him. But we have a routine, and it's already bath time.

I stand up. "It's getting late. I think it's time for you to go."

The statement shocks her as if she'd lost track of time. "Okay."

She leans over to kiss him before she stands up. Without looking in my direction, she strides right past me to get to the door. I follow her to let her out.

She stops on the front step and nervously twiddles with her fingers. "Is it..." Her eyes stay glued to the ground. "Is it okay if I come by...to see him again tomorrow?"

I want to say no, but I decide to not go with my knee-jerk reaction this time. "Okay."

"Thank you, Peter. You've taken such good care of him. I can't thank you enough. These last few months haven't been easy for me, and I—"

Hearing her sob stories is not high on my priority list right now, so I cut her off. “Come by at eleven.”

I don’t wait for confirmation and shut the door. I let out a slow breath and allow myself to decompress because that was awkward and tense. Crossing through the foyer, I go back to check on Ambrose.

“How you doing over there, li’l Bro? You good?” He gives me that wide smile, and the dimple on his cheek reminds me of the asteroid of problems that has just entered the stratosphere of my life. “I’m glad you’re okay because I’m... *so* messed up, but we’re not gonna dwell on it. We just have to find a way to deal with this, right? We have until tomorrow to figure out a game plan, and, uh...” I rake my hand through my hair. “Ah, shit. Seeing her again is really screwing with my head...especially because she didn’t...she didn’t look okay... at all.” I shake it off. “But she’s a grown woman. She doesn’t need me. She blocked my number, remember? That means she can look after herself. She’s been doing that for the last four months, right? I’m not gonna even worry about this.”

Yet even as I say this, I’m pulling out my phone to check the security cameras. I watch her as she walks down to the main gate, but as soon as she’s outside, she just kind of stands there, looking up and down the road. I watch her for almost eight minutes, and she doesn’t move.

Eventually, I call the guardhouse at the main gate. “Hey, Dave. Can you ask Brenda to come up here for a few minutes? There’s something I gotta do.”

“Sure, Mr. Danahay.”

I wait for Brenda to come up to the house and instruct her to look after Ambrose for me. I take the ten-minute walk down to the main gate, and Lia is still outside when I get there, sitting on the sidewalk. The sun is fading, and she’s scrolling through her phone like it’s not almost dark out. Dave opens the gate for me, and she quickly stands up when she sees me walking toward her.

“What are you still doing here?” I ask.

“Um...I’m just waiting for a friend to pick me up.”

“Who?”

She struggles for a second as if she wasn’t expecting the follow-up question, and that stilted pause is a sign that the next words out of her mouth are going to be a lie. “Uh...Tori.”

“I know for a fact you haven’t spoken to Tori in months.”

Again, she seems surprised by my response and remains silent.

“I’m going to ask you again. Who are you waiting for? Is it...” My jaw clenches as I try not to cringe. “Is it Teddy?”

His name is like fucking acid on my tongue, searing the inside of my mouth. I didn’t want to say it, but the question needed to be asked because I don’t want him anywhere near my house.

“No, it’s not Teddy,” she answers, and something is so off about her reply.

I step closer, encroaching on her personal space, and her body stiffens. “Eyes here. Look at me.” I hook my finger under her chin and force her head up. I keep my voice low to not draw any attention to us. “You have twisted your stories. You have omitted facts and left out key details. You have manipulated me repeatedly. And you have screwed me over one too many times. So, I’m going to caution you to not fucking lie to me again. Who’s coming to get you?”

She doesn’t answer right away. Instead, she stares off into the distance until I tilt her chin up for her to look at me again.

“No one,” she whispers. “No one’s coming to get me. Someone at the—” She stops herself short. “Someone told me about a shelter nearby, and I was...I was trying to find it on my phone, but I can’t seem to get a proper signal here.” She swallows hard enough for me to hear her pride go down. She steps back out of my grasp and points to her left. “Um...before I got here, it was saying I should head that way, so...uh, I should get going. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She turns and starts walking down the sidewalk. *Don't do it*, I tell myself. I don't need to be a hero or a knight in shining armor. That was the exact complex that put me in this situation to begin with.

Don't do it. Just let her go. She'll be fine.

Don't. Do. It!

“Lia,” I call out before she's even taken her fourth step. I wait for her to face me again. “Come inside.”

“Uh...I don't want to get accused of—”

She stops to think about it, seemingly very hesitant to take me up on the offer. The fact that she's mentally weighing up whether she'd be better off at a shelter rather than staying at my house shows just how acrimonious things have become between us. I'm sure the only reason she caves is because staying here allows her to spend more time with Ambrose. Eventually, she gives a small nod, and we walk back together.

I stay a few steps in front of her and remain quiet the whole way back. I thank Brenda once we get back to the house, and she must pick up on the tension, because she leaves without saying a word.

Doubt starts to rise the second I close the door. I don't know where she's been all this time. I don't know why she came back. And she has given me absolutely no reason to trust her. To avoid regretting this decision in the future, I need to make sure we're on the same page.

She's already on a mission to locate Ambrose again, but I grab her arm before she reaches the living room and turn her to face me.

“Let's just establish some house rules, shall we?” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “And the rules are that there are no rules. Come and go as you please. Help yourself to anything you need. Do whatever you want. Go wild. I honestly don't give a shit. But if you try to take my kid from me...” I step closer, purposely trying to intimidate her so that she knows I'm one hundred percent serious. “...I will hunt you

down and choke the last breath out of you myself. If you leave again, you leave alone. Are we clear?”

Her eyes widen. I never would've threatened her before, and I guess she's just as shocked as I am at just how far we've fallen.

Her eyes search mine for even a dim ember of what we once had, but she finds nothing. “He's...he's not your—”

“Yeah, he is. He's got a deadbeat father who refuses to take responsibility and a mother who abandoned him. I'm the only parent he's got.”

“I didn't abandon him!” she screams, frustrated that she can't get this point across. “I was going to come back, but—”

“Save it. I don't want to hear your excuses, because what you did was inexcusable.” I ignore the hurt in her eyes and walk back to the living room to get Ambrose. “You can have your old room back. Your clothes are in there too.”

I don't know why I said that. It was never her old room because she only slept in there for two nights, but things are not how they used to be, and we need to get accustomed to a new living arrangement.

The rest of the evening is an awkward dance of us tiptoeing around each other, speaking when spoken to, yet not saying anything at all. We're both doing things for Ambrose but consciously ensuring we don't do them together. I feed him. She bathes him. I have a session of tummy time with him. She reads him a story.

Slowly, the evening draws to a close, and she doesn't object when I come into the nursery to tell her it's bedtime. She reluctantly stands up but doesn't make any attempt to leave.

Instead, she toys with her fingers, and I can sense her trepidation as she debates something internally with herself. “Do you...do you still have the backpack that, uh, that I left here with him? I put a picture in the front compartment.” Her eyes brim with tears, but she uses every mechanism to stop

them from falling. “It’s the only picture I have left of my parents.”

It finally clicks. I finally understand why she’s so obsessive about taking pictures. This is my chance to be spiteful. I could hurt her, crush her, put her through the same pain and loss she put me through when I found out he wasn’t my son. The fact that I’m only hearing about this picture now reinforces how much information she’s kept from me.

I want to tell her I destroyed it, threw it out, burned it...but I can’t bring myself to do that to her. “It’s in there with the rest of your stuff,” I reply curtly. “Just check in the bags.”

The breath of relief she exhales is palpable enough for me to feel it. “Thank you, Peter.”

Her composure cracks. A tear escapes and rolls down her cheek, but she quickly swipes it away and walks across the hall to her bedroom. I push the whole interaction out of my mind and focus on the task at hand.

“How about some Dionne Warwick tonight?” I ask Ambrose.

I switch it on, and the soft melody mixes with the sound of the shower running in the background. Having a third person in the house is going to take some getting used to.

When he’s semi-asleep, I make myself comfortable in the rocking chair. The rhythmic back and forth lull me into a state where I’m almost dozing off, but my eyes flutter open when I hear a light tap on the door.

My face and body remain neutral on the outside, but that’s definitely not my reaction on the inside when my eyes take in the sight of her. She has put me through the absolute worst. I used to think that Isabella inflicted the most egregious form of torture on Dylan, but Lia stepped up to the plate and told Isabella to hold her beer. She has put me through more agony than any man should have to endure in one lifetime. And after *all* that, she still has the audacity to walk in here wearing pajamas.

And of all the pajamas, she chose that one. There's nothing inherently sexy about them. It's just a simple crimson cotton tank top with striped crimson pajama shorts. But I have been craving her softness for months, and now her thighs are on full display, and she's exposing just the right amount of cleavage. I'm seeing too much skin, yet the outline of her pert nipples proves that I'm not seeing nearly enough.

"Would you mind if I came in and kissed him goodnight?"

"No."

She ignores my clipped response and walks over to us. The smell of her shampoo wafts through the air and mingles with the scent of her skin. God, she smells amazing. She tucks her wet hair behind her ear and leans over to kiss his forehead. I stiffen when her smooth thigh brushes against my forearm. My hand clenches into a tight fist. I shut my eyes to the sight of her and breathe through my mouth, so I don't get even the slightest whiff of her. I am a man on the edge.

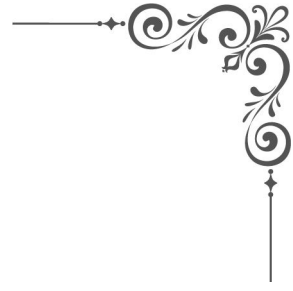
I *hate* her for everything she's done. I'm tense. I'm edgy. I'm livid to the point of boiling over. But that doesn't make me want to fuck her any less. My body's unperturbed by my inner turmoil. It doesn't care that she lied to me. Right now, it's responding to lips and tits and thighs. It knows how she smells, how she feels, how she tastes, how she moans when I slide inside her. It knows that it's gone without all those things for way too long. And it knows that she's the only woman who can give me what I'm yearning for.

"Goodnight, my precious boy," she whispers, kissing him again. "I love you." She straightens and looks at me. "Thank you again...for everything."

She leaves me with that and goes back to the room across the hall. Once the door closes, I throw my head back in frustration.

"What a disappointment you turned out to be," I whisper, lightly stroking Ambrose's back, "I was really hoping you had done some damage, but your mom is still smoking hot. You're telling me you had nine months, and that's the worst you could do? Pathetic. She's even hotter now than she was before. You

had one job, Bro.” I sigh, steeling my resolve. “But I’m just gonna ignore it. Not gonna think about it. At all. I’m not falling for her feminine wiles this time. Crazy is the act of doing the same thing and expecting a different result. That’s not me. I’ve learned my lesson, and I won’t be the fool this time around.”



27. Lia

It takes but a squeak for me to open my eyes. Quick as a flash, I toss off the covers and wade across the hall to the nursery. I've been here for exactly a week and can say without a doubt that this is my favorite time of day. Lila, the police officer I met a few months ago, put me in touch with her uncle, Gerald. He owns a little mom-and-pop grocery store, so I was able to secure a job quite quickly this time. And while I'm very grateful to both of them, this new job leaves me with very little time to bond with Ambrose.

I only get to see him for about an hour in the morning before I leave for work and maybe two to three hours in the evening when I get home. There's so much time I need to make up for that those few hours seem insufficient. But I'm not complaining. I treasure every moment I have with him because I know how lucky I am to even have it. When I came back, I knew I'd be walking into a lion's den. I didn't expect it to be easy, but I wasn't expecting Peter to be this gracious either.

I knew our interactions would be hostile and tense, but I didn't really know what his reaction would be when he saw me. I wasn't sure he would even let me see Ambrose. I came back ready and willing to beg to see my son, so I got more than I bargained for when Peter allowed me to spend a few hours playing with him. That was already a shock to the system, but what I never saw coming was him opening his house up to me again.

The last time I was here, he treated me with such contempt that I thought he'd rip my head off if he ever saw me again. And then I left my baby here without even having the balls to ask him in person. I was a total coward, and I thought he'd use that against me to keep me from seeing my son. So, the direction he took surprised the hell out of me.

Never in my wildest dreams did I even imagine that he would ask me to live here again. And while I truly appreciate the offer, I wasn't keen to accept it. I know he doesn't want me

here. He can barely stand the sight of me. He used to look at me with awe and adoration, and now the perpetual scowl on his face reflects the pure disdain he holds for me.

It's been a rough week, but I take it with a smile because I get to spend time with my baby. I would endure the worst form of torture for him, so I can deal with some scowls and curt comments. I can ignore the constant rejection. And I can live with the pain that now permanently resides within me.

I fully understand why Peter's been treating me this way, and...I deserve it. But every interaction is starting to feel like someone is driving a scalding hot iron poker straight through my heart. He barely speaks to me. When he does, it's clipped one-word responses. If I strike up a conversation, he immediately shuts me down. And I'm trying so hard to make amends. I want to prove to him that I never lied about knowing the true paternity of the baby and that I never used him as a substitute, but he refuses to listen to a word I say.

I know too much has happened between us for him to ever forgive me or try to reconcile, but I just want there to be less friction. This is the type of toxicity we were trying to avoid when we were debating if we should have a relationship. We didn't want our baby living in a hostile environment, yet that's exactly what we've created.

And that's my fault too. I'm sure they were very happy before I came back. That's why I decided to counter every frown with a smile and every curt word with a kind one. I refuse to let our issues impact Ambrose in any way. If I need to fake happiness and joy so that he's happy, then that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to zip up all the pain and loneliness I've experienced in the last four months and toss it into the deep recesses of my mind so that I don't even think about it.

I've been given a second chance in life and with my son. There's a lot to be grateful for, so I need to seize the opportunity and give it my best shot. I need to get my life together so I can get my own place. Peter's been kind enough to let me stay here, but it's not a permanent solution. I need to make a home for myself because this doesn't feel like home

anymore. Primarily because I feel like I don't belong here. Hell, I don't even feel like I'm wanted here.

My clothes are still in trash bags. I haven't unpacked them because I don't want to get too comfortable. I've been kicked out on my ass with nowhere to go a few times in the last year. Peter did it when I was thirty-two weeks pregnant with no warning or time to prepare.

I know full well that what I did was wrong, but given the circumstances and my very large belly at the time, he could have told me he wanted me gone by the end of the week. He could've even told me I had to be out by morning. But no. He told me to leave that same night even after I said that I had no place to go, so I don't doubt for a second that he could do that to me again. And if he decides to toss me out on the street again, at least I'm already packed.

I also have a plan in place to start saving as soon as I get my first paycheck. I've made a conscious choice to never become reliant on any man again. If I want stability, I need to create that for myself. I have a job now, so I'm going to do just that. The pay isn't great, but it's not bad either. I'm going to make this work. I have no choice but to make this work. Life is giving me a beating. It's whooping my ass, pummeling me into the ground. The scoreboard currently stands at:

Life: 89 522 369

Lia...3.

Giving birth to Ambrose earned me another point, but then life hit me with a right hook. And I stumbled, but now it's time for me to come back swinging.

Part of this comeback strategy is rebuilding bridges with people I care about. I sent a groveling apology to Tori and Shontelle two nights ago, acknowledging that I've been a horrible friend and promising to do better. Shontelle responded as I predicted. She called me an emotionally castrated asshole, then followed it up with a heart emoji. Tori called me back, and we spent an hour on the phone.

It was so good to hear her voice. I hadn't realized how accustomed I'd become to being isolated until I spoke to her. I almost cried three times during our call. She did blackmail me, though. She told me she would only forgive me if I came to her wedding at the end of September. And as added penance, she told me I'd have to take pictures of her special day.

I was ecstatic and agreed on the spot. I've felt so empty and alone these last few months, and I came back to anger and hostility, so just having someone happy to hear from me filled me with the kind of joy that I can't even begin to describe.

There were many times during the last four months when I just sat on my bed and stared at the blank wall. There wasn't anything else to do except self-reflect. And the conclusion of all those reflections is that I need to be better. A better mother. A better friend. A better person overall.

It was unintentional, but I hurt and betrayed the people closest to me. Little by little, I have to restore their faith and trust in me. Tori has given me a glimmer of hope that it's not an impossible task. Shontelle will take a bit more time. Peter will probably never come around, but I'm going to try to at least build a relationship that's amicable.

"Good morning, handsome," I say, lifting Ambrose out of the crib. "Aren't you so full of smiles this morning?"

Peter usually leaves us alone to bond every morning and only comes to get him when I leave for work. But today's my first Saturday here, so I'm not sure what to expect.

He babbles while I change his diaper, laughing when I tickle his toes.

"I can't believe how big you've gotten," I say, buttoning his onesie again. "You were so tiny when I left."

A pang of guilt hits me because I didn't want to leave him. It tore me up, yet even with hindsight, I can't see another alternative. And what makes me feel even worse is the fact that leaving here might've been the best thing for him. I had nothing, not even the prospect of a job, because I had no one to help me look after him. So, even if Teddy didn't do what he

did, how would I have survived? How would I have taken care of him?

And when I look at everything Peter has done for him – the fancy clothes and the toys and this house. I could never give him even a tenth of what he has here. Coming back to see him living like this highlighted how I failed him as a mother. I couldn't even get him a proper chair. I delivered him here in a box.

Every day I'm attacked by these kinds of thoughts that run on a loop in my head, and part of me wonders if maybe both of them would be better off without me. I think about leaving and just letting them be happy, but that would make me an even bigger failure.

I take a deep breath, push those emotions aside, and smile. "I want you to know that I didn't abandon you. Your father is just a bigger jerk than I thought. He was a coward, and I ended up paying for that." I bend to kiss his little toes. "But let's not dwell on the past. It's Saturday, and I am looking forward to spending the entire day with you. We've got so much to catch up on."

I carry him downstairs and hook him on my hip while I make a bottle. He starts to get fussy, so I hurry back up to the nursery. I try to give him the bottle, but he pushes it out with his tongue.

"C'mon, aren't you hungry?"

This is very much part of our morning routine. He refuses to let me feed him. And at night, he refuses to let me take him to bed. For those things, he only wants Peter, and he'll scream bloody blue murder until he gets what he wants.

I walk around the room, rocking him to get him to settle down, but his cries get louder. Peter comes to the door to check on us but doesn't enter the room.

"Sorry," I say. "Did we wake you?"

"I was up already."

This is another thing about Peter that surprises me. He could sideline me or rub it in my face that Ambrose prefers

him over me. But instead, he gives me the time and opportunity to bond with Ambrose and learn his likes and habits. Peter only intervenes if I need help, so he stands patiently at the door, waiting to see if I can settle the wailing baby in my arms.

I try rattles and squeaky toys, and he just gets louder. I try distracting him with singing and showing him the characters on the wall. Nothing helps. After almost half an hour, I walk to the door and force a smile when I hand him to Peter. I feel dejected and deflated. At times like this, I feel like the biggest failure as a mother because Ambrose settles down the second Peter takes him from me.

Shutting my eyes, I take a brief second to regroup. I force myself to channel positive thoughts and happy vibes even though my son can't stand to be around me for more than an hour. I used to be the only person he needed, and it's hard to come to terms with the fact that he just doesn't need me anymore.

I'm about to walk out when Peter's hand shoots out, grasping the other side of the doorframe to block my path. I keep my eyes cast toward the floor because I don't want him to see how utterly defeated I feel right now.

"It'll take time," he says.

He usually interacts with me with terse responses or by ignoring me entirely. This is the first time since I've been back that he's actually being somewhat *nice* to me. It's only three words, but it's a start.

And I want to believe him, but these four months have created this chasm between me and my son, and I don't know how to fill it. I don't know how to cross it or how to get to the other side. I lost time I can never get back, and the consequences of my actions are too much to bear.

I nod without looking at him, then go back to my room as soon as he drops his hand. I have a quick cry in the shower. It's very quick because I'm on Team Happy here.

With a renewed positive attitude, I walk downstairs but stop midway through the foyer when I hear Scott's voice coming from the kitchen.

"So, she just popped out of nowhere?" he asks. "That was a week ago. Why are you only telling us now?"

"I didn't know how long she was going to stay for," Peter replies.

"Why did she leave in the first place?" Dylan asks.

"Don't know. Don't care."

There's silence for a minute before Scott pipes up again. "I'm still not understanding why you let her move in with you again."

"Regardless of everything that's happened between us, she's his mother, Scott," Peter says. "I can't leave her out on the street. Ambrose is my priority for *life*. Eventually, he's gonna grow up, and if he finds out I treated his mother like that, what's he gonna think of me? I'm a role model now. I gotta act like it."

The kids are yelling in the background, but that doesn't seem to inhibit their conversation.

"So, what's the plan here? Are you just waiting for her to get a stable job and a decent place and then you'll let her take him?"

"No, that's not the plan at all. She's not taking him. This is his home now. He stays with me."

"You can't just...keep him, Pete." Dylan counters. "She has rights."

"Then she's gonna have to exercise those rights. If she wants him back, she's gonna have to take me to court. She can't afford a good lawyer, and even if she could, I've got a better one. I've already asked him about this, and he said all I need to do is tell the judge the story of how I got him in the first place and how she fucked off for four months...and viola. Case closed. He's mine."

My heart sinks when I hear that. After everything he's done for me and Ambrose, taking him to court would be such a slap in the face. I would never do that to him, and it hurts to know that he's already spoken to a lawyer because he thinks I'm capable of something like that. But that aside, the vitriol with which he speaks about me is so disheartening. It's like I'm no one to him now, just a pest, an inconvenient burden he has to deal with.

Positive thoughts, I tell myself. I'm on Team Happy. And members of the team have enough mental fortitude to deal with this astronomical level of resentment and hostility.

Neymar scurries out of the kitchen at lightning speed and Dylan comes chasing after him a moment later. He halts in his tracks when he sees me, looking awkward because of the conversation they were just having about me. I hate that. I hate that I was finally starting to feel like I was part of their group of friends and now they all think I'm the scum of the earth.

They've made assumptions about me based on distorted versions of the truth, and I have no right of reply, no real defense because they're never going to hear my side of the story. And even if they did, their loyalty lies with Peter.

"Oh, hey, Lia," he says, sounding slightly nervous.

"Hi." I force my voice up to sound more chipper than I feel. "I didn't even know you guys were here. I didn't hear you come in."

He believes that, and his awkwardness level drops a notch. "Uh...we just got here. We're taking the boys out fishing today, so we wanted to get an early start."

I try to hide my disappointment. I was really hoping to spend quality time with Ambrose today, but I feel like I don't have a say in my own son's life.

"You fish?" I ask, peppering the conversation with pleasantries so that I don't think about how much he must be judging me.

"Nah, this is new for all of us," he replies while Neymar runs manic circles around him. "Pete keeps insisting this is

something dads have to teach their boys, so...we're all gonna learn. And hopefully, we'll be half decent at it by the time they're at the proper age to fish by themselves."

Peter steps out of the kitchen. "Ready to go?" he asks Dylan without even glancing in my direction.

Guess those three nice words are all I'm going to get. Dylan's still cordial, though. "We'll probably be back in a couple hours."

Scott says hello and goodbye as he passes me. The greeting is friendly but still strained. I steal a kiss from Ambrose before Peter walks away, and wave them off as the door closes in front of me.

I busy myself making chicken adobo and rice for lunch. I'm not really hungry, but I need something to pass the time. I clean my room and even give Tori a call, but the morning still seems to drag by. It's almost noon when I hear excited gurgles echoing in the house. I rush downstairs but slow my steps when I reach the kitchen, so it's not obvious that I was anxiously waiting for them to return.

"Hi," I greet as I walk in.

"Hey," Peter grumbles back with far less enthusiasm.

Ambrose is seated in his highchair, watching Peter as he stirs something in a pot.

"I made chicken for lunch if you're hungry," I offer.

"No thanks. I'm good."

The rejection is subtle on the surface but cuts me so deep. It's his way of going through life as if I'm not there, as if I don't exist, as if my presence and everything I do are inconsequential. And that hurts like hell.

I ignore the comment, silently hoping that if it happens often enough, I'll grow a thicker skin, and it won't affect me as much. I walk over to Ambrose and hunch over to be at his eye level.

"And how about you? Are you hungry? I bet you are. You had a busy day. I'm sure you worked up an appetite." I glance

back over my shoulder at Peter. “How was his day out fishing?”

“Fine.”

“Did you take any pictures?”

“A few.”

He doesn't offer to show me or send them to me, so I don't bother asking. He spoons the mushy sweet potato into a bowl, then walks over to Ambrose and sits on the stool in front of the highchair.

“Now, don't give me a hard time today,” he warns sternly, gently blowing on the spoon.

“Is he a messy eater?”

“Nope. He doesn't eat at all. We have the same fight every day.

“Can I try?” I ask, fully expecting him to say no.

He hasn't looked at me once since I entered the kitchen. Even now, he doesn't answer and simply hands me the bowl without turning to face me. I set the bowl on the counter, then take Ambrose out of the highchair and place him on my lap as I sit down on the stool next to Peter.

I remove the spoon, dip my finger into the sweet potato, and taste it myself. “Mmm...that's good.” I take another taste, then another, and by the fourth, his little fingers grip my hand, and he pulls it to his mouth. “Oh, you wanna try some, too?” I give him a taste, and after he all but gnaws it off my finger, I take another bite. “Wow. This is delicious.” I animate my voice to make it seem more amazing than it is, and that makes him eager to have more. I give him some, then I have some, and we establish a pattern.

“Well, I'll be damned,” Peter says, sounding just a tiny bit impressed. “I've been fighting this battle daily for two weeks and then you come in and solve the problem so easily. No highchair. No spoon. I never would've thought of doing that.”

That is probably the most he's spoken to me since the day I came back. And there's no animosity in his tone, which I am

taking as a huge plus. I'm too stunned to say anything and instead, focus on feeding Ambrose. Somewhere along the line, he feels empowered and takes matters into his own hands. Literally. He sticks his hand in there and smashes it into his face. And because we established a pattern of turn-taking, the next handful gets smashed into my face.

“Oh, God,” I say, recoiling slightly from the shock. “Well, I wasn't...expecting that...and with a side order of spit.”

Peter snickers beside me but keeps it under control. Ambrose's messy hands tangle in my hair when he feeds me again, and the strands stick to my face and neck. Some even gets into my mouth.

“Yo, ease up, li'l Bro. Give your mom a fighting chance.”

Peter's snicker progresses to outright laughter, and I have to admit. I really miss that sound. I miss that playful naughtiness in his eyes. Using the back of my hand, I attempt to get my potato-infused hair off my face and out of my mouth, even trying to spit out the stubborn strands that just refuse to budge.

“Shit, that's gross,” Peter chuckles. “You're a mess. Let me get that for you.”

He traces his finger along my cheek, trying to gather the messy strands into one lock. It's been months since I last felt his touch, and I just want to shut my eyes and melt into it. I relish in the gentle stroke of his finger, the warmth of his hand.

He stops when he reaches my lips. His eyes meet mine, and even though the smile remains on his face, he's more serious now. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows and, very slowly, his finger moves across the corner of my mouth to remove the hair. His gaze flicks between my eyes and my lips, and for a moment – only a moment – he looks at me the way he used to. It doesn't last more than a second. Ambrose's hand shoots up again, this time offering some to Peter.

“Uh...I'm gonna pass. Thanks for the offer, though.”

“Legend has it that if you turn down a baby, you'll turn to stone.”

“Never heard of that legend.”

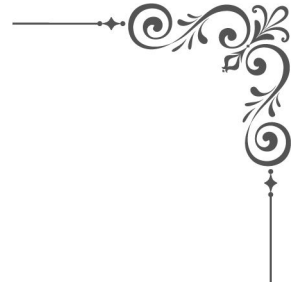
“Oh, come on, Lestat. You’ve lived a few millennia. You’ve been around the block. You were probably around when that legend was invented.”

And with that, all humor fades. It’s like that one statement reminded him of why he hates me. He stands up and takes Ambrose from me. “I’ll take him. You should get cleaned up.”

The cool distance between us is reinstated, and the glimmer of the happiness we just shared disintegrates right before my eyes. I nod, accepting that this is how things are now.

Laughter is no longer the norm in this house, but rather a by-product of both of us simultaneously forgetting that we should be constantly walking on eggshells around each other. It’s the unfortunate result of letting our guards down just long enough to enjoy each other’s company again. Laughter is a reminder of how perfect we were together, and as such, we can never relive that because, according to him, that blissful perfection was all a lie.

I hide the dejection on my face and leave without saying another word.



28. Lia

“Okay,” I say, going down on all fours. “This is a race to the death, so I hope you’re ready.” I reach over to lift Ambrose’s butt a little. Putting him in the same stance as me. “On your mark...Get set...Go!”

I crawl across the living room, but he stays in place, rocking back and forth on his haunches. We’ve been practicing this since I moved back in three weeks ago and he’s almost got the hang of it. By hang of it, I mean that if he rocks back and forth enough times, he might move backward a few inches.

I reach the other side of the living room and turn to face him again. “Move one hand and then the other,” I say, showing him how to do it.

I grab his favorite toy off the couch, a ninja that dances to Kung Fu Fighting, and use it to entice him to the other side. This is probably the most annoying toy in the world. It plays that same snippet on repeat while flashing green, blue, and red lights through the plastic Sumari sword.

Out of all the toys he has, it’s unfortunate that he’s chosen this one to be his favorite. And he has a shit ton of toys. So many that this house is now unrecognizable. It used to be neat and pristine at all times, but now colorful rubber mats cover the fancy porcelain tiles. Cars and blocks and dinosaurs are littered all over the place. Yet even with that endless array of options, my child chose this stupid ninja. This is proof that nature can override nurture because that distinct proclivity to make bad decisions clearly comes from me.

He gurgles with excitement, rocking with more fervor, and he scoots forward an inch. “That’s it. That’s at least going in the right direction.”

He looks at the singing ninja and I can see the determination on his face when his hand shifts forward. He rocks a few times, then his other hand moves.

“Oh, my God. This is actually happening.” I sit forward and hold my arms out. “C’mon. Come to mommy.” I look

around for my phone or Peter and can't find either of them. "Peter!" I yell and get no response. Keeping my eyes on Ambrose, I stand up and walk backward until I get close to the entrance. "Peter!" Ambrose wobbles forward another inch. "Peter!"

"What!" he shouts from behind me, and I almost jump out of my skin. "Why are you yelling? I thought there was a fire or something."

I glance back to find him standing in the middle of the foyer. "Sorry, but...I think he's about to crawl."

"Really?" He rushes in, grabbing my elbow to drag me back too. "Where's my phone? Have you seen my phone?"

"No."

He pats himself down and finds it in his pocket. He focuses his camera on Ambrose and taps the red dot to record. "Can you shut that thing off? It's so annoying."

"That's what he's crawling toward."

He looks at me, shaking his head. "I can't say I'm surprised...but I am disappointed."

I giggle. Over the last week, he's softened a tiny bit. Not much, but moments like this one seem to be happening more often. He doesn't indulge in it. He cuts it off as soon as we start having fun or laughing too much. But when the interaction isn't just between the two of us and includes Ambrose as well, he at least allows himself to enjoy the moment with me.

I get the occasional joke. Maybe even a smile before he pulls away again. I must admit, I think a part of me would prefer it if he were just distant all the time. Experiencing these random glimpses of what we used to have puts me on such a high that the tumble back down to cold abrasiveness is excruciating. Sometimes just being in the same room as him is unbearable because I so desperately want him to look at me the way he used to.

Seeing the man I love look at me with distrust and contempt and sheer hatred is a pain I can't even describe, a

pain I would never inflict on my worst enemy. I'm used to being lonely. It's something I've felt in some way or another since the day my parents died. But this kind of hollow emptiness is very new.

It's a pain that eats away at me, gnawing so deep I can feel the serrations in my soul. I may have my son back, but not having Peter has left me with a void that seems impossible to fill. I can't hold him. I can't kiss him. And I want to so badly. I want to feel his arms around me, feel his lips on my lips, his skin on my skin. I want *him*.

But the distance he maintains puts him far beyond my reach. I can't get through to him, no matter how hard I try. Each day, it feels like a piece of me is chipped away, leaving me even more broken and lost. This house that was once so warm and inviting now feels like a cold and desolate wasteland. The love that we built within these walls is now just rubble and debris.

But I need to take accountability. All of this is a direct result of my own actions, and I need to accept the consequences. Eventually – not anytime soon but eventually – I'll come to terms with the fact that he doesn't love me anymore and maybe the pain will ease just a fraction.

"You can do it." I sit down and open my arms to Ambrose again. "Come to mommy. Come on."

"That's it, buddy." Peter zooms in on him. "You're almost there."

Ambrose moves a few more inches before he stumbles over his hands and flops over onto his back, the rubber mat cushioning the fall. He's a little stunned, looking bewildered, like he doesn't understand how the world flipped over so fast. I waddle over to him on my knees and place a hand on either side of him.

"I'm gonna level with you. The actual Kung Fu Panda showed more grace than you just did. I'm not trying to put you down, but we had the whole theme song going for you and everything, and you gave us nothing. Where's your drive? Where's your dedication? You gave up at the first obstacle. I

honestly expected more from you.” I look up at Peter when I hear him chuckle. “He brings dishonor to the family name.”

His jaw clenches even though his smile sort of remains intact. “And what exactly is the family name?”

The question catches me off guard. “Uh...well...as you can see...he’s a slacker. No ambition or drive to do anything but laze around. Pretty sure that makes him a Danahay.”

That gets a laugh out of him. “Fuck off.” His smile slowly fades, and his expression turns serious. “Why did you name him Ambrose?”

“Because...” That’s another loaded question, and I give a helpless shrug, looking down at Ambrose instead of at him. “I don’t know. It was such a shock when I found out that...he wasn’t yours, and I guess...a part of me still refuses to accept that. And even though I thought I would never see you again...I wanted to carry that memory of you...and us...and that dream we had for him...I wanted to keep that with me always. I think it was the best thing...and the worst thing I could’ve done because on the one hand, it was a constant reminder of all the happy moments we had throughout my pregnancy, but...” I clear my throat to get rid of the lump forming in it. “But on the other hand, it was like my heart broke all over again...every time I said his name. It was, uh, it was an unconventional form of torture. And that made it kinda impossible to get over you.” I chew the inside of my lip and risk a glance up at him. “I know you hate me now. I’ve apologized a thousand times, but I know that you still don’t trust me, and you think that everything I ever told you was a lie. You don’t have to forgive me, but at least believe me when I say that...he’s my son, my whole world. I never would’ve named him that if what we had wasn’t real.”

Uncertainty flickers in his eyes. He doesn’t say anything. He just stares at me, letting me stew in my own exposed vulnerability. That’s about the millionth time I put myself out there and received nothing back. I brush off the rejection the same way I always do and stand up.

I try to focus my eyes on anything but him because it's the same dreadful humiliation I face every time, and I just can't bring myself to look at him. One would think I'd be smart enough to stop doing this to myself, but no. I keep laying my soul open and making an ass of myself because I want to make amends. I want to show him how sorry I truly am, but I need to be real with myself. He's not going to forgive me.

"Okay, well, um, I think...you can hold down the fort here just fine. I need to get ready for Tori's wedding." I force a smile and look down at Ambrose again. "You've got your work cut out for you. By the time I get back, I wanna see a medal or something for the fastest crawler in the world, okay?"

I keep my head down to avoid eye contact as I make my awkward escape out of the living room. My legs feel numb as I race up the stairs. My cheeks are on fire, and I just try to breathe through the pain and embarrassment as I turn on the shower and step inside. I push it out of my mind and focus on something else.

Gerald, my new boss, usually sets up a station in the store every Christmas for all the parents who want to take pictures with Santa. He keeps a camera in the backroom for this and told me I could use it for Tori's wedding because the camera on my phone wasn't going to cut it. It's a damn good camera, better than I expected, and much too sophisticated for basic Christmas pictures. I'm going to make sure I put it to good use today.

I take my time making sure I have all the equipment I need before I curl my hair and apply my makeup. Choosing a dress is more daunting than I expected. While I can still fit into most of my old clothes, my body has definitely changed after Ambrose. Some parts are more plump than they used to be. Other parts are a little less firm. After trying on a few dresses, I settle on a burgundy evening gown because it highlights the good and hides all the bad.

The sweetheart neckline does wonders for my cleavage. The lace across the bodice is adorned with intricate, hand-sewn beadwork that adds a touch of glamor. The back of the

dress dips into a deep V-cut, stopping just above my waist, and is also embellished with lace and beads. It's elegant, but the daring thigh-high slit up the side adds just the right amount of sexy.

With the beating my self-esteem has taken these last three weeks, I could use a bit of elegance and beauty. My work uniform makes me feel frumpy and very undesirable, so it's a nice change to have an occasion where I can dress up a little. I apply a deep plum to my lips and smack them together to even out the color. I put on gold jewelry to match the beadwork on the dress and finish with a splash of perfume.

"Not bad," I say, twisting and turning in front of the mirror.

I open my bedroom door to head out but have an attack of self-doubt at the last minute and rush back to the mirror. Maybe I overestimated the power of this dress. Maybe it doesn't hide *all* the bad.

My eyes zone in on the pooch on my stomach that wasn't there before, and it looks like it's popping right out of the dress. I suck it in and let it out, suck it in and let it out.

"Maybe I should change." I suck it in and let it out. "That looks *awful*."

"No, it doesn't."

The unexpected voice startles me, and I wildly spin around, knocking my makeup and brushes off the dressing table. Peter's standing at the doorway...watching me, and I wonder how much of my in-and-out belly dance he actually witnessed. I look across the hall to the nursery and see Ambrose asleep in his crib. Hopefully, that means he'd been more focused on getting the baby down quietly and paid no attention to my antics.

"Oh, hi. Uh...I didn't...see you there."

It's so awkward, and I don't know what to say because he's just standing there. He glances at me, then looks away, only to steal another peek a few seconds later. It's like he doesn't want to look at me, yet something keeps catching his

attention. Whatever it is, makes me feel ten times more self-conscious.

“Ambrose is sleeping?” The answer is obvious, but he’s making me nervous, and that’s the first thing that popped into my head.

“Uh...yeah.” His eyes finally settle on me for a few short moments. “He’s beat. I told him you were right, and he needed to do better, so I had him do some drills.”

There it is. That tiny glimpse of how we used to be, and I grab it with both hands. “Good. He can’t keep slacking off like that.”

“You don’t think we were too hard on him?”

“Pfft. No. That was child’s play. We can go harder.”

He smiles. The most heart-warming smile that makes me melt inside. His gaze subtly travels up and down my body, studying every part of me in acute detail. It’s penetrative, so intense I feel like he’s taking note of every change my body has undergone and secretly judging me for it.

Those piercing jade eyes shift to my breasts for a moment too long before he looks away again. Granted, my breasts are slightly bigger than they used to be, but they’re also not as... perky, and I’m not sure if it’s that specific change that currently has him acting so weird.

I play with the pendant on my chain, trying to cover myself up a bit. “Is something wrong...with me?”

“No.” He glances at me, then his gaze drops to the floor. “It’s just...I wasn’t expecting *all* this...” He gestures to my outfit. “...when I came upstairs. My mind’s trying to adjust... to seeing you...like that.”

“Okay, what is it? Is it the dress? Does it make me look a little pudgy?”

“No.”

“Then what? Am I overdressed? Is it too much?”

“No, I think it’s...too little.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he leaves it hanging there. “Oh, well, that makes sense. Clears it right up. I fully understand what you mean.”

He smirks at my sarcasm. “I just mean that’s, uh, that’s a lot of skin you’re showing. It’s too much skin. Too little... dress.”

I nod. Maybe that’s the problem. Showing more is exposing more flaws than I’m aware of. “So, it’s the skin-to-dress ratio that’s bothering you?”

“Yep. It’s bothering me a lot. And it shouldn’t...but it is... Rafael is probably going to be at the wedding today, right?”

The question confuses me because it’s random and came out of nowhere. “Yeah. He offered to pick me up.”

“Of course he did.” His hands clench into fists, and he drops his forehead against the doorjamb. “Fuck, I hate this. You’re killing me, Li. Every second of you being here just drives me more insane.”

What is that? Rejection: #562 232 847 512. Every time I feel like we’re making headway, like we’ve taken one step forward, something like this will remind me it’s all in my head. It’s just wishful thinking on my part.

I rapidly blink back tears because I can’t afford to ruin my makeup. “I should get going. Raf will probably be here any minute.”

That’s a lie. Raf agreed to pick me up at 13:30, so I still have a twenty-minute wait ahead of me, but I need to get out of this house. Screw the dress. I don’t care if it exposes more flaws than it hides. I just need to get out of here, and I’m going to use the walk down to the main gate as an opportunity to clear my head.

I grab my clutch and the camera bag off the bed and walk to the door. As I pass him, he grabs my arm, but he immediately yanks his hand away as if he’d been burned. He takes one step forward, then goes one step back. He opens his mouth to say something, but not a single word comes out. Doubt is brewing inside him, and it seems like he’s not sure

whether he wants to bridge the gap between us. I wait a minute for him to say something, but he remains silent, and I accept that as the end of the conversation.

“Bye,” I say softly and get nothing back.

My head is buzzing, a million thoughts zipping through it as I walk down the stairs and out the front door. The clarity I was hoping for during my trek to the main gate doesn't materialize. I'm so preoccupied that I don't even notice the time pass. I push aside my mental anguish when I see Rafael's car approaching. Today is a happy day, and I need to be happy for my friend.

“Hi,” I greet with as much cheerfulness as I can muster as I get in.

“Hi.” He reaches over and gives me a quick hug. “You look incredible.”

“Thank you.”

“So, how have you been? I haven't seen you in ages.”

“I've been good. How about you?”

“Good.” He pulls away from the curb and heads toward the highway. “We were worried about you. You just... disappeared.”

“Just had some issues I had to deal with...but I'm back now. And everything's fine.”

He glances my way. “So, you and Peter are...back together?”

I'm not sure where he's going with that question, so I take the safer option because I don't want him getting any ideas. “Uh...yeah. We had a misunderstanding, but we sorted it out.”

“Good. I'm glad.”

We have a mini catch-up on the way to the church, and then I have the same conversation with Shontelle when she finally arrives.

It's a beautiful garden wedding, small and quaint, with only about seventy guests. I take pictures of every detail,

trying to make sure I capture the sheer exquisiteness of this special day. The bridesmaids and groomsmen. The décor and souvenirs. And, of course, the two lovebirds. I get them from every angle. As they say their vows. As they cut the cake. Their love is captured in the way they smile, the way they look at each other.

“You guys look amazing,” I say to Tori as I adjust her dress.

She’s so excited she’s virtually vibrating. After a quick congratulatory hug, I get back to work. I ask her to look over her shoulder with her eyes cast toward the floor and take a few solo pics before I instruct her husband to join her. Walking back a few steps, I kneel to get a different angle.

The couple gets called away because it’s time for the first dance. Shontelle and I follow them inside, and I continue taking pictures as they sway to the slow beat.

“They’re so beautiful together,” Shontelle says, gently dabbing her eyes. “I want what they have. They’re so—”

“Excuse me.” A woman cuts in. “Are you Lia?”

I’ve never met her, so I’m skeptical about answering. “Uh...yes. I’m Lia.”

“I’m Tori’s aunt Mavis. Tori has been raving about you and your work.”

“She has?”

“Yes. My mother, Tori’s grandmother, is turning ninety next weekend, and we’ve been looking for a good photographer. Tori said you’re fantastic, but also reasonably priced. I believe she said she’s paying you two-hundred dollars per hour.”

“Sorry, what?”

My eyes almost pop out of my head. I thought I was doing this for free. We never discussed payment, and I certainly had no intention of charging her for this. I’m just taking photos, for goodness’ sake.

“Her usual rate is more than that,” Shontelle says, subtly nudging me to play along. “But she gave Tori a discount because we’re all friends.”

“Okay.” Mavis nods, taking out her phone. “Well, I’m willing to pay double your usual price because it’s such short notice. Tori gave me your number, so I’m just going to shoot you a quick text.” She types rapidly on her phone. “There. Send me a quote of the different packages you do and how much each of them costs.”

I’m still too flabbergasted to say much. “Sure.”

She squeezes my arm and gives me a warm smile. “Thank you. It was nice meeting you, Lia.”

I wait for her to be out of earshot before I turn to Shontelle. “Why did you say that?”

“Girl, that woman is loaded. You can’t pass up an opportunity like that.”

“But I’m not a professional photographer.”

“She doesn’t know that.”

“I can’t charge her *two hundred dollars* per hour for something I’m not qualified to do.”

“Yes, you can. You can charge her double because that’s what she’s willing to pay.” She grips my shoulders to make sure I’m giving her my full attention. “This is what you’re going to do. You’re going to go home. You’re going to look for a few photographers and see what packages they offer and how much they charge. And then you’re gonna drop your price just a little lower, so you still seem reasonable, and that’s what you’re going to quote her.”

I shake my head because I’m still having trouble believing this. “It feels like I’m scamming her.”

“You’re not. She’s paying you for your time and talent.” She turns my body to face the bride and groom again. “Now, stop doubting yourself and go earn you some money.”

I take her advice and do exactly that, mingling with aunts and uncles, snapping as many special moments as I can. As the

night progresses, I alternate between partying and photographing the crowd. Tori, Shontelle, and I have a round of shots together because I am the legal age to drink now.

We're having so much fun that I almost forget about all the things Peter said to me earlier (almost). It's sort of hard to ignore a heart when it feels like it weighs a ton. I do my best to avoid leaving because I'm apprehensive about returning to a place where I'm clearly not wanted. Shontelle and I stay long after the bride and groom depart for the night. Even Rafael leaves, and I catch a ride with Shontelle's cousin just after midnight.

The house is quiet when I sneak back in. I tiptoe past Peter's bedroom to ensure I don't wake him. The last thing I want is another confrontation. All my efforts are getting me nowhere, so I need to come to terms with the fact that I'm beating a dead horse. I need to stop trying.

After a quick shower, I change into a pair of cotton pajamas, but I'm still too pumped. I'm also equally emotionally distraught and that makes it impossible to fall asleep. I'm also a little hungry, so I go downstairs to fix myself a sandwich. From the drawer, I grab a pen and paper, then make myself comfortable on the barstool to enjoy my midnight snack. As I eat, I look up various photographers on my phone and jot down all the pertinent information on each one. Browsing through their websites, I notice a trend in what they offer and how much they charge. This could be very lucrative if I do it properly, far more lucrative than what I'm doing now.

I make a list of all the things I would need to do to make this work. Things like getting a decent camera, starting a website, taking some classes to learn different techniques. All these things cost money, so I also need to figure out how much I need, and more importantly, a plan on how to get that money while trying to save for my own place.

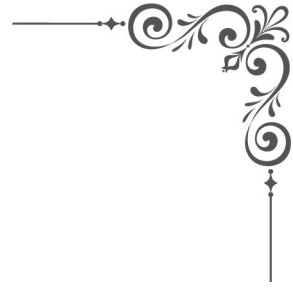
And with each passing day, it becomes more apparent that I need my own place. Peter doesn't want me here. He said so himself today. I've overstayed my welcome, so I need to find somewhere to live ASAP. I rip the top page off the pad and use

the next page to make a list of all apartments in the vicinity that are within my price range. There aren't many because this area is for the more affluent members of society. After jotting down a few numbers and addresses, I rip off the page and start another list with apartments slightly further out.

I don't need a fancy place, but now I also have other things to consider. My son needs a good home, and I need Peter's buy-in, otherwise, he'll never let me take Ambrose. It sounds a little ridiculous that I need his approval before I can let my son live with me, but he has just as much say as I do. He cares just as much as me about Ambrose's well-being. So, this is something we both have to agree on.

I need to approach this cautiously because he was right when he told Scott and Dylan that I can't afford a decent lawyer. I can't, so I'm going to do everything I can to avoid the legal route because that could turn ugly. I could end up losing my son.

I swallow the last bite of my sandwich before I hop off the stool and go to the fridge to get a bottle of water. It's at that moment that Peter walks into the kitchen.



29. Peter

The fact that the light was on should've been my first clue that she was in the kitchen, yet somehow, my brain still jolts with shock when I see her standing in front of the fridge. It's not her presence that surprises me. It's usually what she's wearing that catches me off guard.

I know she's not trying to seduce me, and it's not her intention to mess with my head, but surely, she has some sort of self-awareness. Surely, she knows she can't just traipse around in skimpy pajamas and sexy dresses and expect it not to affect me. She has to know the effect she has on me, right? I even told her today that she's driving me insane...because she is.

Being around her and not being able to touch her is a fate worse than death. It's the reason I'm awake at two in the morning. I can't sleep. My inner conflict won't let me rest for a second. I'm constantly fighting urges of every kind on every level, and I'm not sure which ones are harder to fight off.

The physical urges have reached the point of being painful. I am literally feverish with lust. I wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, craving her so desperately that I want to march down the hall, drag her back to my bedroom, and fuck her until her body is limp and sweaty and clinging to me.

But I can't have what I want now, can I? No. Because she's a manipulative, pathological liar. How she managed to reach that level of skillful deceit at the tender age of twenty-one is beyond me. And there lies another internal conflict. I'm having these thoughts about a twenty-one-year-old. It's not a huge age gap, but it's big enough to bother me. I'm trying to see her as her actual age, but I just can't. My brain created a perception of her, which can't be undone.

And if that's not bad enough, I also have to deal with the emotional urges. It's a continuous battle to keep my guard up around her. I've always loved talking to her, spending time with her, and it's so easy for her to get me twisted into a knot. I want to keep my distance. I want to shut her out. But more

and more often, I'll slip and indulge her in a conversation. We'll joke and laugh and then I'll immediately reel it back in when I remind myself that she can't be trusted.

And the thing is, I have to keep my guard up because I'm the only one emotionally invested here. Her level of stoicism is off the charts. I thought she was closed off before. She is utterly indifferent now. She'll talk and she'll joke, but that's on the surface. Beneath it, there's nothing. I see it play out in real-time. If I make one comment, she shuts off instantly. She just brushes it off like it doesn't matter. I don't say things to hurt her or get a reaction, but the fact that there's *no* reaction proves that I'm the only one taking any emotional strain here.

There was a time when I thought I'd made a breakthrough. She stopped being so withdrawn. She showed me her vulnerability. Hell, she even cried in front of me a few times. But that's not who she is now. She's back to being emotionless, so I don't know if that other side was just a result of the pregnancy hormones, or if it was all a façade. I don't trust her. I don't trust a single word that comes out of her mouth.

The conversation we had this afternoon has been playing on my mind ever since she left for the wedding earlier.

You don't have to forgive me, but at least believe me when I say that...he's my son, my whole world. I never would've named him that if what we had wasn't real.

That's what she said to me, and I've been stewing in it ever since. If what we had was real, she wouldn't have gone back to that asshole. She wouldn't have stayed with him for four fucking months. She claims Ambrose is her whole world, but if that were true, she wouldn't have dumped him on my doorstep to go back to a man who didn't want him.

Maybe she was desperate. Maybe I left her with no choice. But I just can't wrap my head around that. In my mind, no excuse is ever going to be an adequate justification for her doing something like that.

She must sense my hostility because she becomes nervous as soon as I enter the kitchen. "Hi," she greets softly, shutting

the fridge.

“Hey.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were awake.” She glances at the empty plate and scattered pieces of paper on the counter. “I’ll get out of your way.”

She avoids looking at me and reaches over the counter for her dirty plate. I’m not going to pretend that things haven’t been tense. They have. And I’m not going to act as if it’s not awkward every time we’re around each other. It’s painfully awkward. But she’s even more squirmish than usual tonight. She becomes even worse as I approach her. I stop beside her to get a bottle of water from the fridge and her body stiffens.

“How was the wedding?” I ask, testing the waters to make sure I’m not imagining this odd behavior.

She washes and dries the dirty dishes at lightning speed. Her movements are quick and clumsy, as if she can’t get away from me fast enough. “Oh, it was great. Very beautiful.”

Yeah, something’s off. “Everything okay?”

“Fine.” She forces a smile as she gathers up the papers. “Goodnight, Peter.”

I catch a glimpse of her scribbles before she snatches it up. It only gets my attention because I recognize Carl’s number. While he’s the property manager for almost all my buildings, he doesn’t work exclusively for me. And I know from personal experience that he doesn’t only manage the maintenance issues, he also deals directly with tenants and potential tenants, even acting as a letting agent sometimes.

So, why does she have his number? She tries to squeeze between me and the fridge to get out, but I place my hand on the fridge, blocking her path with my forearm.

“Are you looking for an apartment?” I ask.

“Uh...yeah.” She seems taken aback by the question and nervously toys with her fingers. “I was going to talk to you about it tomorrow. I’ll start phoning around on Monday, and hopefully, I’ll be out of your hair in the next week or two. If...

if, um, you want me to leave sooner, I will. I can go to the shelter tomorrow and stay there until I get everything in order.” She half-scoff, half-laughs. “I’m already packed, so it’s really not a problem.”

Is this a joke? I’m so confused right now. It feels like someone just kicked me out of nowhere, and I’m completely disoriented. “What are you talking about? Where is all this coming from? You’re making it sound like I gave you an eviction notice.”

“Peter...” She shuts her eyes to recompose herself, and she doesn’t look at me when she opens them again. “I don’t think this living arrangement is good for either of us. It’s tense *all* the time. It’s not conducive to a healthy environment for us.”

“Yeah, but it’s not about *us*,” I fire back. “This is the best arrangement for Ambrose. If you leave, what are you expecting to happen with him? Because I’m telling you now, Li, you’re not taking him from me.”

“I’ll still come over to see him every day if that’s okay with you. And once I have my place sorted out, we can maybe look at sharing—”

“No,” I cut in because I’m not even going to entertain the idea of seeing him every other day or every other weekend. “Not gonna happen.”

Her shoulders slump, and she lets out a helpless sigh. “Peter, please be reasonable. I don’t want to fight about this. I shouldn’t even have to fight you on this because he’s *my* son, not—”

“Don’t.” Even though it’s barely a whisper, she can hear the warning in my tone. “I strongly advise you to *not* complete that sentence.”

That makes her feel even more helpless, and she bites down on her lower lip when it starts to quiver. “What do you want me to do? We both know that you don’t want me here, so I’m trying to...I’m trying to find a solution because I can’t keep feeling like...” Her eyes shift up to meet mine. “You can’t stand the sight of me. Most days, you won’t even look in

my direction. And...and I miss that. I miss the way you used to look at me. I miss the way you used to kiss me every time I was annoyed. I hate that you don't smile at me anymore."

It's that tiny hint of vulnerability in her voice that throws me off. I step back to distance myself from her, leaning against the counter instead.

"You lied to me, Lia. You betrayed me in the worst way."

"You lied to me, too." Her voice cracks as it increases in pitch. "You told me you were committed to me. You *promised* me you wouldn't hate me once I told you about my past. You told me that this..." She waves her hand around to gesture to the whole room. "...was the home and the life we were building together...and then you kicked me out...in the middle of the night...when I was thirty-two weeks pregnant. That was a betrayal I didn't see coming either."

My head drops. It's an automatic reaction to her triggering the guilt and shame I carry with me every day. It takes a good minute, but I eventually subdue my self-loathing enough to look at her again. "Don't...don't put that all on me, Li. I found out that you were a totally different person from who I thought you were. I found out that you lied about knowing who his real father was."

"I never lied about that!" she yells, becoming more exasperated. "I found out the same day as you."

She rambles on about how she was watching *Step Up*, and it sparked the memory that we didn't actually have sex that night. That shocks me because I still don't remember a damn thing. She explains her conversation with Dr. Cheng, and I start to see just how stupid we both were in this situation. And when her pain-filled eyes focus on me again, I see how it was never her intention to deceive me.

At least not on that front. She may have been telling the truth about that *one* thing. Granted, it's the biggest thing, but everything else was a lie, and those lies were all intentional.

"But you refused to even have a conversation about it," she continues. "You just kicked me out, knowing I had no place to

go.”

Tensions are rising in tandem with our voices. She’s so hurt she’s on the verge of tears. I’m so angry I’m actually shaking.

“How did you expect me to react, Lia?”

“I don’t know!” she screams. “Maybe with a little more compassion than that. You could’ve at least waited ‘til the next morning, but you wanted me gone right that second. That proved that you never gave a damn about me. The only reason you were with me was because of Ambrose. The second you found out he wasn’t yours, I became completely dispensable. You tossed me out like I meant nothing to you.”

Every time I lose my shit, something bad happens. So, I’m trying to remain calm. I’m trying to not let my temper spiral out of control. But she’s pissing me the hell off.

“No, the reason I reacted that way is because you *didn’t* mean nothing to me. I fucking love you, Li.” I stop dead when it registers that I said that in the present tense. I don’t correct it because it’s true and continue hoping she didn’t pick up on that. “But I don’t know who you are. I put my all into our relationship. I gave everything of me, and you couldn’t even give me the truth. You lied about your parents, your ex, your fucking age. And you dropped all that on me in the space of five minutes. And yeah, my reaction was stupid and impulsive, but I tried to rectify it. I called you to ask you to come back, and you blocked my number.”

The revelation stuns her for a second. “Is that why you called?”

“Yes! But you left and didn’t look back. You took that as an opportunity to run right back to him.”

She shakes her head. “No, I didn’t.”

“So, you didn’t go back to him?”

“I did, but—”

I immediately turn away from her, shoving both hands into my hair. I can’t stomach the thought of them together. Him

kissing her, holding her – it’s driving me insane. I don’t want to hear a word...yet I want to know every sordid detail.

I turn to face her again. Stepping forward, I box her in, placing my hands on the fridge on either side of her because I don’t want her to have any escape from this question. “Did you sleep with him?”

Her eyes widen to the size of saucers. “What?”

“Did you fuck him?” I hiss through gritted teeth, venom lacing every word. “I don’t care that we weren’t together at the time. I need to know.”

She’s floored, absolutely flabbergasted that I have the gall to even ask that. “No!”

“Don’t lie to me. You were with him for four months. You left Ambrose here, so you could *work things out*, and you’re telling me you didn’t have sex with him? Not even once?”

Her eyebrows furrow together, confusion wrinkling her forehead. “I wasn’t...I wasn’t with him for four months.”

For some reason, hearing that shifts everything off its axis. I had my mind made up about what happened, and it had me feeling a certain type of way. But now I’m doubting what really happened, so I don’t know how to feel.

“So, if you weren’t with him, where were you?”

“I was...”

It’s that pause that gets me. That pause always precedes a lie, and my guard shoots right back up. I wait...and I wait, and she doesn’t say anything. That’s when I realize I’m wasting my time. She’s never going to change. Lying is her default setting, and expecting the truth is simply expecting too much.

I step back and nod, accepting that it is what it is. “Okay.”

My disappointment is immeasurable, but I suck it up and walk away. I’m halfway to the staircase when she calls out behind me.

“Peter.”

I stop in the middle of the foyer but don't turn around. Instead, I slide my hands into the pockets of my sweatpants and wait for her to speak.

"If...if I tell you, will you promise me that...that you'll never use this to take Ambrose away from me?"

Again, the vulnerability in her voice makes me cave. I slowly turn to face her again. "What do you mean?"

"I heard..." She takes a breath to steady herself. "I heard you talking to Scott the other day. You spoke to a lawyer about me...so if I tell you this, promise me you won't use it against me in court."

The expression on her face lowers my defenses a few more notches. Her nervousness shows in the way she fiddles with her fingers. Her trepidation is etched into every crease on her forehead. She's still desperately holding back tears, and her helplessness reinforces that I hold all the cards here. She feels weak because she's completely at my mercy.

Based on her other revelations, I don't know what to expect. I'm almost fearful about the bomb she's about to drop, but this dynamic is heavily skewed, and I need to shift some of the power back to her.

"I promise."

She swallows hard, steeling her nerves. "When I left here, I went to a women's shelter, and I stayed there until I gave birth to Ambrose. But I couldn't stay there indefinitely, so after four or five weeks, all my options were running out because I couldn't get a job, but I couldn't look after him by myself unless I had a job." She shrugs, and her shoulders drop with the heavy weight she carries on them. "So...so I went to the Country Club to speak to Teddy. I told him about Ambrose, and I told him he didn't need to do anything. I just needed a place to stay, so I asked him if he could let me live in the penthouse again."

The story still doesn't make sense. "If you were living there, why did you leave Ambrose with me?"

She scoffs. “He didn’t agree to that. He freaked out, called me a whore...and a liar. I tried to calm him down. I tried to reason with him. He wouldn’t listen...and kept shouting at me. I got so panicked that I told him to forget about the penthouse. I would disappear if he just let me use his credit card for a few months...just until I got a job.” She shakes her head as if she regrets her decision. “I didn’t know his wife was there.”

This entire situation is such a tough pill to swallow because every tidbit of information makes it ten times worse. “He’s married? And you were with him for over a year?”

“I didn’t know he was married.” She throws her hands up in frustration. “He lied to me the whole time. And when I found out and confronted him about it, he kicked me out. But I still had his credit card, and I was still using it. It was trivial amounts. I only used it on basic necessities, but that’s what caused all the trouble. She asked him why I had his credit card...and the bastard lied and told her I must’ve stolen it. Instead of just admitting that we had an affair, he made it seem like I was a crazy stalker who was trying to destroy their *perfect* lives. He told me if I didn’t leave, he’d call the cops. He embarrassed me in front of everyone, and I was so ashamed I just left.”

I feel myself getting more annoyed with this asshole as the story progressed, but I clench my fists and suffer through the rest of it.

“A few days later, I took Ambrose out for a walk and when I got back, Stella told me that two cops came to the shelter looking for me because there was a warrant out for my arrest. Apparently, his wife opened up a charge against me. I don’t know how they found me because I used a different name. I think they tracked the card or something. That’s when I brought Ambrose to you.” The tears start up again. “Staying at the shelter wasn’t viable anymore because they were looking for me there. I just wanted to slip under the radar for a few days, and I couldn’t do that with a baby. I thought it would just be for a week or so, and then I’d talk some sense into Teddy and get him to drop the charges. But when I went to see him again...he had me arrested on the spot.”

“He did what?” White-hot rage surges through me. If I ever get my hands on this guy...

“Yeah, um, they booked me for credit card fraud because he denied ever knowing me. They saw that I used it for the motel, and all records and location history showed that Teddy had never been there, so his side of the story checked out. I could see that there was no way I could win, so when the judge asked me where the baby was, I told him it was my friend’s baby, and I was just using him to...extort money from Teddy. It made everything look worse, but I knew he was safe with you, and I couldn’t risk them taking him. The judge said it was a misdemeanor and sentenced me to ninety days, but I was in there for almost the full four months because I couldn’t make bail while I waited for my court hearing.”

I’m stumped, speechless, for a solid minute, feeling torn between conflicting emotions. The thing that bothered me the most was thinking she’d been with him for the last four months. Knowing she wasn’t sets my mind at ease, and as the tension cracks, relief spills over inside of me.

But on the flip side, knowing where she *was* makes me want to rip this guy’s fucking head off. She came back with bruises on her face, for God’s sake. How could he do that to her, knowing she’d just had his baby? He better pray he never runs into me.

“You were in prison?” I ask.

Ashamed to admit it, she drops her head and just nods.

“And you didn’t think to use your one phone call to call me?”

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

She is so goddamn infuriating. “Of course, I would’ve come. Even if I was angry and hurt and on the cusp of hating you, I would’ve been there. And it’s not like you didn’t involve me, anyway. You left Ambrose with me, remember? I was already neck-deep in this shit. And if not me, why didn’t you say anything to anyone? You could’ve told Tori or

Shontelle, but you didn't reach out to anyone. You just suffered through all that alone. Why?"

"Because..." She shrugs, again trying to balance the weight on her shoulders. "I'm always alone. If life has taught me anything after my parents died, it's that...no one's coming. There's no Prince Charming. There's no knight in shining armor. There's just me. I have to learn to stand on my own two feet because no one is coming for me, Peter. Twice, I put myself out there. I tried to be a devoted girlfriend and a loving partner. And twice, I was kicked out without a second thought."

My jaw tightens, and I sneer. "Don't you dare lump me together with him. We are not the same person."

"You're right. You're not like him. I thought you were different...which is why it hurt so much more when you did the same thing. And I know I lied. They were stupid lies, which only continued for so long because I was too embarrassed to admit the truth, and they seemed harmless because I didn't expect us to get into an actual relationship." The first tear rolls down her cheek, her stoic mask slipping off her face. "And I've apologized a million times. You refuse to accept it. I try to make things right, and you reject me every time. I lay myself open to show you that...I still love you, but you think it's all a lie." She looks away to hide the hurt in her eyes and wipes the moisture off her face. "So, I've reached the point where I have to stop trying. No matter what I do, you're always going to hate me."

Maybe it's because of my slip-up earlier, but I catch her present tense declaration in between all that. In fact, that's the only thing my brain latches on to. Her voice seems to echo in my head, a mixture of pain and frustration filling the silence that now hangs heavy in the air.

My anger and disappointment are still there, pulsating beneath the surface, but her confession has chipped away at my resolve. Not only that. She dropped the veil of strength and exposed all her weaknesses to me. She's showing me the person beneath the stoic mask, and that's *my* biggest weakness.

“I hate what you did.” My voice is hoarse as I take a step toward her. “I don’t hate you. And it’s not from lack of trying. I’ve tried. I just keep falling short. I’ve gotten to levels of manic frustration...gut-wrenching worry...inconsolable grief. Not hate, though.” I take another step. “You’ve provoked relentless pain...some obsessive jealousy...and believe it or not, you’ve even pushed me to the point of blind rage...several times. But hate? Hate is a little sketchy. I’m still working on it.”

“What about...” Her hands are working overtime now, twisting into her pajama top. “What about *fucking love*? I think you mentioned that earlier.”

“You caught that, huh?”

“I did. It was a significant step up from loving me as a... whole being person. Pretty hard not to notice that.”

“You had to throw that in there.” I chuckle, and the tension between us slowly dissipates. “Just so you know, you said it too.”

“Yeah, but I was disgusted with myself for even admitting such a thing to a Hustler University graduate, so it doesn’t count.” She gives me that smile I love so much, and that dimple deepens on her cheek. “Hey, Peter. Did you...did you really call to ask me to come back?”

“Yeah...like, every day until you left Ambrose here. I know I shouldn’t have done what I did. I spoke out of anger... and the consequences...Fuck, the guilt was eating me, Li. And I had no intention of working it out with you, but...I was gonna let you stay in one of the apartments here. Even if we never spoke to each other again, I just needed to know you were safe. What did you think I was calling for?”

“I thought you were going to tell me to bring back all your things...and rub it in my face that stealing your stuff proved I was a gold-digger.”

“Oh, yeah. Because I’m petty enough to whine over two hundred dollars. That’s definitely gonna break the bank for me.” Hearing myself say that only confirms the type of person

she is. It's not the amount, but the principle that bothers her. She was never in it for the money. I groan, frustrated at how all this turned out, how it could've all been avoided. "God, we've gone and fucked this up royally, haven't we?"

She nods. "Yep."

"So, the way I see it, we've got two choices. We can call a truce and have an amicable relationship as co-parents to Ambrose, or...we can be really stupid...and try this again. This time, no secrets, no lies, no bullshit."

"Which one are you leaning toward?"

"The one that gets you out of those pajamas."

She thinks about it, stiff as a board as she considers these options. Holding my gaze, she exhales a nervous breath. She toys with the edge of her pajama top, and after another stilted pause, she slowly takes it off. I wasn't expecting that, and my breath catches as my eyes rove over her smooth skin, her supple breasts.

With the same exaggerated slowness, she hooks her thumbs under the seam of her pajama shorts and drags them down her legs. She stands there. Naked. Waiting. Hesitant and demure as she offers herself to me. It's an offer I can't refuse.

I stride toward her, eating up the distance between us. Catching her by the back of her neck, I slam my mouth on hers. Her lips part, allowing my tongue entry into her mouth. The taste of her ignites a fire within me, a burning passion that grows hotter by the second. Curling my arms around her, I pull her closer until her soft skin is pressed against my chest.

She wraps her long legs around me as I hoist her up and carry her up the stairs to my bedroom. We drop onto the bed, frantic, breathless. I move down her neck to her breasts, then back up to her mouth again because I can't get enough.

I break the kiss to strip off my sweatpants. My room is dark, and the light from the hallway casts shadows across the wall and over her body. My eyes devour the sight of her. The way she watches me, eagerly waiting for me to return to her.

But as I climb back onto the bed, she places her foot on my chest.

“Stop.” Her eyes lock on mine, her chest rising and falling with every erratic breath.

“You nervous?”

“A little. It’s been a while...Go slow.”

My patience is thinner than a strand of hair tonight, but I nod. “Okay.”

I lift her leg up to my shoulder to kiss her ankle. My mouth trails up her calf and over her knee. She spreads her legs further as I move up to the juncture of thighs. That’s an open invitation to taste and explore.

And I do. I savor her taste. I explore every inch of her. My tongue circles her clit before dipping inside her. Her fingers tangle in my hair, and she rocks her hips, chasing her pleasure. Aching whimpers fill the air, her moans becoming louder and more desperate. She cries out my name as she climaxes, and my hand clamps down over her mouth.

“Shhhh.” I crawl over her, covering her body with mine. Using my knee, I force her legs further apart before I settle myself between them. “We’re not alone anymore.” My lips move across her cheek. “Don’t make a sound,” I whisper, nipping the shell of her ear. “No matter what I do, don’t make a sound.”

Watching the expression on her face triggers the most primal part of me. The way her eyes widen when she feels my tip penetrating her entrance. The way her eyebrows pinch together when I push in deeper. She gasps but stays quiet. Her body tenses beneath me, as if she’s trying to adjust to the discomfort of having me inside her again.

Discomfort features nowhere on my radar. It’s utterly euphoric for me. Her wet warmth sheaths me, her pussy pulsing around me as I sink in inch by inch.

Keeping one hand over her mouth, the other grips her thigh. I lift it higher around my waist to give me just a few

more millimeters to maneuver. For her, those few millimeters are the difference between *great* and *earth-shattering*.

“Not a sound.” The command is hoarse, and she nods, bracing herself.

I slam into her hard enough for her to whimper. Her only request was that I go slow, but I’ve been deprived of this body for months. I’m taking everything I want from it.

I’ll just do it...slowly.

I plunge into the depths of her, building a rhythm, losing myself in her softness. Her body isn’t the same. She’s thicker, plumper, curvier in all the right places. The familiarity of sensations mixes with the newness of how she feels. The present mixes with the past.

Being back in my bedroom with her again is like delving into a time capsule, and I’m reminded of all the nights we shared in this very bed. The memories engulf us, and we fall into an abyss, an inescapable void that has collected every emotion we’ve felt for the last few weeks...months.

What we did to each other isn’t without consequence. There’s an acerbity between us that wasn’t there before, a direct product of leaving our feelings unresolved for so long.

My longing and anger mixes with her hurt and frustration. My latent hostility mixes with her passive-aggressive indifference. The result is explosive, an eruption of molten heat and fevered lust. She feels it in my unrelenting thrusts. I feel it in her abrasive touch. Claws are out tonight, viciously raking down my back.

Gritting my teeth, I thrust harder. I love that look on her face. It’s so erotic watching her strain to take the full force of me without uttering a sound.

“Bite me,” I rasp, lowering my hand a fraction. “Hurt me as much as I’m hurting you.”

Her teeth sink into the side of my palm, and I wince, her pain mixing with my pleasure. I keep going, maintaining the slow, steady pace she asked for, and she moves her hips in time with mine. As my exigency builds, so does my need for

those luscious lips. I remove my hand, muffling her soft moans with my mouth instead.

This woman kisses me like she's been starved. She's ravenous, insatiable. Weaving my hand into her hair, I tug her head back to deepen the kiss and give her what she's silently begging for. The brutality of my yearning mixes with the voracity of hers. My hips hit against her with fervency, and I swallow every shallow breath she exhales into my mouth on impact.

Lips fused. Limbs entwined. Our bodies damp with sweat. We chase ecstasy, climbing higher and higher until we tumble into blissful oblivion. I spill over inside her, and the burst of pressure releasing makes me feel lightheaded. She wraps her arms around me and slides her hand into my hair to keep me close. Breathing hard, I drop my forehead against her as I try to recover from that.

"We lasted almost four weeks this time," she says. "We're getting better."

"It wasn't four weeks. It was seven months...which felt like an eternity. And I know what eternity feels like. I'm immortal." I dip my head to kiss her again, drawing her lower lip into my mouth. "We've got a lot of time to make up for."

"I bet there were so many dance movies you wanted to watch, but you couldn't bring yourself to watch them without me because it was just too painful."

"That didn't happen at all. Like, not even once."

"But now that I'm back, we can catch up on all of them. Let's start tonight. Let's start right now."

"I can't think of a single thing I would want to do less."

"Oh?" She plays dumb, trying very hard not to smile. "What else could you possibly have in mind that would be better than watching dance movies?"

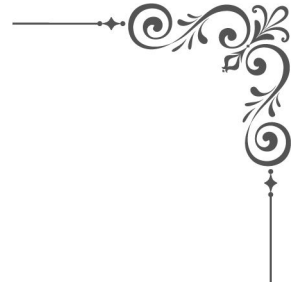
My cock is already stiffening again, and I slide my hand down between our bodies to guide it inside her.

Her eyes widen at the unexpected entry. "Oh, that?"

“Yeah, that.”

She gasps when I surge forward, burying myself to the hilt.
“I guess that’s a close second.”

“I’m glad you approve. Now, shut up and kiss me.”



30. Lia

I snap a picture of Isabella running down the beach after Neymar. It's his second birthday today, and Peter suggested they have the party here at his beach house. I haven't had too much time to relax because I'm technically working today. I've been working every weekend for the last two and a half months. Tori's aunt loved the pictures I took for her mother's birthday party, so she recommended me to a friend. Her friend then recommended me to his cousin. That cousin recommended me to his aunt, and before I knew it I was being double booked for weddings and anniversaries, even a bar mitzvah.

It's been insane trying to balance this second job on the weekend while having a full-time job during the week. Gerald has been great, though. He lets me use his camera whenever I need it and allows me to take Tuesdays off so I can spend quality time with Peter and Ambrose.

Catalina sells a lot of her art online, so she helped me set up a website. That boosted queries significantly, and I'm now booked pretty much every weekend for the next nine weeks. If demand stays stable at this level, I should be able to give up working and pursue this as a career. It's exciting and daunting at the same time.

Even though I know Peter has my back and would support me with whatever I need, this is something I want to do on my own. I want to gain my own financial freedom and independence. And I want to do it on my own. I'm paying for my own photography courses. I'm saving up for my own car. These are personal goals that I want to achieve without any help.

I snap a picture of Dylan side-eyeing Tommy, who's shamelessly flirting with Dylan's sister. Said sister seems to be flirting back, and I make sure I capture the way they're staring at each other.

I get one of Cat blindfolded, taking a wild swing at a piñata, but her aim is so off, she ends up hitting Scott in the

arm. They both double over laughing when she lifts her blindfold to see what she hit. I zoom the camera in to get the most adorable shot of Ambrose feeding Peter a marshmallow. Watching them together makes my heart feel so full. For so long, I yearned for a family and that sense of belonging. The two of them have filled a void in me, healed wounds I thought I'd be scarred with forever.

I take a break and walk across the wooden deck to sit down next to Peter. It doesn't take long for Ambrose to shove a fluffy pink marshmallow in my face, too.

The rest of the gang are scattered across the deck, sitting and chatting as they bask in the afternoon sun. It's a perfect day. After having four months basically stolen from me, I appreciate every moment. Being imprisoned wasn't a traumatic experience for me. Some women had it far worse than I did. I got into a few violent scuffles, but it didn't happen often. So, overall, it was bearable. But I resent what it took from me. Mistakes were made and hard lessons were learned. I chose the wrong man and paid a bitter price for it.

But the opposite is also true. The right man has brought out the very best in me. He's a pillar, a rock, and staying true to his words, the best mistake I've ever made.

"So, how does it feel?" Peter asks, using a wipe to get the stickiness off my cheek. "To go from being in front of the camera to behind it? It must be weird."

It takes a minute for me to realize what he's talking about. "Uh..." I begin sheepishly. "I was never a model." I lay my hand on his forearm when he stiffens beside me. "Last one. Last one, I swear."

He chuckles. "I'm gonna let you off the hook because you told me the truth with that one. *I* was the one who insisted otherwise."

I lean forward. "Let's just wipe the slate clean with the customary kiss of resolution."

Saying that takes me right back to the day we met, the day my life changed forever. And when he cups my face and

plucks a quick kiss on my lips, I'm reminded of just how far we've come since our first kiss.

"Is there any alcohol?" Tommy asks, his eyes scouring the table covered with snacks and treats.

"It's a kid's party," Dylan replies.

"Why are parties getting more PG-rated the older we get?"

Isabella shrugs. "It's the great circle of life, Thomas."

"We anxiously await turning twenty-one so we can start drinking only to give up alcohol before we're thirty?" Tommy is exasperated by this. "That's not even a full circle. That's barely a...a..."

"Slice of the pi?" Scott fills in. "Get it? Because the circumference of a circle to the diameter is—"

Cat's giggle cuts him off. She sits down on his lap and slaps a kiss on his cheek. "God, you get nerdier by the day. No one understands math jokes except you, Soldier."

"Does it at least count as a dad joke?" Scott asks.

"No," Dylan replies. "You're not a dad yet. And even if you were, you still wouldn't be part of our club, so we'd disregard all your dad jokes."

"What club?" I ask.

Dylan's eyes widen slightly, and he exchanges playful looks with Scott and Peter. "Nothin'. It's just bro talk."

The guys excuse themselves and go into the house for beers. Isabella props Neymar on her lap to clean cake and cream off his face.

"So, how are you feeling about leaving Ambrose with us for the night?" she asks.

Peter wanted us to have a date night on the yacht and Isa and Dylan were kind enough to offer their babysitting services.

"I think...I'll be okay. Peter might ask them to dock before midnight and come get him."

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” she says with a giggle. “But tell him not to stress. Li’l Bro is in good hands, and you guys deserve to have a night off.”

“She’s only saying that because she’s going to call in the favor when she wants a night away with Dylan,” Cat says.

Isa doesn’t even deny it. “What can I say? I’m strategic like that.”

Cat asks us about all the pros and cons of being a mom, and Isa and I give her the full run-down for almost forty-five minutes before the boys join us again. Peter already has our bags, and the ladies read the cue and stand up. They say their goodbyes, hugging both Peter and I. The hardest part is saying goodbye to Ambrose. I talked a big game earlier, but now I’m actually considering canceling our plans for tonight. Isabella finally manages to pry him from my arms.

We walk them to the driveway, but they leave in a weird way. Tommy, Scott, and Dylan leave in one car while Cat and Isabella strap in the two boys into the backseat and leave in a separate car.

“What’s up with that?” I ask.

“They’re having a boys’ night. Tommy wanted to go somewhere that actually serves alcohol.”

“And you don’t want to go out with them?”

He curls his arm around me, and we start walking toward the beach. “I’d much rather spend the night with you.”

The sun is low in the sky when we climb on board the *Sea Serenity*. We’re not that far out tonight. I can still see the shoreline, and there’s a big, clear square floating randomly on the water.

“What is that?” I ask Peter. “Is that a rubber mat?”

“Dunno.” He shrugs. “Maybe they left it here after doing those Ninja Warrior water activities. Who knows?”

He takes me to the cabin we shared before, which is secluded yet still has a private deck for us to watch the sunset.

“This is beautiful,” I say, taking in the multicolored patterns painted across the sky.

I walk a little further out on the deck, and he’s set up a picnic with candles and rose petals. Champagne and strawberries are neatly placed on a red and white checkered picnic blanket.

“Are you trying to be romantic again?” I ask.

“Nah, some guy used it before us, and he set all this up for his...mother?”

It’s adorable that being sentimental still makes him so uncomfortable. “His mother? That’s a bit weird, don’t you think?”

“Who are we to judge?” He sits down and tugs my hand until I sit down beside him. “But...we’re here now, so we might as well enjoy it.”

I stretch my legs out and prop myself up on my elbows to gaze out over the water. “I had a great time today. I love hanging out with the whole gang. They’re all so much fun.”

“We’re still trying to get rid of Dylan,” he says idly.

I laugh. “How is he even compatible with Isabella? He’s so sweet and wholesome, and she’s...kinda hardcore, isn’t she? Like, she’s a bad-ass bitch.”

He glances over at me. “Not as bad-ass as you.”

I eye him questioningly. “I’m nowhere in her league.”

“Yeah, you’ve surpassed her. Word out in these streets is that you’ve done some hard time. That’s as bad-ass as you can get.”

I shove his shoulder. “You’re such an asshole sometimes.”

“I’m not. I’m being truthful. Do you know how much street cred that gives me? The other guys can brag about their wives and tell me how feisty they are, and how they stand their ground, and how they don’t back down. But when I start bragging about how *my* wife was the queen bee of her cell block, everyone else is gonna have to take a seat.”

It's not the snarky remark about being in prison that gets me. It's the... "Your *wife*?"

"Oh, yeah. We're getting married. Didn't I tell you?"

"No!"

"No? You don't want to get married?"

I'm still reeling from shock because this came out of nowhere. "I do...but...I thought you'd..." I shrug. "You didn't even ask me."

"Why do I need to ask you? We're living together. We're raising a baby together. It's the logical next step."

"I don't want to be logical." I lower my voice when I realize my irritation is getting the better of me. "Peter, you can't just assume something like that. The question has to be asked. Besides...I've always wanted to get married, and I thought you'd – I don't know – put some effort in."

He stares at me as if he's never considered the possibility that this might be an important moment for me. "What do you mean by *effort*?"

"I don't know. The guy is supposed to think about all this stuff. A proposal is supposed to be intimate and have that personal touch, you know."

"Hm?" He takes a moment to mull this over. "So, you want me to think of something that's personal, like...something that's unique and just for us?"

"Well...yes."

"So, something like that?"

He points out to the water, and it becomes apparent that he lied about the other guys going out for a boys' night. In the dimming light, I see Dylan floating on a paddleboat. Despite my annoyance, a loud laugh bursts out of me. He's wearing board shorts and a Count Dracula cape, holding a cardboard sign that reads: "*Marry him, Lia. He loves you...*"

"Does that work?" Peter asks expectantly. "That's pretty personal."

“No!” It comes out more like a shout because I’m trying so hard to contain my laughter. “I mean, it’s cute.”

“You’re not impressed?” He looks from me to Dylan. “Yo, Dyl. Show her the rest of the message.”

Dylan lifts the cardboard to reveal the writing across his chest. Now the full message reads: “*Marry him, Lia. He loves you...as a whole being person.*”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m getting all choked up.” Peter pretends to wipe away a fake tear. “Is that good enough for you?”

I’m not sure how to respond to respond because this feels like a prank rather than him genuinely asking me. “Uh...”

He takes note of my hesitation and stands up. “Dyl, cut it. It’s a bust.”

“She doesn’t like it?” Dylan asks.

“No, I do. It’s—”

“What if I grabbed my crotch in front of her? Do you think that will help?”

Peter shoots daggers at him with his eyes. “You just can’t let things go, can you?”

Dylan smirks, winking at Peter before he paddles away.

“So, that was terrible.”

The disappointment in his voice makes me think that this might not be a prank.

But if that was a real proposal...

Well, it wasn’t the worst proposal in the world. It was just unconventional. I guess when I pictured it in my mind, I thought it would be something more romantic than just being *told* that we’re getting married. “It was really cute,” I assure him.

“Yeah, but you hated it, otherwise you would’ve said yes.” His dejection is short-lived because he perks up a second later. “Okay, humor me here, so I can make sure I get it right. Would

you be more inclined to say yes if I – let’s say – organized a flash mob? I’ll even add in the personal element. The only dance movie we both like is *Dirty Dancing*, so...what if I played the song at the end of that movie...”

And as if on cue, *The Time of My Life* starts playing.

“Where is that coming from?” I ask, looking around for the source of the sound, but he carries on unfazed.

“And a whole group of highly skilled dancers pop out of nowhere...” As he speaks, marionettes drop on the deck in front of me. “...and do a rendition of that dance routine.”

These six puppets begin their poorly timed dance routine, and I follow the strings. It’s getting dark, but I can make out that it’s Scott and Tommy controlling them from the upper deck. Tommy is the puppet master for the four backup dancers, while Scott is in charge of the two main dancers, who I assume are supposed to be Johnny and Baby. The four backup dancers each have a word pinned on to them: *Will You Marry Me?*

They might be trying hard to get the routine as close to the original as possible, but the puppets aren’t cooperating. It’s so bad, and Scott’s snickering can be heard over the music. I watch as he tries to get the lift at the end right, but the strings get tangled, and the puppets just sort of fall over onto each other. Quite...anti-climatic.

I look over at Peter, who has his hand over his mouth because he’s desperately trying not to laugh.

“Those are the highly skilled dancers?”

He nods.

I don’t want to be ungrateful. I appreciate the effort (if that was what it was), but this still feels like a prank. “I’m almost insulted because Scott and Cat *are* highly skilled dancers. *And* I watched all of you dance at Dylan’s wedding, so this performance was kinda subpar for me.”

“Subpar? I was in awe. You are impossible to please, woman.” He has the nerve to look at me like he’s offended before his eyes move to the upper deck. “Pack it in, boys.

She's not impressed." He waits for Scott and Tommy to skulk away.

I'm not sure what he's trying to do because all of this is so weird. "Peter, what exactly is...all this? Is this a joke? Or are you—"

"Li, you told me to ask you. You said you wanted a personal touch. I did that...twice. And it's not enough. I'm not sure what you want."

"I want..." It feels so odd to explain this to him because no woman should have to explain how she wants to be proposed to. If this isn't a prank, then I'm conflicted about how I should respond. "I just want...something romantic."

"Romantic? I mean...that's not really my style. Hm?" He stops to think about it again. "What counts as romantic? Is it something big...and bold?" He waves his hands in the air to show the bigness of the gesture. "Something like...dozens of fireworks bursting in the sky."

Again, on cue, fireworks launch from the shore and go off overhead. The night sky becomes a canvas of colors, shimmering and cascading, illuminating the darkness. The brilliant reds, deep blues, and dazzling golds take my breath away.

"And then Dean Martin would start playing," Peter says, and *Ain't That A Kick In The Head* comes blaring through the speakers.

I'm stunned, looking around in confusion. "How are you doing that?"

Somebody must be reading his physical signals somewhere because everything is so on point.

He ignores me though, continuing as if I hadn't asked the question. "We could get more ostentatious and throw in some colored lights and fountains."

My mouth drops open. I'm utterly awestruck when the yacht itself seems to come to life. Strings of soft white bulbs decorate the railings and dance to the rhythm of the music, their gentle twinkling a testament to the magic of the moment.

As the song's tempo quickens, the water around the yacht responds, shooting up from the rubber mat I saw floating on the surface earlier. A carefully choreographed fountain display begins, synchronized with the music. Jets of water dance in time with the melody, arching and twirling to create intricate patterns. Droplets gently hit against my face as I watch on, enamored by the beauty of it all. Colored lights hidden beneath the water's surface turn each spray into a cascade of radiant hues.

Peter pulls me into his arms and dances with me the same way he did the first day I stayed over at his place, singing along as he sways. *"If this is just the be-ginning, my life is gonna be beee-au-tiful."* He holds me close, whispering the next line in my ear. *"She's telling me we'll be wed..."* After a soft kiss on my temple, he pulls away slightly to look at me. "Well, in our case, I'm still trying to convince you. Maybe something like this would work better for you."

The commotion around us dies off. The last firework crackles and disappears into the ether. The water dies down, and the lights fade into darkness, leaving only the fairy lights on the railing to illuminate the deck. He waits for absolute stillness, and the only movement is the soft yellow glow dancing on his face.

"Or maybe...it could just be me and you out on a boat somewhere. It's quiet, and no one is around...And I could get down on one knee." Holding my hand, he takes a step back and drops to one knee. "I could tell you I love you and our baby more than anything, and then ask you to be my wife. Will you marry me then?"

My heart flutters manically. I'm so overcome with emotions, I feel like I may just burst into tears. I only keep it together for a few seconds because when he opens the box to reveal the ring, tears spill out of me without warning. It's an exquisite ring, a platinum band lined with two rows of tiny diamonds. But my eyes are drawn to the bigger diamond in the middle because it's cradled between two intricately designed butterflies.

"You got butterflies?"

He nods. “Yeah. I like efficiency. Dual functionality, you know. It shows that you’re mine, but...if it’s going to be on your hand forever, it’s a nice way of keeping your parents with you always.”

I don’t even have enough in me to keep standing. I drop to the floor in front of him, throwing my arms around him to hold him tight. “I love you so much,” I whisper.

“Is that a yes?”

“Of course, it’s a yes.”

He cups my face, stroking my tears away with his thumbs before he kisses me. That kiss encapsulates everything I feel right now. Love. Joy. The promise of forever. With a slight nudge, he eases me back, his body covering mine as I lie down on the picnic blanket.

Lifting one hand in the air, he gives a thumbs up. That must be another hand signal because fireworks go off again. Red, green, and blue gleam against the dark wood of the deck and dance on his skin as he dips his head to kiss me again.

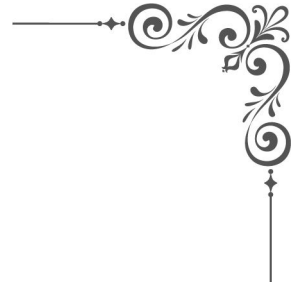
They say time is a relative concept, an ever-shifting, elusive wisp of existence. During times of happiness, months and years can be condensed into a mere moment, a simple memory of a smile, a hug, a kiss.

I’ve only known Peter for about a year and a half, but it feels like I’ve known him for a lifetime. We only spent a few months apart, yet it felt like an eternity. In a short space of time, we’ve been through so much.

We fell in love, had a baby, built a home together. We danced. We played. We made love for hours. We fought. We argued. We broke each other’s hearts. Memories float through my mind, moments of tears and laughter, love and pain. They all go together, intricately woven into this amazing life we now share. One can’t be separated from the other. The good must be taken with the bad.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would fall for an egotistical manwhore. But time has changed him into an incredible man, a man I want to spend the rest of my life with.

The sound of the fireworks rings in my ears. Time is a relative concept, and as his soft lips move over mine, time stands still. As the seconds condense, I get trapped in this magical moment with him. It's boundless, infinite. It seems to have no end and yet...it's just the beginning.



31. Peter

T*hree years later...*

I take a sip of beer and ease back into my chair behind the steering wheel of my boat. “This is the life,” I say, looking over at Scott.

He concurs with a nod. “No worries. Just us and the water.”

We’re actually halfway decent at fishing now. Dylan currently holds the record for the biggest catch, but I’ve come in as a close second. I bought a small boat, and it’s become a routine to take the boys out at least once every two months. Neymar and Ambrose are currently passed out on the lower deck, so we’re enjoying one last beer before we dock and head home.

Peace and quiet are a luxury for all of us now. Scott and Cat welcomed their baby girl into the world not even two months ago, so he’s still adjusting to sleepless nights. Dylan and I are following close behind them. He and Isabella are in the process of adopting their second child, and the new addition to their family will be joining them very soon.

And then there’s me and Lia. Even though I’ve been ready for a second child for a while now, she’s been focused on building her career. She’s doing phenomenally. She doesn’t just get hired for weddings and birthdays anymore. A number of corporate clients use her services for advertisements and trade fairs. She’s even been contracted to shoot the covers of a popular women’s magazine. I’m so proud of her and what she’s achieved, and she did it all on her own.

But in six months, she’s going to have to put a pause on all that because a few weeks ago, we were surprised once again to see two pink lines on a pregnancy test. She was shocked. I was thrilled. Ambrose is crazy excited that he might be getting a new brother. I’m convinced it’s another boy, and I can call these things. My predictions have been a hundred percent accurate so far.

Well, in certain respects. I never would've predicted that this is how my life would be right now.

I take another sip of beer, then turn to Scott again. "If you have to put yourself back in senior year, how different is your life now than what you expected it to be?"

His eyes widen. "Are you kidding? It's not even the same life. I was supposed to be the CEO of my dad's company and married to Beth. If I went back in time and told my eighteen-year-old self that I'm now a *math teacher* married to the one girl I hated more than anyone, my younger self would've laughed in my face."

"Same," I agree, nodding my head. "If I told my younger self that I'm now a proud father, committed to *one* woman... he would slap me upside the head." I turn to Dylan. "How about you, Dyl?"

"I was infatuated with Isabella from the second I laid eyes on her, so my younger self would probably want to grow up faster just to get to this future."

Scott and I exchange looks because Dylan's sentimental nature never ceases to amuse us.

I chuckle. "How the hell are we friends with this guy?"

"Fuck, if I know, Pete."

"Dyl, you know we're still trying to figure out a good use for you?"

I give him a lot of shit, but I know I wouldn't trade these two for anything. They've been my best friends for over a decade, and we have been there for each other through everything. Through breakups and makeups. Through therapy sessions and eccentric proposals. They were there, driving me around in the middle of the night to look for Lia. They were there when I found Ambrose on my doorstep. They've helped me through the worst of times...except diaper changing. That was a step too far for them.

But they were there, right next to me, when I declared my vows to my beautiful wife, and that's what counts. And it's not just the big things. It's the small everyday moments that matter

most. Basketball every second Saturday. Workout sessions during the week. Even just being out here, talking shit as we fish, is nourishment for my soul.

I couldn't ask for better friends. They have played such a fundamental role in my life and helped shape me into the person I am today. These highs and lows are the threads that have woven together to create a tightly knit friendship. I would do anything for them, and they've proved time and time again that they would do anything for me.

We have another round of beers, and Scott even catches a bass before we pack it in for the afternoon. Ambrose wakes up as we dock the boat at the edge of the lake and talks non-stop all the way home.

"Hey, Li, we're back," I call as we enter the house.

She steps out of the kitchen into the foyer, tossing a dishtowel over her shoulder before she lifts Ambrose into her arms. That little pooch on her stomach is more prominent than it was yesterday. She's showing much quicker than she did with Ambrose, and despite being tired, she still looks radiant.

She kisses him, then me. "And how was your day out fishing with dad? Did you catch anything?"

"I caught a grasshopper."

"Oh." She gives me an amused grin. "Well, that's the entire point of fishing, isn't it?"

"I wanted to use it as bait, but dad said no."

"I'm not trying to raise a little psychopath," I say when she eyes me questioningly. "How was your day out with Tori and Shontelle?"

"Amazing. It was Shontelle's turn to pick the activity, so we went hiking and had breakfast on a hilltop. The view was incredible. I took so many pictures. I'll show them to you after dinner...Speaking of which." She kisses Ambrose on the cheek, then hands him back to me. "Please get him cleaned up. Dinner's almost ready."

I bathe him and dress him in pajamas. After dinner, I don't get a chance to look at Lia's pictures because it's imperative that we first build a fort in the living room and rescue her from the Dragon of Goulag. She doesn't even play the part, though. She's just sitting on the couch with her feet up, while we're out on the front lines, fighting the alien foot soldiers with nothing but a flimsy plastic sword and a Lego grenade.

"Li," I say, lifting up my plastic helmet, "the dragon just bit your leg off. Can you at least pretend to be in pain? You're giving us nothing here."

"Is this a rescue mission or a horror movie?"

"We're still deciding."

"Oh...Ow! My leg. If only there was a strong prince to save me."

"I'll save you."

Ambrose jumps from the backrest of the couch even though we've told him a million times not to do that. He patches her leg right up with some play dough.

"He's going to be a doctor," I say.

"His methods are unconventional. I don't think the medical world is ready for him. Besides, is he a doctor or a prince?"

"We're still deciding."

Li'l Bro is jam-packed with energy, and it takes us over an hour to tire him out. He's a handful, and I'm not sure how we're going to handle another one. But that's a problem for another day.

I tuck him in, and as I kiss him goodnight, I think about all the little choices and big choices I made to get me here. If I hadn't stood up at that exact moment, I wouldn't have crashed into her. If I hadn't crashed into her, I wouldn't have asked her out for coffee. That one moment changed my whole life.

The day we had our first appointment with Dr. Cheng, I told her I wasn't sure if she ruined my life or made it worth living. I know the answer now. Both of them have given me purpose, the drive to be a better man, a better dad.

He'll never know who his biological father is, but he'll always know who's his dad.

I'll be the one he turns to. I'll be the one who's there for him, day in and day out. And I'll make sure he never doubts how much I love him.

I switch on the night light and head down the hall to my bedroom. I find my wife lying seductively on the bed, wearing nothing but my T-shirt. God, I love this woman. She's wholesome and sweet while still being sexy and provocative. She's everything I want and all that I need.

"I've been thinking about you all day," she whispers, the sultriness in her voice causing my cock to stiffen instantly.

I grab the back of my T-shirt and yank it over my head. "What thoughts, exactly?"

"I was thinking about the way you looked at me the first time you saw me naked."

"I remember it vividly."

"Mmm..." She catches her lower lip between her teeth. "And I was thinking that even though my body has changed, and you've seen me naked a million times, you still look at me like that."

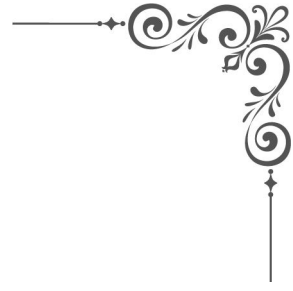
Heat surges through me as she slowly spreads her legs in front of me. My eyes move up her thighs, and my hands clench at the sight of her pussy, just glistening and waiting for me.

"That look," she says, raw hunger burning in her eyes.

Her breath hitches when I crawl over her, and she gasps when my fingers trail up her thigh to circle her entrance.

"Get used to it, dollface," I rasp, nipping her lower lip. "I'm going to be looking at you like that forever. And I'm an immortal fuckboy, so when I say forever...I mean it."

I don't give her a chance to respond. I dip my head and take possession of her mouth.



Get in My Head

So, firstly, I wanted to apologize for taking so long to complete this book. It was a crazy year. Between work and my husband falling ill, I just didn't have the time or the right emotions to write this story. And I didn't want Peter and Lia to suffer because I wasn't in the right frame of mind. In addition, I've had some other personal issues. I have a special needs daughter, who needs a lot of attention now that she's in school, and this hobby is becoming very unsustainable for me.

That being said, it's with a heavy heart that I tell you that this is going to be my last book for a very long while. As much as I love writing, my family (my daughter in particular) needs my full attention. I'm finding it impossible to juggle everything, so this has to take a back seat.

I really hope the last book in the series was worth the wait, though. Their love story turned out so different from how I envisaged it. I knew Peter, but Lia was an odd character for me. I'm not sure if you picked it up, but it was very hard to get her to interact with anyone other than Peter, so most of her relationships were told rather than shown. As a writer, I hate doing that. I love building relationships between my characters, but I just couldn't get that with Lia. I tried with Tori and Shontelle, and I tried with Cat, but as soon as I put her in a room with other people, she became withdrawn and just went silent. So, I had to move the other characters *around* her to get the scene to flow.

That has never happened to me with a character before. I'm not sure if the rest of them already had an established dynamic, and she felt like an outsider, but it was very difficult to write a group scene from her point of view. Over and above that, she also kept messing up my scenes. So, the reason I built it up from book four that Peter and Lia were living together is because I wanted them in the same house, so it would be easy for me to write the scene where she finds out she's pregnant. They're living together. He's seeing her throwing up all the time. They put the pieces together. Easy.

But then, doesn't Lia decide to just leave after Dylan's wedding. So, now I figure out a whole other scene for him to find out with the added extra of him going to the pharmacy, and then he's gotta get *back* into the house. I thought I could use this to my advantage and build some tension – that forced proximity tension.

But then Peter stepped in and ruined that idea, too. He just jumped right into a relationship after two days. This was a challenge for me because, as some of you may know, I like a buildup to the sex scene. They had sex on the first night, so with him going all in so quickly, I had nothing to build the tension. I had none of that *will they?/ won't they?* energy, so I had to work with what they gave me.

I initially thought I could have some tension to about the middle of the pregnancy at which point they'd finally get together. Have a cute scene or two and then do a time jump to the part when the truth was revealed. But without the tension, there's no building of the relationship, so now doing the time jump didn't make sense.

What I decided to do to fix the problem was use my version of a montage...in a book. So, short quick scenes, taking us through the pregnancy and showing how they fall in love. Not the greatest montage because I couldn't even use music, but it's the best I could do under the circumstances.

Maybe that worked out better because we got to see them happy together before the breakup. Now...some of you may be very upset with the direction I took with this story, but in my defense, I gave away the plot twist in the title of the book. I admit, coupling that title with the man on the cover was a tad deceptive, but again, that too is a major theme of the book. I have no regrets, though, because seeing Peter bond with this baby (even though it wasn't his) was my favorite part of this story.

What I also loved was the bromance. I have loved watching Dylan, Scott, and Peter grow as friends from book one, but this book really solidified just how deep their friendship is, which is why I had to give them their own chunk of the epilogue. When I look at all the arguments they've had

across all five books, I can see that their friendship has also overcome so much. And that bit in the epilogue gave me closure to say goodbye to this second chances universe.

I'm actually tearing up as I write this because these characters have become such a big part of my life. They have been with me since 2021 and it's hard to say goodbye to them. *It Just Had To Be You* was supposed to be a standalone book, but then some readers asked for an epilogue and this entirely new world opened up when I wrote the follow-up to Cat and Scott's story.

I know some people didn't like the way book four played out. Some people hate it *vehemently*, but that book was the inspiration for all the other books in the series. It's how all these characters came to life. And I'm so happy that I got to know each and every one of them. I'm also so grateful to all the readers I got to know along the way. Your comments and reviews are so special to me.

In particular, I wanted to thank Amanda (from Goodreads). Amanda, you don't know this, but I was going through such a slump. I'm usually not the emotional type, but with my husband being ill and my daughter struggling so much, I was just not in a good head space for good couple months. I'd only written two chapters, and I was honestly contemplating not finishing this book, but then you messaged me on Goodreads and asked me when Peter's book was going to be released.

And that took me right out of my funk because then I realized that there are people waiting for this story. It may not be a lot of people because I'm not a bestselling author, but there are some readers who are really invested in this universe. So, I decided to stop being so stupid.

I realize now that my emotional wires got crossed. I was letting my real-life sadness affect my fictional world. How dare I? That is an offense of the highest level because the fictional world is supposed to be the escape from real life. I can't believe I did that, especially to Pete. And then I dragged you along with me. This book was supposed to come out in May, and here we are in October. I'm ashamed, but I'm humbly asking for your forgiveness.

I hope I can continue to write and share my stories with you in the future, but I have to put a pause on this for now. It really has been an incredible journey for me. I wrote a few books, trying to my own style. *The Journal* was way too sad because I thought all love stories had to be tragic. I was big into Nicholas Sparks at the time. Then I tried too hard to get comedy right in *Childish Games* because I'd read more rom-coms from other authors. But then I decided to stop trying to mimic other authors and just write as *me*.

I wrote *Journey to the Unknown*. It's still my most underrated book, but it's so special to me because that's the book that cemented the type of writer that I want to be. The comment I get the most on my books is that *it was an emotional rollercoaster*. Kevin and Jasmin from *Journey to the Unknown* made me that type of writer. They forced every emotion out of me, and I tried to transfer that to the reader. And I've tried to keep that up in every book I've written since then.

I want readers to experience everything the characters feel. I want them to laugh one minute and then cry their hearts out the next. And if you've rolled your eyes along the way because something was so incredibly corny, just know that's all part of who I am as a writer. I truly hope that's the experience you've had when picking up one of my books. I hope I've taken you on a journey with all my characters, leaving you drained yet satisfied at the end of it.

But now my journey must be put on hold, and I can only hope that these characters keep you smiling until we meet again.

Keep well. Stay safe.