

THE FORBIDDEN TEMPTATIONS SERIES

SOFIA T
SUMMERS

Christmas
Hottie

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND,
SECRET PREGNANCY ROMANCE

CHRISTMAS HOTTIE

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND, SECRET PREGNANCY ROMANCE

SOFIA T SUMMERS

CONTENTS

[Other Books by Sofia T Summers](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue II](#)

[Halloween Hottie \(Preview\)](#)

Copyright © 2023 by Sofia T Summers
All rights reserved.

The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

OTHER BOOKS BY SOFIA T SUMMERS

Forbidden Temptations Series

[Daddy's Best Friend](#) | [My Best Friend's Daddy](#) | [Daddy's Business Partner](#) | [Doctor Daddy](#) | [Secret Baby with Daddy's Best Friend](#) | [Knocked Up by Daddy's Best Friend](#) | [Pretend Wife to Daddy's Best Friend](#) | [SEAL Daddy](#) | [Fake Married to My Best Friend's Daddy](#) | [Accidental Daddy](#) | [The Grump's Girl Friday](#) | [The Vegas Accident](#) | [My Beastly Boss](#) | [My Millionaire Marine](#) | [The Wedding Dare](#) | [The Summer Getaway](#) | [The Love Edit](#) | [The Husband Lottery](#) | [Christmas in the Cabin](#) | [A Very Naughty Christmas](#) | [Make Me Whole](#) | [Take a Chance](#) | [Halloween Hottie](#) | [Christmas Hottie](#)

Forbidden Doctors Series

[Doctor's Surprise Twins](#) | [Written in the Charts](#) | [Rendezvous with My Resident](#) | [The Doctor's Twin Secrets](#) | [My Ex Boyfriend's Dad](#) | [Secret Baby for Dr. Dreamy](#) | [The Doctor's Secret](#) | [A Doctor Daddy for Christmas](#) | [Baby Bump](#)

Forbidden Fantasies (Reverse Harem Series)

[My Irish Billionaires](#) | [Toy for the Teachers](#) | [Three Grumpy Bosses](#) | [Feasting on Her Curves](#) | [4 SEAL Daddies](#)

Forbidden Promises

[**Maid Without Honour**](#) | [**The Wedding Witness**](#) | [**Honeymoon Hoax**](#)

BLURB

I never thought I would want to put a ring on her finger.

Knowing who she was.

A party girl, and my best friend's daughter.

And yet... I'm completely in love with her.

My sanity went out the door the second Vanessa walked into my office.

I know she would be my undoing.

There was a certain depth underneath that rich party girl façade.

The kind of depth that her own parents had never seen.

She wanted more out of life.

And she wanted *all of me*.

But the result of that has been more than either of us wanted.

Vanessa has proven time and time again that I cannot trust her.

Especially now that she's hiding a secret.

Christmas is a time for celebration, and that big reveal will cause us to either
burst into joy...

Or bid farewell to our forbidden office affair that never should have started.

PROLOGUE

Edward

God, I hate Christmas.

It's the crowds. It's the frantic last-minute shopping for presents. All the lights strung up everywhere and the constant holiday season sales promotions on every billboard, every app, and everyone grinning madly while Mariah Carey yodels *All I Want for Christmas is You* for the ninety millionth time.

Every year, I tell myself that I'm going to rent a cabin in the woods, hole up with some canned soup, and wait until it's all over before I come out again.

And every year, I leave it too late, and then I end up saying yes to some office party or someone's house party or a shindig at some kind of club, and then I can't back out because the people I work with insist I show up, so then I'm stuck.

And if you say no to people around Christmas, they call you the Grinch for the rest of the year, and suddenly, my influential contacts in the business want to '*just check in to see if you're doing okay, Edward—is everything really fine?*'

So I go to these things to prove I *am* fine, actually. I may be single, but I can socialize and schmooze with the best of 'em. I just grit my teeth, get my assistant to buy carefully personalized gifts, and push through the crowds to prove to everyone that I'm okay, not depressed and lonely during the holidays.

Which I'm not. I'm totally okay spending time with myself. I just really hate Christmas, that's all.

This year, I'm at my old friend Bob's townhouse in the West Village in New York. Bob is kind of my best friend. Twenty-odd years ago, he was a junior associate at Dunnwoods, the venture capital firm which gave my first start-up our Series A financing. Bob pulled through and gave me the chance to develop Phoenix, my original data encryption program, and we've stayed friends ever since.

Which explains why I pushed my way through hellish amounts of traffic to get to his house for Christmas. It does *not* explain why I have to stand in his kitchen and listen to him fight with his ex-wife.

"You could make an effort for once in your life, Bob," Alyssa snarls at him under her breath. The house is full of people. Otherwise, she'd be yelling. I've known Bob and his ex for decades, and I can tell when they're about to explode at each other.

I take a quick step back. *No need for me to be in the line of fire.*

"I *am* making an effort," Bob mutters, uncorking a bottle of white wine. He looks more flushed and harassed than usual, his tubby figure and receding hairline making an unfavorable contrast to his tall, elegant ex. "I've been talking to her about finding a job, a new direction in life. She's just staying here until she figures things out."

"She'll never figure things out if you keep coddling her, will she?" retorts Alyssa. "You should have never encouraged her to drop out in the first place. It's a biochemistry program. It's *supposed* to be hard, and how on earth will she ever learn to stick at anything if she thinks you'll pick up the pieces every time she breaks down?"

"I did *not* encourage her to drop out," says Bob, outrage adding droopy lines to his mouth. He's only fifty, about eight years older than me, but he looks a hundred years old tonight. All the stress, probably. "I wasn't even there when she was struggling with her coursework. Edward, tell her!"

I take another step back. "Tell her what?"

Alyssa gives me a dangerous warning glance. "Yeah, Edward, tell me *what?*"

I don't want to be involved with any of this. I don't know how, and I don't know why, but I know this is going to come back to bite me in the ass.

"Oh, um, I don't know," I mumble, an answer so generic that not even the CIA could make anything of it.

"You *do* know," says Bob irritably. "You were there, remember? We were having dinner at that place in Milan when Vanessa called me, crying her heart out. That was the first time I heard anything about her dropping out of college, right?"

Oh, that.

"You were certainly surprised," I agree. "Shocked, even. Sorry, but do you mind if I head to the bar? I'll let you guys talk this out."

"You stay right where you are," says Alyssa ominously. "I want to know everything. Did you hear Bob tell Vanessa to get herself together and not, I repeat *not*, make hasty, unwise, and potentially self-destructive decisions, Edward?"

Oh, shit.

"Alyssa, I could only hear one side of the conversation, and I honestly didn't think too much of it," I say patiently. "It's none of my business anyway, is it? I'm sorry, but I haven't even seen the kid since she was about ten. I don't know what you want me to say here."

Alyssa turns and gives her ex-husband a level stare, deadly as a rattlesnake and twice as ugly.

"So," she says in a soft, threatening undertone. "You *did* tell Vanessa it was okay to drop out? Am I hearing this right?"

I don't know how she got that from what I just said, but I know it's time for me to slide off. My preferred destination would be a nice, quiet tent somewhere in Antarctica, but right now, I'd be grateful to just escape this room.

"Oh, um," I say again, stunningly articulate as always. "I'll just be outside."

I move away to the door leading out to the terraced garden, careful not to turn my back on Alyssa. Just as I make my escape, I hear the emotional volcano erupt behind me.

"I cannot *believe* you did this!" Alyssa yells, all thoughts of volume control forgotten. "How many times, Bob?"

There are other people in the garden looking around, startled at the noise from the kitchen. I edge my way around the perfectly manicured lawn, laid out to resemble a Chinese pavilion, and quickly head to the outdoor bar.

It's cold outside, but I consider freezing my balls off a worthwhile exchange for having to listen to Alyssa yell at Bob for whatever he got wrong this time. I've heard it all before, and while I don't usually take sides, I

sympathize deeply with Bob.

I don't know why people insist that Christmas is a time for family. In my opinion, it just gives your worst relatives an excuse to show up at your house and make you miserable. All while stuffing their faces with the food you paid for, the ungrateful assholes.

God. I'm so lucky I never fell into the trap of a wife and kids and a three-bedroom in the suburbs. My own parents went through decades of resentment before they gave up and died, and I know better than to make promises to be better than them, even to myself, let alone to any woman I meet. All my girlfriends have been strictly casual so far, and I have no plans to change that.

Maybe I should have brought one of them to this party. Maybe then, Alyssa would have checked herself before she tried to get me to snitch on Bob.

On the other hand, if I had a girlfriend in tow, I wouldn't be able to approach anyone else. I've just spotted a pretty woman at the bar. She's alone, she looks interesting, and she is smiling at me like I'm the one man she's been waiting for.

Did I say pretty? I meant beautiful. Like knock-out, drop-dead, and flat-out gorgeous.

She has curly blonde hair, ocean-blue eyes, and a figure voluptuous enough to turn Venus green with envy. Her red Spanish off-shoulder dress fits her like a glove, and she has a small sprig of mistletoe pinned to her neckline, begging to be kissed just there, between the creamy swells of her gloriously full breasts.

This is definitely improving my Christmas experience right now. I move in and lean nonchalantly on the pinewood bar, checking out her curves from the corner of my eye.

"Hello, stranger," she says, still with that inviting cherry-red smile. I tip my head in her direction, giving her a cheeky grin of my own. Her eyes drop to the phoenix tattoo across the back of my hand and wrist, spreading to the knuckles in riotous flames.

"Hi. I'm Edward," I say, casually offering my hand. "Just so we're not strangers anymore."

Her smile slips just a little. It's as if she was waiting to be recognized, which I find odd.

Am I expected to know her? I know I haven't seen her before because she's a stunning lady, one no red-blooded man could ever forget.

I hope she's not one of those Instagram-famous influencers. I find them exhausting to talk to. They're vain, they're ignorant, and they're relentless in the pursuit of self-promotion. *No, thank you, and kindly fuck off.*

But this woman goes right back to smiling, a cute little dimple in her chin winking into prominence.

"Hi, Edward," she says, taking my hand after a beat. I notice she lets go quickly.

Also, she doesn't introduce herself, but I don't necessarily mind that. A hint of mystery is refreshing, just like the lemon and sea salt scent of her skin.

"Are you here with anyone?" I ask just for the heck of it. It's not like I care. Any man who leaves this piece of perfection alone is asking to have her taken away by the nearest and more intelligent rival.

"No, I'm alone," she says, fluttering her long eyelashes outrageously. The effect is like a butterfly in the forest, casually stirring up a storm somewhere on the other side of the world. Add that to a body like a birthday present just waiting to be unwrapped, and I'm immediately hard as a rock.

I turn to face the bar, hoping I haven't embarrassed myself. The way I feel, I think I might need to hide my lower parts from public view for a while.

"Are you here with anyone?" she asks, prodding me back to attention with a fingernail painted sparkly green and studded with crystals. "Please say no. I'd love to have you to myself for a while."

For a moment, I suspect she's joking. She can't really be hitting on me this hard, this fast, right?

"I'm not with anyone," I respond automatically. It's true at the moment, but I would have lied my ass off about it if I needed to. She looks like she's used to fending off male attention all the time, and I can't believe she chose me to flirt with.

God, I hope she's not a gold-digger on the make. I might not be the most attractive man here, but I'm probably one of the top three wealthiest. *Please, God, let her not be planning the payout from this right now.*

"I thought so," she says, her soft voice almost caressing my skin. She's very close to me suddenly, and her eyes are dilated, her lips parted a little. "You look like you're alone. Do you want to get out of here?"

I haven't even had a drink yet, and I feel wildly intoxicated. I can see her vodka, but she's barely touched it. And she's looking at me like I'm the craving she needs to satisfy.

Fuck it. I'm in.

"Let's go," I say quickly before she can change her mind. She nods, her eyes flickering up to meet mine for a second before she turns and leads me away from the crowd and toward a dark and deserted path to the back of the house.

"My car's that way." I jerk my head in the opposite direction, even though she looks like she knows exactly where she's going. "Can you—"

And then she whirls around and kisses me, her arms twining around my neck like ivy around an oak tree, and my words dry up.

My whole capacity for speech is gone, really. She is soft and fragrant in my arms, every luscious inch of her pressed up against my hard length. Her lips open against mine, and I claim her mouth in an act of possession so primal, so fierce, so very natural that I almost lose my mind.

My hands go to her waist, intending to steady her, but instead, I pull her flush with my body and back her up to a nearby wall. Anyone could walk along and see us here, but I don't care. I run my hands up her torso, nibbling at her lips as I cup her heavy breasts and brush my thumbs against her erect nipples.

She moans into my mouth and arches her back, thrusting the pale half-moons of her breasts into my hands. I explore the taste of her mouth with eager greed as my hands travel across her chest, around her back, and squeeze at her waist.

I go lower to grasp a delicious handful of her bountiful buttocks, and she lets out a stifled gasp, grinding her pelvis against me. My cock throbs, aching to make closer contact. The taste of her mouth overwhelms me, and I probe deeper.

Meanwhile, my hands are busy pulling up her flared skirt, slipping inside to touch the warm, rounded flesh below. She's wearing something slinky in silk down there, and her ass fits so perfectly into my hands. I can already see myself stripping her naked, bending her over in just her high heels and a thong, and easing her wet folds open with my thumbs.

I tear my mouth away from hers and kiss and lick my way down her exposed throat to her breasts. One kiss just above the mistletoe, and then I bury my face in the abundant curves peeking above her low-cut neckline.

She squirms and pants, her hands on my head now. I can see she is as aroused as I am. She runs her fingers through my cropped hair, almost begging me to take the erect little buds of her nipples in my mouth.

I push the red silk of her dress down from her shoulders with one hand

and caress up her inner thigh with the other. She's not wearing a bra, so her dress catches under her naked breasts, heaving in short pants as her nipples stiffen under the chilly winter air. I can see her arousal, and one swipe of my index finger across the wet patch on her thong tells me she's ready for me.

I hook a finger under her panty line and then put my palm squarely across her mound, letting her feel her most intimate parts against my skin. She moans and sighs helplessly, then presses her thighs together to keep my hand there.

I lick across her nipples before biting down, sucking greedily at the most perfect pair of breasts I've ever encountered. In the meantime, I crook my fingers against her pussy and start stroking upward, from her slick entrance to the tiny little bundle of delicate nerves that make her quiver all over. I circle the bud with my thumb and press down.

"Oh, fuck," she gasps. "Do that again."

I oblige her, pressing down harder on her clit. I lean back to watch the expression on her face this time, the taut tension as she bites her full red lips reflected all over her helplessly exposed body. I insert a finger into her warm, wet entrance and start pumping it in and out.

She is half-naked, her legs apart, my finger inside her in the most intimate way, and I'm fully aroused. I imagine what being actually inside her would be like, thrusting in and out of her while standing right here against the wall.

I imagine her with her legs wrapped around my hips and her arms around my shoulders, screaming as I bounce her up and down on my rigid shaft. I imagine biting her tender nipples moments before she comes, bruising her pale skin as I let her ride me to my climax. I imagine her gushing her release all over my cock, her inner muscles clamping down the way they are now.

She reaches her orgasm with a panting little sigh, and her body strains and rides the crest for endless moments before she's done. After that, she collapses against me as I gather her soft, flushed body close to mine, kissing her cheek. Even in heels, her head barely tops my shoulders. I feel oddly, unusually, protective.

"You're the perfect pocket Venus, you know that?" I muse aloud. She lets out a shaky giggle and buries her face in my chest. I rub my hands across her back to keep her warm.

She mumbles something after a while. I want to give her my jacket, so I pull away a little and tip her head up with one hand.

"What did you say?" I ask gently, already planning what I'm going to do

to her once I take her home. Unwrapping her completely is just the first part.

"I said I have to go now," she says, blinking sleepily at me. "This was really great, though. Thanks."

Thanks? Did she just thank me like I'm a waiter helping her to a side of orgasm, *When Harry Met Sally* style? What the fuck.

Her smile's back, but it's not helping right now. I'm still hard, I'm confused, and I'm starting to get mad.

"You're welcome," I say, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "Where do you have to go?"

Who are you going to? is what I really want to ask. If she's just passing the time with me before she moves on to the next man, or an ex-man or whatever the case might be, then I don't know whether I want to kill her or that other guy.

"Home," she says, and suddenly, she's pulling her neckline up and her skirt down, wiping around the corners of her mouth where her pink lipstick is faintly smudged. It's that easy for her to cover it all up, pretend like nothing happened.

So what? I don't have to like it. I just have to cut my losses and walk away.

"Okay," I say with a curt nod, putting my hands in my pockets. I check for my car keys because I'm getting out of here as fast as I can, too. "Have a great night. Merry Christmas."

I turn around and walk away from her, pushing my frustration down deep inside so it doesn't show. It shouldn't because it doesn't matter. It's just a girl at a party, and none of it matters at all.

I'll go and say goodbye to Bob and get the fuck out of here and never think about tonight ever again. There. That's the plan.

Her voice floats toward me, cheerful and light. She's already just another shadow, back there in the dark.

"Merry Christmas, Edward!"

I keep walking without bothering to reply. Because I just fucking hate Christmas, that's all.

1

Vanessa

The gin and tonic I hold in my hand is not my usual drink, but the group of socialites I'm sitting with had all ordered one, and I felt obliged to follow suit. We sit in the privacy of the rooftop bar, looking down at the city lights stretching out into the horizon. I take a sip and try not to retch.

The club downstairs is blasting new pop music (that I hate), but when Stacy leans over and asks how I'm enjoying my night, I smile a little too widely and say, "It's divine."

Ugh. I'd rather be sipping a Shirley Temple in my pajamas at home, but I can't stand it there.

My parents are divorced, but you wouldn't know it by how often you'd find my mother at my father's place, screeching at him over one thing or another—usually me. Of late, it's always me. I have been one big disappointment to her since I dropped out of my biochem degree. Dad seems to understand my reasons, but I feel I'm only adding to his stress. He is supposed to be enjoying his semi-retirement, not worrying about me.

I feel a hole the size of Jupiter in my stomach, and the guilt overwhelms me. I will have to make my own way in life, but I don't feel ready. I don't think my mother's overbearing ways are helping, nor my father's pampering. But between the two, I have been carefully playing them off one against another. I have all any young woman would want except the freedom to choose my path.

I sip the gin and tonic again. This time, I make a face, forgetting myself and where I am.

"Not a fan of your drink? I can have another one made." Stacy smiles, carefully hiding a smirk.

"Actually, yes. This gin is going right to my head. I'd prefer a Blue Hawaiian, but few bartenders know how to make it." I smirk back. I really hate the melodrama and the competition for some imaginary title of coolness.

"I'm sure Serge knows how to make one." Stacy lifts herself off her seat and just barely covers her assets with a careless hand. "I'll go ask."

She sashays her way to the private bar on the balcony. I watch her perk up her breasts in her teal mini-dress. The color looks horrible on her, but I won't tell her that.

I watch as the bartender and Stacy put their heads together. She's flaunting herself but plays with her reddish-gold hair so much that she comes off as nervous. The bartender is shrugging his shoulders.

I knew it.

I watch him pull out a drink menu, and he passes it to Stacy, who grips it in her carefully manicured hand. I watch as she blows the guy a kiss and makes her way back to our table, ensuring he's watching by seductively swaying her slim hips.

Sadly, her efforts have no impact on the bartender, who is now speaking with another young woman with the exact same level of attention he gave Stacy. The guy obviously doesn't know who her father is and how much money she has sitting in the bank. Stacy usually attracts men on those two counts alone.

"You were right. He didn't know it." She passes me the menu. "He said to pick one of these, and he'll be over in a second to take your order."

"Thanks, Stacy. I appreciate the effort." I carefully browse the menu and pick a fruity drink I have never heard of before.

And all the while, I'm thinking of Edward and our encounter during the Christmas party. I have never met a man like him before. He's not another one of these immature fuckboys who are scattered all throughout this club.

I lean back and look up, hoping for a glance of the stars, but the city's light pollution blocks them from my gaze. I hate the city. I hate the classism and the pretentiousness of my supposed friends. They're not all that bad, but the effort I put forth to remain a part of their group is exhausting and lonely.

I hear a light tap on the chair next to me, and I turn my head to see who it

is. A man stands before me, dapper and handsome, with a broad smile that lights up his face.

"Oh, so you must be Stacy's friend." He takes a seat without waiting for an invitation. "My name's Vincent, and I couldn't help but notice you from across the room. I work in finance, and sometimes it gets a bit lonely in this city, so here I am. Wanna hang?"

He comes off as slightly predatory. I'm not sure what to think of the bold man, but the fact that he reflects my thoughts makes me inclined to like him.

On the other hand, there was the older and more sophisticated Edward, who had made me come with a simple provocative gesture. Vincent doesn't do anything for me, while thoughts of Edward still make me blush.

"Vincent Gale, did your mommy let you out to play?" says Stacy a little cruelly.

I watch as the guy's face flushes and notice how his freckles darken. I instantly feel sorry for him, but I know the ways of this social circle. If you aren't a part of it, you don't matter to them, aside from being a potential victim of their humiliation.

"Sorry," I say a tad harshly, "I'm not interested. Unless you can make me a Blue Hawaiian."

Stacy bursts into laughter, and a few of the others laugh, even though they know nothing about the situation. *Sheep*. They're all fucking sheep.

I can't bear to stay here for one more second. I see the bartender approach and hand him the menu, not ordering anything. I just want to dance and lose myself in the music.

Entering the main dance floor, I weave my way into the center. Bodies are pressing all around me, and I start to dance. Soon, my thick blonde hair starts to stick to the back of my neck, and a light sheen of sweat coats my body.

The music has more tempo than bass, which is rather annoying when you want to dance like a wild thing, but I find my rhythm. Soon, I feel a body meld to my backside.

I look over my shoulder to see Vincent. His short hair is white-blonde, and his teeth are perfectly straight when he smiles at me. He is good-looking in a nerdy way, and I surmise he has to come from money to make it onto the private balcony.

It takes more than simply being in finance to get into the private section of this club. You need to come from wealth, preferably old money, but if you

do come from nouveau riche money like my father has, you are more than welcome, too.

Vincent lays his hands on my hips and pulls me into his body harder. I feel all the muscles he has, despite his seemingly slim appearance, and I can also feel his dick getting harder by the second through his suit pants.

I pull myself away, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. I know he probably can't help it, but the last thing I want is this stranger's penis poking at me.

He looks hurt for a second, and then an odd look flashes across his face, as if he's smelled something disgusting.

"Have it your way," he sneers. "I heard you were a slut from Stacy, but if you want to play hard to get, I'm game."

Vincent reaches out and pulls me by the waist back into his firm body.

"Fuck you, you fucking creep," I say, pulling away and heading off the dance floor. He grabs me by the hand and yanks me back so hard it hurts.

"Ouch!" I scream, attempting to slap him across the face. "Let me go!" But he doesn't

let up.

I start to feel anxiety settling in. I have to get away from here now. The people around us are beginning to turn and watch.

I look toward the balcony, where there are bodyguards and bouncers, and I attempt to wave one down. I must be lost in the crowd of dancers because not one comes to my aid. Vincent is wrapping himself around me like a boa constrictor. My anxiety peaks, and I scream out like a little girl, knowing I would never live this down in my social circle.

Suddenly, as if beckoned by a cold breeze, Stacy and her elites enter the club from the balcony. Their presence is noted by all by the swarm of security that encircles them. I see Stacy pointing at me, and the guards are all on point like hounds and rush toward me. They separate Vincent and me from the crowd and gently pull me from his grasp.

"Mr. Gale," they say politely to Vincent, who curls his lip contemptuously. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

Yep, Vincent had to come from money if they weren't tackling him to the floor. I'd likely just made an enemy.

I try not to think of that as I make my way back to the elites and hug Stacy. "Thank you so much for saving me. I don't know what I'd do without your help." *Fake.*

"It's no problem, darling. I was worried about you, especially since you

don't bring your own security. I wouldn't want anything to happen to my sweet Vanessa."

Spare me. She had staged the whole scene. Once I'm out of sight, I know they'll be laughing at my expense.

"Vincent shouldn't even be here. He's underage, and I'm surprised his mommy let him off her breast." More humiliation. *Great.* The shit I have to put up with to stay in the group's good graces is more than I can bear.

"I think I'm headed home. I'll come with a bodyguard next time. Thank you so much for your help, you're a lifesaver." Now she knows I'm laying it on thickly, but two can play this game.

I wave and blow kisses at the rest of the group and make my way to the doors. A bouncer follows me as if I'll get accosted again at any second.

"I'm sorry, Miss Kazinsky," he says in a thick Southern accent. "Incidents like this rarely occur at my clubs. You can have free drinks whenever you come here as compensation for your discomfort."

Wow. This guy's got a smooth tongue, and I realize that despite the oversized muscles, he's wearing a Gucci belt and a form-fitting tee. And he'd said '*his clubs*'. Shit, I just made a fool of myself in front of the club's owner.

"No worries, sir," I say as politely as possible.

"I imagine you run into problems like this frequently," he says with a smarmy smile.

From the frying pan and into the fire, I can't help but think.

"Actually, no. I like to stay below the radar. But thank you for the compliment. Have my car pulled around, please," I say, relegating him back to the status of hired help in as prissy a way as possible. A flash of anger flickers across his face but is gone just as quickly.

"Of course." He nods. "I'll escort you to the private entrance. The name is Dallas, by the way, and if you ever need anything, please let me know." He gestures. "Right this way."

I follow him on my three-inch Louis Vuittons and throw back my messy blonde hair that my hairstylist had so meticulously combed and tamed earlier on. I'm blessed in the hair department and seem to be taking after my mother in body shape, too.

Instead of being stout like my father, I have what men have described to me as curves for miles, at least right before I shut them down and sent them packing. I'm definitely not in the market. It's just odd that I'm still hurting from the derogatory comment.

I still can't believe Stacy had set me up like that. What a bitch. I was not made for these pretentious games.

My driver pulls up in Daddy's town car. I slide into the backseat and shut the door quickly, turning away so no one glimpses my weakness as a tear rolls slowly down my cheek.

2

Edward

It's almost seven thirty in the evening, just about when the sun sinks into a golden haze of smog over the city. Consequently, I'm not pleased when I hear that I have a visitor dropping into the office.

"Whoever it is, tell them to reschedule," I say curtly into the intercom on my office desk. "I'm almost done for the day, and I need the car around in five minutes."

"Sir, it's Robert Kazinsky," says the smooth voice of one of my many, many interchangeable office assistants. *Damn.*

I hope to get home early and watch a few episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* or something before I fall asleep. I must be getting old because going out to meet new people feels more and more like an unpleasant chore these days.

Bob isn't in the category of new people, however. Bob is my oldest friend, the guy who gave me a chance back when nobody else was going to risk losing money on an unprepossessing and lanky young coder geek. I owe Bob.

I sigh. "Send him up."

I don't have to wait too long for him to appear in my private lift. I work on the top floor of the Phoenix International building, and my guests have the shortest wait time for the strictest security checks on the building's security app. I should know. I wrote the code for it myself.

"Edward!" Bob hails me with obvious relief. "I was hoping I'd be in time

to catch you. How are you, man?"

I consider Bob narrowly. He is uncharacteristically flustered, with thinning hair all on end and his cheeks mottled with stress, possibly rage-induced. Add to this that it's Bob, and he wouldn't just show up unscheduled and unannounced unless it was a real emergency. He must be in trouble of some kind.

In all the years I've known Bob, I've rarely seen him so unsettled. He was almost preternaturally calm during the 2008 recession, and again when Dunnwoods was acquired by their biggest competitor. He's supposed to be the calm, stolid guy, being the money man whom New York's elite depend on to keep their stocks and shares portfolios safe.

I only know one person who can reduce Bob J. Kazinsky to this level of pathetic worry, so I deduce that Alyssa Meyers must be involved somehow.

"I'm okay, Bob," I say gently, waving him to the seat opposite me. He sinks into the ergonomic faux leather with a weary sigh, looking incongruously out of place in my sleek and stylish office.

The vast ceiling-to-floor windows give me a panoramic view of the sunset over midtown and affords me perfectly natural lighting. It does Bob's crow's nest of wrinkles no favors at all.

"Tell me how you are," I say, prodding him into speech once more. He stares at my chrome and silver desk dejectedly.

"I need a favor," he blurts out. "I need you to give my kid a job."

He's clearly not enjoying this, and who can blame him? He's the last person to encourage nepotism, always focusing on real ability. I was one of his real sharp kids, back in the day. He never cared that I came from a rough background.

And now he thinks he has to be ashamed of asking me for something? No, fuck that.

"Of course!" I say with fake enthusiasm. "I was just going to ask you how Violetta's doing. Isn't she living with you now?"

"Vanessa," he corrects me, "and yes, she is. Her mom doesn't like it. Well, you heard her back at the Christmas party, going on and on about how I'm spoiling the kid."

I must check this habit of Bob's. He can't keep referring to me to remember things that I don't really understand, not when we barely talk about each other's family lives. Our families don't impact our work or our friendship, so why bother?

"I wasn't really listening," I say diplomatically. "It seemed like extremely personal stuff. I'm sorry Alyssa's upset with you, though. That must be hard."

I know that Bob was devastated by the divorce fifteen or so years ago, and by the fact that he lost custody of his kid in an extremely contentious court hearing. With that kind of history, I'm surprised that he still seems to sometimes be hung up on Alyssa.

"She keeps showing up," he complains bitterly. "Now that Vanessa's home from Harvard for good, her mom is always around at the house. Pestering the kid, nagging me. She keeps saying that if the girl won't go back to school, she could at least get a job instead of going out to clubs and being chronically online whenever she *is* at home. Which is fair, but bullying the kid won't help her straighten herself out, will it?"

"I don't know," I say cautiously. "I'm not a family man, Bob. I don't know anything about kids. What does Vanessa want to do with her life?"

"She doesn't really know," says my old friend glumly. "When I was her age, I was working my way through law school. Alyssa was in pre-med, and you—you were at MIT and already writing the code for Aurochs, weren't you?"

I nod. Aurochs would go on to become my second big win and my first defense contract from the Pentagon. I only ever wrote it to fend off rage trolls from my landing page for Phoenix, but my original approach turned it into a weaponized counterterrorism program. It still makes me millions today.

"I don't know," Bob continues tiredly. "I guess I assumed she'd turn out to be motivated, like us. Lord knows, we tried to set a good example. But she says she was completely burned out at Harvard and she's never going back. So, what now?"

It's clearly a rhetorical question, so I don't have to answer. I wait for Bob to finish venting.

Outside, a few faint stars wink into existence in the darkening sky. The sun is below the horizon, but there is still a stark line of ochre in its wake, lighting up all the crowded skyscrapers across midtown in an almost hallucinogenic way.

"So she needs a job," Bob concludes shamefacedly. "She doesn't know where to apply or for what, but I told her, if you think biochem isn't for you, we'll find you something else, right? She needs to explore her options, that's all. Can you help?"

The thought of Bob's spoiled little princess of a daughter *exploring her*

options at Phoenix is enough to curdle my blood. But I would gladly hire a hundred cretins first thing tomorrow as long as it takes that worried, pleading look out of Bob's eyes, so of course, I have to say yes.

"I'll find her something," I say, nodding vigorously. "Something safe and, um, not too stressful. Just to make the phasing in easier, of course."

Bob gives me a grateful, beaming smile. "That would be perfect. She's still feeling a bit fragile after Harvard, so this is just the thing to get her on her feet again."

Wonderful. Phoenix, one of the world's most insanely challenging work environments, where we routinely execute a bottom ten percent cull, is going to be a combination creche and rehab for sweet, fragile little Vanessa, the trust fund brat who couldn't hack it in an undergrad degree but still expects her daddy to land her a high-profile job.

I have to really work to suppress the instinctive cringe of revulsion at the mere thought. *It's Bob*, I have to keep telling myself. *This is for Bob. I'm going to suck it up because of Bob.*

And he looks so happy, too. His color has improved and he isn't slouching anymore. He listens with an air of bright interest while I call my head of HR and tell her to keep an eye out for Vanessa Kazinsky's resume, to be received shortly.

If the eminently qualified woman in charge of my hiring and firing decisions is shocked, she's professional enough not to show it. I'm able to tell Bob it's all figured out, which is exactly what he needs to hear right now.

"Thank you, man." He leans over and grabs my hand. We exchange the kind of enthusiastic handshake that normally happens after people close a million-dollar deal. "I really, really appreciate this. You have no idea how much it means to me."

I think I have a clue, though. It's been four months since he's had his kid living with him, and the strain of it shows. God only knows what kind of havoc she'll wreak in this building. I wonder if I should assign her a handler.

Well, we'll call it a work assignment with someone who has more experience and actual professional credibility, but essentially, yes. The kid's going to need a babysitter, which means one of my people is going to be assigned, overworked, and probably drained of their will to live, just like Bob.

God. What was he even thinking, having a kid? Look at the poor man. His once-impressive brain is practically broken.

"I'm sure this is exactly what Nessa needs," he says optimistically. "Experience in a really modern, high-tech workplace, with plenty of structure and opportunities. And with you here, I don't need to worry about her getting into trouble, of course. You're one of the very few men I'd trust with my daughter's life, Edward. I just wanted you to know that."

I rapidly revise my plans. In addition to the babysitter, we will also need a full-time security team, a personal financial advisor, and possibly a free therapist for little Nessa.

Wonderful. There's my peace of mind going completely down the toilet for the foreseeable future.

"Don't worry about it," I say, injecting some real sincerity into my voice. "If the kid needs help, I'm here for you. And I'm not doing you a favor, Bob. I'm returning one. If you hadn't given me my first term sheet, I wouldn't have a building to my name today. Anything you want, you just have to ask."

Embarrassingly, Bob's eyes well up with tears. He blinks them back and gets to his feet.

"You're a good guy, Edward," he says, pulling himself together. His voice is only slightly choked. "You always were. I'm so proud of you, you know. Maybe I don't always say it out loud, but I've been rooting for you since you were a kid." He pauses for a second and blinks.

"Well, actually, you were older than Vanessa is right now. But looking back, we were all so young and excited about everything." He sighs. "I just want her to have that. Everything that we had, and more. All the fun we had back when we could still afford to take risks, right?"

At that moment, I want to strangle the life out of Alyssa. I know it was her and her insistent carping that put Bob in this despondent mood. It's not like him to go around sighing wistfully over the past.

"We'll catch up over dinner one of these days. I want to know what else is going on with you," I say to Bob. "I've missed our random meals in other countries ever since you decided you were done with the jetsetter lifestyle."

"We should schedule one soon." He nods happily. "There's a great Creole restaurant around the corner from my place. They do the best lobster in New York, hand on my heart. I'll take you, and we'll talk."

"Done." I stride around the desk and clap him on the shoulder. "I'm glad you dropped in today, though. I don't get to see you enough. Give my love to Vanessa and, uh—"

"I think I'll put off mentioning this to Alyssa for a while," he says slowly.

"Let's just give Nessa some time to settle in before her mom finds something else to blame me for, right?"

"Right." I completely agree. Alyssa is a brilliant woman who is capable of many things, but meeting her ex-husband without criticizing him is not one of them. "This is completely confidential for now."

"Perfect." He beams up at me, and I can see the man I remember him being, that tubby, enthusiastic little man I met almost twenty years ago, full of brilliant business ideas with just the right mix of crazy and genius.

"Awesome." I have to blink away a few tears of my own now. "I'm heading out too, so I'll walk you down."

We go down in the lift together, and I lie to Bob, saying that I'm heading to the club instead of letting him know that I'm going home to watch TV on my own.

Ever since that girl at Christmas, I've lost my taste for random hook-ups. Give me a nice, apocalyptic Sci-Fi series with the threat of cyborg dominance any day.

It's not like I ever have to see her again, right? I'm definitely not going to ask Bob to identify her for me and track down her number.

Because that would be immeasurably stupid, and getting too involved with women always, always fucks up a man's life. Look at what happened to Bob once Alyssa got her claws into him.

I say goodbye to Bob in the lobby and stride out to my car. I'm never going to see the girl in the red dress again, so it's fine, right? I'm going to be fine.

Right?

3

Vanessa

Despite what my father may think, I'm excited to get to spend some quality time with Edward. My brain is full of twisted fantasies. I want him to take me in the storage room, over his desk, and in his elevator.

I had expected him to meet me at the doors for an extended tour of the Phoenix building, but when I get out of my private car, I'm not whisked away by an elite group of executives. Instead, a mousy girl is standing there with a pile of folders in her hands. She is tapping her foot impatiently.

"If you can't be on time, at least have the decency to let us know, or don't bother showing up," squeaks the mouse, practically vibrating with outrage. I make an apologetic face, knowing I've made a poor first showing. And after all the effort I made to get ready, too.

I wanted to feel comfortable in my choice of clothing, as it is so different from my regular jeans and T-shirts. I'm wearing a black skirt and jacket. Underneath, I wear a form-fitting white blouse tucked into my waistband. My lingerie is an apricot color made up of tiny bits of lace that barely cover my private parts. *Just in case*, a naughty voice in my head whispers hopefully.

"Come with me," says the mousy girl, suddenly brisk.

"Are you taking me to Edward now?" I ask. "Oh, and I'm Vanessa. What's your name?"

"I'm Jane Roscoe, I'm from PR, and you will be shadowing me until you know what to do. From what I hear, that could be a long time. So stay present

and sharp, and we should get along fine."

For some reason, I doubt it.

Halfway through the morning, we're covering how to make effective infographics for events, and I'm bored beyond belief and having a hard time keeping my eyes open. I can't help that Jane has a nasally, droning voice that could put a speed freak to sleep.

I don't want to be rude, but I'm sick of being relegated to these mundane tasks, which are not my idea of a job I want to pursue. If I asked Dad, he might allow me to help run his philanthropic endeavors.

As for now, it's time to see Edward and ask for another position. I feel humiliated by being shoved into a corner and placed in a job that is clearly make-work. He must have a really low opinion of me.

When I say this to Jane, she flushes furiously, pushing her glasses up her nose. "What we do here is essential. The marketing team and public relations need our skills. They come up with the ideas, but we see them through to completion."

It is hard not to roll my eyes at her defensiveness, but I'm willing to bet that's what she has to tell herself to get through the day.

"I appreciate your help, Ja—Ms. Roscoe. I'll find Edward's office." I pull my skirt down as I rise from my seat. "He's on the top floor, I assume?"

"It's Mr. Rutherford," she corrects me. "And staff can't simply go and see him when they wish. You need to make an appointment with HR, and they'll discuss things with his PA, and only then, if you are lucky enough to get an appointment, can you see Mr. Rutherford."

She seems both intimidated and concerned. Likely, her job counted on her succeeding with me.

"Where's his office?" I demand, picking at my nails as if I didn't really need her assistance with this one problem. She frowns, then rolls her eyes.

"I'm sure a resourceful girl like you can figure it out for yourself," she says before she turns back to her computer screen and blocks me out.

Frustrated, I turn and start walking to the elevator in a far corner. I head toward it boldly, like I'm supposed to be there. When I approach the lift, I realize it's locked with coding and a special key.

I call security and ask them to connect me with Mr. Rutherford's personal assistant. They seem happy to help Mr. Kazinsky's daughter. In seconds, I'm speaking with the PA, and she's arranging for me to reach the penthouse floor. Seemingly from nowhere, a guard appears at my side. He's rigged up as

if ready to serve in a military engagement.

"You guys sure you have enough security?" I joke with the guard. He doesn't laugh. In fact, he seems offended.

"We guard not just the office but every company that uses our products and services. We take it very seriously, and you should too." He says the last part with a tinge of disgust in his voice.

"Yeah, I know about the Phoenix and Aurochs programs. My father helped fund the first and has a large stake in the many programs created here, not to mention this business itself. Now, if you will please show me to Edward's office, I'd appreciate it."

I feel like a manipulator pulling the 'Daddy' card, but if it gets me into his office faster, I can absolutely act like the spoiled brat my parents think I'm turning into.

He takes me to the corner elevator, punches in a code, and turns a key. The elevator is made of glass on the exterior, offering an incredible view of the city as we rise toward the penthouse. It is a surprisingly long ride to the top of the building, and I feel anxiety getting to me right as the elevator stops.

Turning around is difficult as I scan the scenery one more time. I'm about to face Edward again, and it doesn't feel like butterflies in my stomach. Instead, there are locusts from hell scouring my insides.

I need a moment to collect myself and freshen up. "Is there a bathroom I can use?"

"That would be on the other side of the PA's office." He gestures while approaching the extremely beautiful woman leaning over a secretary's desk, clearly lost in her work. She looks formidable as hell.

Walking a touch unsteadily, I enter the bathroom. A bit of nervous sweat breaks out on my upper lip, and I wipe it away. My makeup needs a major touch-up, so I take a few minutes to apply my mascara and lipstick.

Finally, I take one last look in the mirror and give myself a little smile of encouragement before exiting the bathroom. It's time to face Edward again. This will be challenging, but I'm ready for this.

I'm still hurt from the prior engagement at Dad's Christmas Party. Edward hadn't even realized it was me, his best friend's daughter. He basically forgot he'd ever met me and only gave me some attention due to my little red dress and how embarrassingly thirsty I must have seemed. Not to mention the teasing I put him through.

I feel like he deserved it. He didn't even bother to get my name. Proof

right there that he isn't a gentleman.

Would he even recognize me this time? My hair is up in a carefully arranged bun with small flower pins holding it carefully in its place. My business suit is designer, my shoes are perfect, and my confidence is still shit.

It had been fun choosing this outfit for my first day at work. But when I put it on, I felt like an outsider. He would probably see me as a kid playing dress-up who had run away from my undergrad program because I couldn't hack it. I would have to make him see me as a woman who could stand on her own two feet.

But how would I do this?

Had my father told him that I was lazy and spoiled, too? If he had, that would make my goal of getting Edward's attention much harder.

No. Breathe. You can do this.

I straighten my collar one last time and turn and leave the bathroom. The security guard is still waiting around as if I'm a danger to the company. I roll my eyes this time, hoping he sees it. I strut to the doors in my spiked heels and feel like I'm on a catwalk. *All eyes on me.*

I approach the door, and as I'm about to knock, the doors swing wide. *Automatic doors. Right.* I stroll into Edward's office as if I don't have a care in the world. When I stop, I take a moment to pose before looking at the man seated behind the desk. He's writing furiously in a notebook while looking at his computer screen. He doesn't even bother to look up at me.

"You wanted something, Miss Kazinsky?" he asks brusquely, still not glancing up at me. "I don't mean to sound rude, but I can't have my time held up with questions another person in my company can answer more easily. I'll make an exception this time, but from here on out, you are going to have to settle with discussing personal and professional issues with an underling."

I grit my jaw. I'm not used to being thoroughly ignored and rebuffed, especially by someone who fingerbanged me at my father's party.

I stride up to his desk and lean against it, resting my butt on his desk calendar and twisting so my cleavage is practically in his face. He raises a golden brown eyebrow but then continues to pretend he is busy.

"I don't think my father sent me to you so I could be put into some corner with a babysitter to keep watch while I do menial tasks in the lower ranks of the company. I also don't see how it will help me learn anything about running businesses or other important roles in the workplace."

I cross my arms under my breasts and wait for him to gaze up at me. He

gives me a quick once-over and goes back to his scribbling, phoenix tattoo on arrogant display. There isn't even a hint that he recognizes me.

Now I'm getting angry. Edward Rutherford comes off as the biggest tool in existence. If this is the way he usually acts, then I really dodged a bullet at Christmas.

On the other hand, Dad really, really wants this to work out for me. I can't really risk disappointing him all over again.

Not wanting to push my luck, I take a few steps back. I hadn't expected to have this much difficulty with this. Nothing is going according to plan.

I hear a pen being set down and a few more shuffles of paper, and then Edward says, "Okay, let's figure out something more appropriate for you."

His eyes finally look at me from head to toe, and his chocolate-brown eyes widen.

That's it. That is the look I want.

"It's you!" he practically yells.

"Took you long enough to notice."

"That means *you're* Bob's—no! I mean—but I—we..."

"Yes, I am your best friend's daughter. Funny how that worked out."

All I can do is grin as he blushes a furious red. *Take that, Edward.*

4

Edward

Oh, fuck no. What have I done?

I can't believe it's her. I can't believe this is happening.

Vanessa Kazinsky was the girl at the party?

Which means I nearly fucked my best friend's daughter. Not to mention, I've been lusting after her ever since.

Shit. *Shit*. Holy fuck and a thousand fucking shits.

My brain wants to shut down, my body wants to run, and the voice of my conscience is silently screaming the word *nooooooooooooooooooooo*, like a fire alarm noticing a nearby volcano. Just as useless, in context.

To make matters worse, she still looks delicious. I don't know how this is possible, but somehow, she makes a plain black jacket with a tailored linen shirt and a completely appropriate length of skirt look outrageously sexy.

On anyone else, it would be approved office wear. On Vanessa's lush curves, it's an invitation to strip her naked and bend her over the desk. Immediately.

I cross my legs, glad that I didn't get to my feet when I saw her. It might be rude, but this is safer. I don't want her noticing my extremely NSFW response.

She's Bob's daughter. She's far too young for me. She's my employee, and she doesn't need to know that I am instantly, painfully erect in her presence. There's a complaint to HR, a lawsuit, and a friendship of twenty years at

stake here.

She looks at me with her hand on her hip and that cheeky, challenging grin. I, on the other hand, am the furthest thing from amused.

Judging from her completely unsurprised expression, I'm convinced she knew exactly who I was back at Christmas. Which means that she deliberately played me for a fool.

I'm starting to get genuinely angry about this. There's audacity, and then there's whatever the fuck she thinks she's doing here.

Systems back online, my brain tells my body. I don't want to give her the upper hand here.

"You want some real work?" I say sardonically. "I didn't get the impression you were that interested in work in the first place."

She flushes. It's so unfair that she can make even embarrassment look good. A rosy pink touches her cheeks and her dimpled chin. I try not to notice anything below that point. *Eyes up, buddy. You got this.*

"I wasn't looking for work at my dad's party," she replies, her tone sharp and cutting. "And I never imagined I'd end up having to work for you. How could I? Dad never even asked me before he set me up for the job interview here."

"You could have mentioned who you were," I say gently, and her eyelids flicker. "You knew I didn't recognize you. I haven't seen you since you were what, ten?"

"Eleven," she corrects me. "Not that it matters. Look, can we just put that behind us? It's really unprofessional to bring that type of thing up in a workplace."

Oh, look at you. Little Miss Perfect Professional all of a sudden, I think savagely. But I keep my eyes cold and shrug.

"So, what do you want me to do for you, *Vanessa*?" I emphasize her name deliberately. "Unpaid interns don't usually get to pick and choose their assignments, you know. Also, your father's name is not supposed to get you a meeting with the CEO whenever you feel like it. That happens when *I* decide you deserve my time."

Her flush travels up to her hairline and down below the open collar of her frilly white shirt. *I'm not looking*, I promise myself. I'm not thinking of peeling her top open at all.

Liar, whispers my conscience.

To my surprise, Vanessa spreads her hands out apologetically. "Okay,

yes, I do know that. It's just that I did try to tell my supervisor that I have zero expertise in PR, but she didn't listen. She said something vague about my doing market research, but that's just busy work, to be honest. It's a really great department, obviously, but I'm contributing nothing."

"And you want to contribute?" I ask, raising my eyebrows. "You astonish me."

She sets her teeth. "Look. I know you didn't really want to give me a job, and it's only because my dad's friends with you that I get to be in the building. I get that, and I'm really, really grateful for the opportunity.

"But I didn't come here to just get out of the house or to pass the time until I get to clock out. I know my educational record isn't great, and I want to do something that's solid on my resumé. Something that isn't a complete waste of my time, your office space, or anyone else's energy.

"So, yeah. I want some real work, please. If it's not too much trouble."

She sounds sincere. And I'm surprised, pleasantly so. She doesn't seem at all like the useless, directionless party girl her parents made her out to be.

Maybe she's finally getting her act together, and getting pushed out of the nest is exactly what she needs.

And if she can't handle the pressure, tough. I've already made sure she has a babysitter, a couple of extra security tags, and decent parking space. Let her find out how other people earn these things.

"What kind of job were you thinking of?" I ask, picking up a silver-embossed pen next to my mouse pad. It's just for something to twirl between my fingers when I think.

Her eyes drop to my hands. "Um. I was thinking, uh. Well. Back in college, I was on a grassroots community project called SoupHub. And I noticed the Phoenix Foundation runs a couple of homeless shelters here in New York which kind of do the same thing. Could they use some help? I'm good with people, and I've had experience with supply stocktaking, and I have some medical emergency training as well."

I roll the pen between my palms. Vanessa's anxious blue eyes flicker between the pen and my face.

"You can do stocktaking?" I ask, frowning. "SoupHub's a cloud kitchen for homeless people, right? Can you do organizational logistics for a shelter, for example?"

She looks apprehensive. "I mean, maybe? I wasn't in charge or anything, but I know the basics, and I can pick up the rest."

I can almost see her crossing her fingers behind her back. The effect of the white shirt pulling tautly across her chest in front is a completely different matter, one which should be borderline illegal in every jurisdiction under the sun.

Yes, okay. This might be a good plan.

Vanessa's not the useless brat I thought she was, so maybe there's some point to shifting her role to something where she does have prior experience and at least shows some signs of interest.

And also, a shamed little voice whispers from the dirty corners of my conscience, *it's not the worst idea to get her the fuck out of this building and into the shelter, far away downtown and safely out of sight.* Less of a distraction.

Less of a danger, in fact.

"Okay." I tap the pen on the desk a couple of times, relieved to have something I can be decisive about. "I'll tell someone at HR to get you set up."

Vanessa looks stunned. Her pretty plump lips—*careful, Edward*—drop open in surprise.

"Really," she says faintly. "Huh."

I subject her to a narrow-eyed scrutiny. "I thought that's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Oh, it was." She nods vehemently. "I mean, it is. It very much is. I just didn't think it would be this easy. Thank you, Edward. Sorry, I meant Mr. Rutherford. Sir?"

She ends on a faintly questioning note. I have to suppress a sudden grin at her about-face in attitude.

"Edward is fine," I reply equably. "Was there anything else, or can you see yourself out?"

"Right." She's a little flustered now, adorably so. The girl I thought she was would have looked smug, but she's not that girl any more than I am the kind of man who'd take advantage of an employee.

"I'll go now," she says hurriedly, and there's that quick flush betraying her nervousness again. "Thanks for your time."

I nod and keep my eyes on the top of the desk, making an honest and completely useless effort to avoid looking at that perfectly pert little ass as she walks away.

Good, I think to myself. At least I don't need to worry about direct contact anymore. Whatever happened in the past, I'm staying well away from her in

the future.

And if I do spend the next few days thinking guiltily sensual thoughts about her, well, that's nobody's business except mine.

I do try not to. It's just that I'm having an extended dry spell, so I don't have anyone or anything else to take my mind off Vanessa. About what her skin felt like in my hands, the sweet fragrance of her hair in the wintry garden just a few months ago. Troubling thoughts, but I have to deal with them on my own. I must.

Bob calls a couple of times, once to thank me again and once to check in on how his kid is doing. I make excuses about how busy I am to get out of talking to him for too long and hang up the phone with a keen sense of guilt every time.

The poor man. Sweet, innocent Bob. *If only he knew.*

And all the while, I wait for this feeling of tense anticipation to pass. It does not.

I have to see her again.

I try to fight it, but it's a futile battle of wills, my brain against my worst instincts. Inevitably, I find myself drifting into the shelter downtown, ready with a thinly manufactured excuse to see Vanessa.

The motherly woman at the tiny front desk recognizes me immediately. "Edward! How are you? Did you tell me you were coming and I missed the email somehow?"

"No, no," I say guiltily, bending to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. I've known Luanne for years, ever since she showed up to the Phoenix International building with a surprisingly well-made PowerPoint for her shelter's fundraising pitch. She's a wonderful woman, and I feel terrible that I don't drop in more.

"I've just been busy," I say weakly. "I know I haven't been very present lately, but I do keep tabs on the accounts. Do you have everything you need here?"

"Oh, yes." She beams at me fondly, as if I'm a favorite nephew of hers. She's only a few years older than me, but she's always behaved like my adopted aunt. "How are you, though? You look tired. Have you eaten anything? I could get you some sandwiches and soup if you want."

I hurriedly disclaim any pangs of hunger. Give Luanne a chance to feed anyone, and she'll end up cooking enough for a small city under siege.

And what I really want to do, of course, is see Vanessa. It's been more

than a week since she came sashaying into my office and destroyed every last vestige of my peace of mind. Part of me wants to return the favor. Part of me, regrettably, just wants to get another look at that perfect, peachy ass.

"So, um," I say to Luanne. "How's that new hire working out? The one we sent from the main office?"

"Oh, Nessa? We love her! She's doing so great," beams Luanne. She is ever the incurable optimist, but her standards for her employees are even higher than mine, so I instinctively feel reassured.

"Though I don't know if she's around today," says Luanne, looking around vaguely. "She was going to go pick someone up, but she's not back yet. Oh, no, wait. There she is now."

I turn around, and there she is indeed.

Vanessa. Just the woman I was looking for, delicious as always. The thought floats unbidden through my mind, and I don't even feel guilty anymore about looking at her like that.

Unfortunately for me, what I'm looking at is Vanessa being wrapped up in a close embrace by another man.

Well, shit. My anticipation turns to rage in the space of a heartbeat.

She's fucking kidding, right?

5

Vanessa

I meet Edward's angry eyes and my first thought is *oh, fuck*.

"Simon, hold on," I whisper urgently. "Just hold on for me, please."

But the man shaking in my arms can't really hear me. He's gone to a dark, dark place in his mind, and who knows what's happening to him there?

That's why I went after him in the first place. When he came to the shelter yesterday, he looked around apprehensively, awkward and watchful as almost all of them are. It makes my heart break to see it.

"A huge percentage of New York's homeless male population is ex-military," Luanne told me on my first day here. "They come back with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or traumatic brain injuries, and then they don't ask for help."

"Why?" I had to ask, because this was something that I'd never even heard mentioned before.

Luanne sighed. "Oh, because if you've seen your friends die out there in combat, you start thinking you're lucky to just be alive. Even if you can't be indoors or keep a job or be around your family any longer, you feel ungrateful even asking for anything more. Even if it means panhandling and eating out of trash cans to stay alive."

That makes a horrific kind of sense, I suppose, I thought. Death or dishonor, carried out to its logical conclusion, perhaps.

"We get transients and a lot of drug addicts too," continues Luanne, "but

there's this overlap with homeless veterans that you need to watch out for. They might look sad and helpless, but their muscles remember the combat training just fine. Always be careful not to trigger them, all right?"

Regret colors her voice when she talks about these things, always, but I have yet to see her angry or bitter or even afraid. Luanne is one of those people who carry kindness with them like a shield, and if I become half the woman she is one day, I think I will have really achieved something with my life.

When Simon came in yesterday, Luanne wasn't there. I hurried to offer him food and a blanket, which is mostly what veterans want. I knew better than to insist that he sign up for a bed in the dorm upstairs or to let a door close behind his back.

Fear of confinement is something I can fully understand, after all. But the dull dread I saw in his eyes? I could not even imagine how much he's had to endure.

He left quickly, and although I made him promise to come back and check in today, he never did. I told Luanne I'd just stroll down to the corner intersection where he usually hangs out and see if he was doing fine.

Simon was not doing fine. I found him huddled up in a back alley, shaking with something. Fear, paranoia, maybe a terrible panic attack—I couldn't tell.

All I knew is that his hands were cold, even under the hot summer sun. May in New York is no joke, and I thought he was probably sick.

It wasn't until we started walking back that I heard him muttering the words, "Not again, not again," and realized that this happens to him a lot.

So by the time we get back to the shelter, I'm steering Simon by the elbow. His eyes have gone blurry, almost blind, and I don't know what he's seeing anymore. Maybe the worst parts of his past. At least, I suspect it might be that.

Just at the short, paved entrance to the shelter, he bucks like an uneasy horse and refuses to go in. "Not again, not again," he keeps saying, but he's almost shouting now.

"It's okay, Simon," I say softly, not wanting to scare him but not letting go of his arm, either. "You know this place, remember? You were here just yesterday, when we talked? You got to walk out last time without being trapped, right?"

He turns to me, and his eyes are wild. Under the matted hair and the dirty,

pitted skin, I realize with a shock that he's still a young man. When he pleads with me, he sounds like a scared boy.

"I can't do it again," he says urgently, his voice shrill with anxiety. "They caught me before."

"Who caught you, Simon?" I wonder if he's a former prisoner of war. That would explain a lot about his symptoms right now.

"*They*," he whispers, taut with tension. "The doctors. They'll catch me and lock me up and I won't ever get out. Don't let them do it again. Please, I'm begging you."

My God. This was done to him *here*? On American soil?

I cannot imagine what a betrayal that must have felt like. He told me his name and rank yesterday, but this explains why he's got such a complete lack of pride in his service record. All of that must feel like a different life to him now.

"I won't let anyone take you away," I tell him fiercely, putting both hands on his arms. "Do you hear me? If anyone comes looking for you here, they'll have to go through me and my boss and everyone else in the building. I promise you, you'll be safe here, Simon."

He looks at me for a long, unbelieving moment. Then he lowers his head slowly and I hear a sob.

"Okay. It's okay," I say, frantically patting his shoulder. "Just come inside."

I don't know if it's exhaustion or just the emotional overload or both, but Simon can't walk anymore. He just slowly collapses into my arms, and I kind of have to drag him into the shelter without letting go of him. *Can't let this one fall, not now.*

I almost call out to Luanne for help until I see who's with her. Then the words dry up in my throat.

It's Edward, and he looks hella pissed off.

I curse my bad luck at finding him here right now. Why couldn't he come when everything was peaceful and the place was all tidied up? Midway through the afternoon, the shelter really isn't ready for outside visitors, especially not the single biggest donor in the city. We have our hands full with the people who actually need us.

I won't look at him right now. I can't. I have to focus on Simon, who's clearly in the throes of a full-blown crisis, so Edward and his bad temper will just have to wait, that's all.

"It's okay, Simon," I croon gently, sending a desperate glance in Luanne's direction. "You're going to be safe here. You got this, come on."

Luanne comes bustling over as soon as she realizes what's happening. "Oh, hello, Simon. I guess I missed meeting you yesterday. Do you need a bed for the night?"

Her voice is calm and non-confrontational, just like we talked about. No pressure, no reason to cause a panic. Just a warm welcome, no judgment involved. All these people have been through enough.

But Simon isn't in the mood to be talked to kindly. He gives her a blank half-glance and clings to me like a drowning man to a raft in the ocean.

"What's happening? Is he ill?" asks Edward curtly. He's frowning now, so I guess his filthy mood is due to spill out.

"He's okay, just tired and a bit overwhelmed," I say neutrally, keeping my eyes on Simon. He is painfully thin, almost emaciated, and his breath is heavy and sour. Whatever he's been using to cope, he needs to get off it, STAT.

Simon shudders, his knees giving way under him. I stagger and brace myself just in time.

"Don't let it happen again," he mutters, and I can't tell if he's talking to me or praying aloud.

And then suddenly, Edward is there beside me, taking the weight I can't handle. He loops Simon's dirty arm around his neck with complete disregard for his own designer Polo shirt and lifts the younger man up.

"Where to?" he asks me, and the anger is completely gone from his voice. His chocolate brown eyes are calm and steady, perhaps even a little apologetic now.

I still have no idea what he was so mad about before, but I'm so glad the storm seems to have passed. I discover that I don't like the thought of Edward being angry with me, and it's completely unrelated to Simon or any other crisis brewing at the shelter.

It's the worst possible moment to stare soppyly into a pair of beautiful brown eyes, but I do it anyway. I might never get the chance to be so close to him again, after all.

"Bring him in here," says Luanne briskly, breaking the spell. I quickly lower my gaze and hoist Simon's other arm over my shoulder. Together, Edward and I lead him into the small doctor's office next to the lobby, which is deserted right now.

"Put him down on the table, and Nessa, keep an eye on his pulse," Luanne directs me. She's a registered nurse, so I'm not surprised when she pulls out a syringe from a drawer.

I step quickly in front of Simon, not wanting him to see it and freak out. "Nope. Not right now. Simon's previous experience with doctors has been—problematic, to say the least."

Luanne lowers the syringe, frowning. "Hm. Well, he does need something for the shock. Those are PTSD shakes, and it's only going to get worse."

"Food first?" I say, looking back at Simon to check whether he's up to eating something. "Simon, do you want a snack?"

"He wants a drink," says Edward bluntly. "Luanne can see the signs, even if you can't. I'm guessing he tried to go sober on his own and had a meltdown, right?"

Simon doesn't look at Edward, but after a moment, he gives a slow nod.

"There's no shame in that, Simon," I say, glaring reproachfully at Edward. "At least you're trying to get better at handling your worst instincts. Not to name any names, but there are some people, perhaps in this very room, who could learn from that."

"Oh, yeah," says Edward, nodding intelligently. "You used to be a hardcore party girl, right? What was your poison, tequila shots?"

"I wasn't talking about me," I shoot back at him furiously. Luanne clicks her tongue.

"Children, don't fight," she says, smiling absently. "Simon, sweetie, I'm going to get you some sandwiches and a juice pack, okay, because we can't have you on meds for withdrawal on an empty stomach. In the meantime, Nessa, fix him up some of those ORS salts. He needs to stay hydrated."

"Need a shower," croaks Simon suddenly. "I stink."

"It's not that bad," Edward says reassuringly. "It's New York, buddy. We've all smelled worse than you right now."

Luanne leaves to get a meal tray, and Edward is holding Simon up. Which leaves me nothing to do, really, except silently mix up a sachet of oral rehydration salts and hand them over to Simon. He gives me a look of heartrending gratitude.

"You do need to eat first," I tell him firmly, anxious to make him feel that someone is in charge. I can't have Edward bossing me around everywhere, even though he is technically still my boss.

I can clearly remember how useless and small he made me feel in his

office, like I was some kind of entitled brat. I never want to feel that way again, not around anyone.

But I'm much happier and more confident working under Luanne's direction, and my newfound sense of purpose gives me the strength to give Edward a challenging glance. He has to see that I'm working hard here. I'm a valuable employee now, Ivy League dropout or not.

"You need to eat, too," says Edward, meeting my gaze head on. "Have dinner with me tonight."

Simon swivels his gaze between us, startled. It's as if he's waking up from a stupor and noticing something outside of his own misery after a long, long time.

"Huh," he says softly, then gives me a sidelong glance. "Yeah. I'll eat if you eat."

Men. Give them a chance to gang up against a woman, and suddenly, they're each other's wingmen, best friends for life.

"Sure, Simon," I say, ignoring Edward entirely. "Just to make *you* happy."

Edward only grins. What an utterly infuriating man.

Every time I think I have a fix on him and his thought processes, he comes up with something new to completely upset my peace of mind. He's done it every time we've met. I should know better by now.

But it's Edward, the guy I've secretly had a crush on for like, forever, and if he's serious about dinner, then I promise myself that I'm going to seriously blow his socks off tonight.

6

Edward

I don't know what I was thinking.

I sit alone at the bar at the Madrigal, one of New York's hottest party scenes. It's deserted tonight, but only because I hired this whole floor.

I can try to lie to myself all I want, tell myself that I made a stupid blunder by asking Vanessa out in the first place, and that it's better not to compound the mistake by flaunting her in public, at least in a way that her father might get to hear of.

But the truth is that I did it so I can have Vanessa to myself without distractions. Because I don't want her slipping off and melting into the crowd.

Because I experienced a completely unfamiliar spurt of jealousy today when I saw her hugging a strange man.

Granted, that man turned out to be someone in desperate need of help, which is exactly what I'm funding the shelter for in the first place. But I couldn't see that in the beginning when dark thoughts of violence flashed across my mind at the mere sight of him in Vanessa's arms.

I grimace wryly at my whisky sour. I've never been the possessive or insecure type before. I didn't even know I had it in me. If this continues, then what next? I briefly contemplate a future that involves my demanding Vanessa resort to full nun's habit and shudder involuntarily.

No, she'd never do anything like that voluntarily, and I have neither the right nor the will to ask. It's just that something is different when I'm near

her. I wonder if I'm due for a nervous breakdown or something along those lines.

A man appears at the other end of the bar, quiet and inconspicuous in his house concierge's uniform.

"Your guest is here, sir," he says in a respectfully muted voice. I nod.

Soon afterward, the automatic doors to the private lift swish open and Vanessa walks in. I blink in disbelief.

This is not the prim and proper outfit she had on in my office the first time she sashayed toward me like this. And this is definitely not how she dresses at the shelter, where T-shirts and jeans are a given.

This is not even the scarlet seductress at Christmas, glowing hot with desire. This is something else.

This is a naked challenge, the head to toe armor of a woman bent on conquering everything in her path.

It's just a little black dress, but the way Vanessa wears it, she looks like she was poured into it. Every lush curve is highlighted, every inch of the sheer black lace on black leather screaming *take me and fuck me now*, repeated a hundred times over in the mirrored paneling of the room.

She's also wearing dangerously high black stiletto heels, laced up the sides to her knees with interlocking metal clasps. It lends a sense of intimidating strength to her rose-blush skin, her golden hair held back with a pair of silver combs like a crown.

"Hi." She smiles, coming up to me. Even her smile has a sharp-edged quality tonight, her mouth a pale slash of pink under cool blue eyes.

For the first time, I can believe she's Alyssa's daughter. Someone told me that they used to say Bob married a Valkyrie back in the day. I never saw it myself until right now.

"Hi," I respond, slowly putting down my crystal tumbler of whisky. "You look spectacular."

"Thanks. You clean up nice, too." A brief smile crosses her face as she looks around. "Are we super early or something? I've never seen this place so empty before."

"I wanted privacy for tonight," I say casually, and her eyes flicker. Her eyelids are dusted with something blue and shimmering like fairy lights. Or maybe a will-o'-the-wisp. I can't tell yet.

"Impressive." She keeps her tone light as she takes the barstool next to me. "I sometimes forget what a big deal you are."

The way she says it is perfectly polite, but I can feel the barb like she planted it in my skin. I smile.

"I *am* a big deal," I say, signaling to the concierge. He brings Vanessa a specialty tequila sunrise, sprinkled with cherry and lime soaked in gin. "It's why you get to work for me, not the other way around."

I half expect Vanessa to send the drink back and demand another, but she only gives the wide-mouthed glass a dry look and refocuses.

"Yeah, I do work for you," she says abruptly, almost before our personal concierge has stepped away to give us our space. "So, what am I doing here? I thought you set your boundaries pretty clearly that day in your office."

Was that what I was doing? I thought I was fighting off the devilish temptation to get up and take her clothes off.

"That was in the office," I reply instead, watching her take a delicate sip of her drink. "This is here and now."

She sends me a sideways glance, suspicious rather than flirty. "Did my dad put you up to this?"

"What?" I stare at her. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know." She shrugs, sending delicious little ripples smoothing across the creamy skin of her shoulders and exposed cleavage. "Maybe to test me? See if I'm still likely to get drunk at parties and stuff?"

The way she sits, legs crossed and her breasts almost spilling out in that tight little corseted bodice, is a scandal. I can barely focus on her words right now.

"Why would he think you would get drunk with me?" Even though I feel intoxicated right now, which has very little to do with alcohol and everything to do with her.

I make the discovery that Vanessa's wearing black silk stockings with garters under her skirt, which rides high on her thighs. Only five minutes in, and I'm already itching to touch her.

"I don't know." She turns to face me fully now, and I switch my gaze upward. "I know you never told him anything about Christmas, and obviously, neither did I, which is the only reason he thinks it's okay for me to work for you."

"Apart from the fact that I run a successful business and you need some type of work experience, sure," I agree. She quirks a cynical eyebrow.

"But I also know he doesn't trust me. Like, at all," she says slowly. "He used to, but Mom thinks the real reason I dropped out was because I went to a

few nightclubs at some point, so now he thinks that's true, too. You're sure he never talked to you about this?"

"Bob doesn't discuss his personal life with me all that much." I shrug, neglecting to mention the few exceptions in his daughter's case. "And he wouldn't ask me to test you in that way. It's far too manipulative a tactic, and he's never been that guy."

Vanessa expels a long breath. "I guess. It's just a bit uncomfortable, somehow. If he knew I was here with you like this, you know he'd freak out, right?"

"Hence the private date at the empty bar," I say gently. "I don't usually kiss and tell, Vanessa. You might read a lot of things about me in the press, but anything and everything about my love life is pure speculation. I know how to protect my privacy. It's kind of my whole brand."

"Because of the data security thing, yeah," she says as she twitches her nose, looking adorably like a worried kitten. "You do encryption, I get it. But this is different. I thought maybe you were just trying to distract Simon at first, but when you actually called me to set this up, I wondered what you were up to."

What *am* I up to? If only I knew the answer to that one.

"We're just having dinner," I say, my voice indifferent and calm. "It doesn't mean I'm up to anything."

"You *are* up to something." Outside on the long, low balcony, a row of floating candles set in silver bowls comes alight. She eyes the arrangements for a private dinner with slight astonishment. "You don't do this with all your employees, I know that much."

"You didn't work for me when I first saw you," I reply roughly. "You don't think there's some unfinished business here?"

She doesn't reply, but I can see the memory of that first encounter dawning in her suddenly widening eyes, the telltale flush of her cheeks and jawline.

She looks like a black rose in bloom. I'm taut with need already, desperately impatient to take her home, take her to bed, and get her out of my system once and for all.

"There's no need to make such a big deal out of it," I say through gritted teeth, getting to my feet. "Do you want to have dinner with me or not?"

"No." Her pulse beats fast and hard in the small hollow at the base of her throat. She wets her soft pink lips with the tip of her tongue.

"No?" I half expected this, but the disappointment still swoops in my belly and sinks with a thud. "Well, if you're sure..."

"I am sure." Now, she looks up at me directly at last, and her eyes are melting pools of sapphire. "I don't want to have dinner with you. I want *you*. Right now."

7

Vanessa

Edward is shocked, I can tell. The women he usually prefers are sophisticated and glamorous and probably never talk the way I do.

But I also know he wants me back.

I've known it since I walked in here expecting a crowded club, only to find him alone and sipping a whisky at the bar.

It's a fantasy I've had for a while, to get Edward alone.

Don't say no now, I beg him silently. If you knew how long I've been craving you...

Because the shameful truth is that I have had a crush on Edward for a long, long time. Ever since I was old enough to realize that the tall, skinny man who used to be friends with my dad was one of the most brilliant men alive.

And definitely since I met him in the flesh at Christmas. The things he did to *my* flesh at that party were utterly unimaginable, and I have imagined nothing else since.

I should have agreed to dinner first, I think wildly, wondering if it's too late to get up and leave. He'll think I'm truly desperate now.

And the hell of it is that he would be right.

So I'm almost ready with some fake laughter and a convenient excuse to exit when Edward reaches for me. He draws his thumb across my bottom lip, and my capacity for thought just completely dries up.

"Now," he agrees softly, and there's a rough, insistent quality to the way he says it that makes me want to melt into my shoes. "My car's downstairs."

Oh. I haven't really thought this through, have I?

I have somehow assumed he'd be okay with being intimate in a semi-public area again, but after what he just told me about his privacy, I guess it makes sense that he wants to go somewhere else.

I wonder if it's going to be a hotel or his house. Call me naive, but being the woman Edward Rutherford wants to take home feels like the biggest thing that could ever happen to me.

He pulls me to my feet and puts his hands on my waist, shaping the line of my hips in a slow, sweeping touch. I sway toward him, and he bends his head to mine.

The faint silver threads at his temple gleam faintly in his black hair, matching the dusting of stubble at his carved jaw. I part my lips instinctively, willing to surrender on the spot.

"Walk," he whispers, and my body responds like it's a command. I almost snap to attention with a "Yes, sir!" before I quickly turn and walk by his side to the doors.

Nobody approaches to interrupt us. The artist who arranged the lighting and table settings in that gorgeous dining space is going to be terribly disappointed when we leave. But on the other hand, I'm going to be crushed if I can't have Edward the way I always dreamed of tonight. No time to lose, no, none at all.

My thoughts whirl in a maelstrom of random, unconnected thoughts as the private lift takes us downstairs. I remember seeing Edward in the papers once and cutting his picture out. I was eating milk cake with strawberry cream on top in the kitchen that night and having the time of my life, indulging my crush. I was barely seventeen at the time.

I didn't think I would ever really meet him. I barely saw Dad during those years when he and Mom kept fighting, and I never lived with him between the ages of six and twenty-one.

I remember being bored out of my skull at Christmas and then seeing Edward at the party, hoping he would recognize me. Then the sickening disappointment when he didn't, the rising thrill in far too close proximity to my heart when he made it clear that he found me attractive.

All leading up to this, now, in the moment where I'm in the lift with him. I'm leaning back against the man of my dreams, and he has his arms wrapped

around me. His mouth is on my neck, dropping kisses below my ear, and his stubble grazes my skin. I shiver in spontaneous arousal, arching my head further back.

"Your car, sir," says a neutral, expressionless voice. I jerk myself upright with horror, but Edward doesn't let me escape his arms. He just takes the keys from the valet and steers me down a few steps to where his car waits in front of the Madrigal.

I barely notice the car, or the valet, or anything else, for that matter. I'm too busy keeping my head down, my eyes locked on my feet in mortification.

Edward guides me into the car as smoothly as he does everything else before he takes the wheel. I wait for a few minutes before I dare to look up.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about," he states calmly, as if replying to the question I haven't asked. "It's a nightclub, and you and I both know they've seen much worse on the premises."

How do I explain that my wild child phase never extended to all that much sexual experimentation? Edward's an older and infinitely more experienced man. What if he laughs?

"I guess I'm still worried about anyone finding out," I improvise. "I don't know what the consequences might be, but I can kind of guess it won't be pretty, right?"

For example, a lot of people might say I'm trying to sleep my way to the top.

"I told you, I'll take care of it," he says almost brusquely, startling me. I sneak a quick look sideways to check whether he's mad. He can be so unpredictable sometimes.

But to my relief, he gives me a quick grin. "Relax. We're both adults here. There's nothing for you to be worried about."

He's right, of course, but I still nibble at my lips while the bright city streets flash past. Sooner than I can believe, we slow down and turn into the basement parking lot under a high-rise apartment block right next to the river.

I want to say something intelligent and appreciative about Edward's home, but I never get the chance. There's a private lift here as well, and this one takes his thumbprint scan and a password before it opens up.

He pulls me inside, and his mouth is on mine before the doors even close. He's gripping me so tightly around the ribs that I can barely breathe. I turn my face up and throw my arms around his neck, inhaling the whisky taste of him, the scent of his skin, and the touch of his hands all at the same time.

It's overwhelming and intoxicating and everything I've ever wanted. His tongue explores my mouth and his hands tangle in my hair, unthreading the curls and stroking them loose, continuing the caress down my back.

By the time we get to his apartment, I'm melted—no, welded—against his body. Edward picks me up with astonishing ease, giving me a passing view of a sleek luxury penthouse apartment, chrome and black everywhere.

I barely notice anything at all. It's all I can do to cling to Edward's shoulders. Even when he carries me up a short flight of wooden stairs into his bedroom and tosses me down on immaculate Egyptian cotton sheets, cool to the touch, I pull him back to me immediately.

"Wait," he groans into my ear, burying his face in my hair. "Wait a second."

Then he's rearing up on top of me, pulling off his black jacket and tie. The shirt comes next, and I reach up to run my hands across the formidable muscles of his chest, teasing out the light smattering of short black hair before I stroke down to the waistband of his trousers.

There's an arrow of hair here too, pointing downward between lean, taut hips. I fumble a little at the belt buckle before Edward takes over, unsnapping the fastening before he pushes my hands lower.

"Touch me," he growls, and I squirm immediately. I'm starting to realize that just the sound of his voice can make me wet between my thighs.

I trail my fingers down from his navel to his groin, pausing to caress his throbbing length through the thin fabric of his black silk boxers. He has an odd expression when he stares down at me, watching me explore his body. It's almost a look of awe.

"Yes, like that," he says just as I touch the tip of his cock. I circle the place with my fingertips and spread my palm upward before I take him fully in my hands. "Just like that. Don't stop."

He is already erect, a thin trail of precum spreading across the boxers. I tug them down while he's kneeling above me and draw out his cock, realizing that he's not only longer than I expected but also thicker in girth. None of my awkward fumbblings in the dark with teenage boyfriends have prepared me for anything like this.

I take a deep breath and caress the base of his manhood, then dip underneath to cup his balls. Edward's hand shoots out and grabs my wrist. I look up, confused.

His dark hair is ruffled, falling into his eyes. He stares at me, scanning

every inch of my face.

"Wait," he says hoarsely. "You have to wait. You're driving me mad."

Then suddenly, he pulls my wrist above my head so that I fall back on the bed with a gasp. His other hand pushes up my chin, and he claims my mouth with a fierce kiss, rapidly making me breathless.

He's between my legs now, parting my thighs roughly before he pulls my skirt up and my mesh stockings down. I put both hands above my head to brace myself when he grabs my legs below the knees and brings my sopping wet folds into nearly direct contact with his unsheathed cock.

Even through my thin lace panties, I can feel every vein and bulge on his manhood rubbing against my pussy. I writhe frantically against Edward, desperately wanting more, knowing I won't be happy until he's inside me as deep as he can go.

"Now," I moan. "Please, Edward, fuck me now. Please, I need you so much."

He pulls my panties to one side, drapes my legs over his shoulders, and runs his hands down the soft insides of my thighs, pausing to stroke over my mound lightly before he travels upward. I lift my hips up, angled toward him so he can push my dress up around my waist.

"I wanted to take this slowly," says Edward almost contemplatively, eyes fixed on the exposed vee between my legs where I'm already dripping. "But you're always in such a rush."

"Yes," I whimper pleadingly as he leans over me and his hands stroke my chest. My dress is extremely low-cut, so much so that it takes nothing more than a breath for my breasts to burst out of the tight neckline and spill into Edward's hands. He tweaks my nipples, pinching and pulling at them, and every twist of his talented hands sets my body aflame.

I can't help but squirm and grind against his huge cock. Edward cups my breasts and squeezes hard, letting his weight drive me into the soft mattress as he teases me with the head of his cock, slipping and sliding between my slick labia.

"Yes," I say again. "Please, Edward, I can't wait anymore."

He puts his hand down between us and rubs two fingers between the hood of my clitoris and my pussy lips, then extracts his hand to show me the gleaming liquid of my arousal coating it. "I can see that," he says wryly. "Lick."

He slips his fingers into my mouth and makes me clean each one

separately. I obey, hypnotized by the shining gleam of the phoenix tattoo and his burning eyes.

I've never done anything like this before. I've never met a man who had this effect on my body before.

Edward straightens up, towering over me again. He glances downward and aligns his cock with my pussy with one hand while the other keeps a firm hold on my waist. He nudges my entrance, and I hold my breath.

Now he starts to thrust inward, slow, achingly restrained movements to give my body time to adjust. I brace my feet beside my hips, spread open and splayed out for him to take me as deeply as he wants.

Soon, he's almost halfway in, and I'm the most stretched out I've ever been. I know I'm sweating because Edward leans over to lick at a drop of sweat beading just above my nipple. As he does this, he pushes farther inward, the new angle splitting me open even more. I nearly scream.

"Am I hurting you?" he asks, staring down at me with a frown.

"No!" I gasp. "Or maybe yes, but in a good way. The best way. Please, *please* don't stop."

"I won't," he says, holding eye contact. He props himself above me on his elbows and uses the leverage to thrust deeper into me with every stroke. "I don't think I know how."

My head falls back with the sheer aching pleasure of him inside me, every pulsing inch of his cock now fully encased inside my wet warmth. He withdraws a little, then moves in again, and I lift my legs and wrap them around his waist encouragingly.

He begins to ram his whole length into me, pistoning in and out with more and more speed. I try to wrap my arms around his neck and bring him closer, but he laces his fingers through mine and pins me down. When I open my eyes, panting for breath, he bends his head and kisses me once, hard.

I'm so close to the edge, nearly there but not quite yet. There's a cascade of ripples moving through my body and spiraling down to where he is joined to me, setting off sparks behind my eyes.

"Come," he says, like he's giving me permission. "Come for me now."

And my most intimate muscles respond to his command immediately, squeezing and clenching around his cock until I reach that glorious point where I peak into a gushing orgasm. I can feel the release of the flood in every cell of my body, and my back is arching and my legs are straining to hold him to me, hold the moment in that place for as long as I can.

It's the most glorious thing I have ever felt. I didn't even know it could be like this. I could never have imagined it before Edward.

Afterward, once those trembling ripples subside, my whole body goes limp. I'm sated, exhausted, and sleepy.

Edward, however, is still hard. He brushes kisses across my forehead and cheekbones, asking whether I'm okay.

"I'm okay," I say with pleasurable drowsiness. "I'm really okay. A *great* kind of okay."

He laughs and bites my neck.

"Good," he growls into my ear. "Because we're about to do it again."

8

Edward

Vanessa blinks up at me, so sleepily ruffled and cute and just happy, that I have to laugh.

"We're about to do it again," I tell her, shifting her very, very carefully so we are both lying on our sides facing each other. I'm still inside her, and judging from the way she throws her leg over my hip and nestles in closer to me, she likes it.

"No, I'm too tired," she claims unconvincingly, pushing her face into the hollow of my shoulder. But she's tracing patterns down my thigh and coming back up on the inside to tickle the base of my cock, so I can't take her seriously right now. I give a little thrust, more of a nudge, really, and she giggles.

"Why didn't you come?" she asks me, curling her other hand under her head. "I thought we were doing it together."

"We were," I agree, "until the very last second, when I remembered some key basics of male biology. You get to come as many times as you want, sweetheart, but I can't. I'm saving myself for something special."

She giggles again, and I can feel her delicate pussy muscles fluttering around my cock in the most delicious way.

"Female privilege at last." She chuckles, giving me a cheeky wink. "Though to be fair, I don't think I've ever come before. Or at least, if I did, it was never as intense as this. I didn't know I could feel this way, ever."

I've already guessed that she hasn't had much experience, and to hear her say that I am responsible for her first really satisfying climax feels like an Olympic gold medal, a Nobel peace prize, and an Oscar combined. I grin at her, cupping her bountiful ass in my hand and giving it a little slap.

"There's a lot more where that came from," I tell her, enjoying the way she wriggles and snuggles against me. She plants a kiss against my shoulder and hides her face without replying.

I stroke one finger idly down her spine and watch the goosebumps rise on her upper arm. The smile slides off my face when I realize that I totally agree with what she just said. I've never felt like this before either.

I tense involuntarily. The well-honed instincts of fight or flight which have kept me a carefree bachelor all these years may just have kicked into overdrive.

I consider the situation, calmly and rationally.

One: I am not usually a jealous man. But around Vanessa, I behave like a silverback gorilla looking for a fight.

Two: I am in no way prepared to sacrifice my freedom for a woman, any woman. However, Vanessa is the first woman I've brought home in years.

In fact, I usually go to the woman's place, or we get a hotel room if she's interested. With Vanessa, the rules are just different in the sense that they don't seem to exist at all.

Three: if I have a type, as such, it's usually tall, elegant brunettes with something impressive in the way of an arts, academic, or legal background. Vanessa is basically the definition of a ditzy blonde. A very hot, very ditzy blonde, and really, *really* not my type. Usually, that is.

Four: I've never met a woman and immediately tried to get her into bed before. This is the second time that I have basically thrown caution to the winds, common sense under a bus, and myself into Vanessa's arms.

I'm starting to feel like continuing this list might be a bad idea. The more I think about Vanessa, the more besotted I become.

One more thing occurs to me.

Five: I like her. I just like her as a person. Even if she weren't incredibly beautiful and magical in bed, I'd still like her charm, and her kindness, and the fact that she dropped out of a high-ranking STEM course and went on to work in a shelter, helping people with no education at all to speak of.

And she's funny, and sweet sometimes, and *holy shit, what am I doing right now?* I'm supposed to be fucking her senseless to get her out of my

system, not thinking about the way her pert little nose crinkles up when she laughs.

Six: and let's not even get into whose daughter she is, which was the original reason I wanted to stay far, far away from her. That's not something I'm going to even think about right now, or I'll lose it.

Instead of exploring these entirely futile thoughts, I tickle Vanessa below the shoulder blade. She wriggles in indignant protest.

"Just checking that you're still awake," I tell her, patting her cute ass for luck. "If you're not, that's fine too. You can sleep if you want."

You can have anything you want is just a random thought that drifts through my mind for no reason and definitely shouldn't be said out loud.

She puts her hand confidently on my chest.

"You know what? I thought I was tired, but I could totally go again," she says in a tone of such innocent surprise that I have to laugh again. "If you're still up."

I consider the current status of my erection. *Yup*. Still upright and pining for more, despite my best efforts to think of something, anything else.

"I'm still up," I confirm. "Do you want to try something different this time?"

"Ooh, yes. Cowgirl!" she says excitedly. "I've seen it in movies, but somehow, it never seems to work out in real life. I was probably doing it wrong."

I briefly consider the logistics. One sideways roll and I'm flat on my back, with Vanessa crouching on top of me with an expression very similar to that of a surprised kitten.

She cautiously draws her knees up on either side of me until she's able to sit up comfortably. Meanwhile, I edge us both back to the padded headboard of the bed so I can lean back and watch her figure this out.

"Oh. Okay." She resettles herself on the base of my cock with a delightful little bounce of her breasts. Her dress is still pooled around her waist, but I've managed to struggle out of my trousers, socks, and shoes at least, so that's something.

"Take this off," I say, nudging the black lace and leather hiding her most intimate parts from me. She immediately complies, pulling it up by the strappy sleeves and over the top of her head.

I run my hands up her torso, stretched out and fully exposed for my pleasure now. Her pretty nipples are just within biting distance, and the

thought of it makes my cock twitch down below.

"Okay," she says as she throws her dress aside, and I rip off the thin scrap that is all that's left of her lingerie and follow suit. "Now what do I do?"

I settle my hands on her gloriously full hips and stretch my legs out, forcing her to spread her knees out to straddle me better. I can see exactly where my cock is swallowed up by her tight little pussy now.

"Now ride me," I instruct her, gently guiding her hips up and down. "It's just like being on a horse. You're on top, so you get to set the pace for both of us."

She places her hands on my shoulders and shifts a little. Every tiny motion she makes does delectable, indescribable things to my cock, and I actually have to grit my teeth to stay in control.

"Like this?" she says doubtfully, and I watch as her pillowy breasts sway back and forth in rhythm with her hips. She clamps down on my cock unexpectedly, and I grab her ass to steady her.

"Yes," I say hoarsely. "Exactly like that."

It only takes a few minutes for her to fall into a natural pace, rising and falling as she pumps my whole length at a steady pace. I release her hips and put my hands on her back to pull her chest closer to me instead. Her cream-white breasts are flushed with this unfamiliar exercise, and I nibble on the soft undersides, making her moan and arch her back to push herself further into my eager mouth.

Every time I bite down on one of her stiff, pink, puckered nipples, her inner muscles squeeze on beat. When I suck there afterward, practically inhaling her soft skin, she moans out loud. Her pace speeds up, and I realize she's ready to chase another orgasm.

I'm not sure I'll be able to outlast this one. I'm in seven kinds of heaven, with her riding me and my face buried between her full breasts. I smooth my hands down her back and take hold of her buttocks, alternately cupping, squeezing, and spreading them out. They overflow in my hands, and I know I want to try something else soon.

But maybe not right now. I'm far too close to the edge of my own explosive climax, and I've already spent hours, days, months, actually, fantasizing about coming inside this woman.

This one woman I can't get out of my mind, no matter how much I try.

I thrust upward now, for the first time, making Vanessa release a soft gasp of startled shock. She bounces back and grabs the top of the headboard

behind me, digging her curled toes into the bed to stay upright.

"Do that again," she breathes into my ear, and I buck out of control again, jackhammering up again and again in a desperate frenzy. She's so close too, and I can hear her almost sobbing little gasps echo against my guttural growls.

She holds on for dear life as I drill up into her, feeling my balls start to rise. I flick a tongue across her nipples, one lick for each before I'm able to seize her bouncing ass and control her movements, making sure to hold her in place for the final few thrusts.

My cum erupts out of me in a tidal wave of pleasure, all the stronger because I've held back for so long. I release jet after jet into Vanessa's soft wetness, and she joins me just in time, her inner walls shuddering and trembling around my pulsing cock.

She throws her head back and continues to squeeze down, milking me of every last drop of hot, splashing seed. Even before I finish, I can already see our combined juices leaking out and down the insides of her plump thighs.

After a few moments of stunned stillness, I slump backward and take Vanessa with me, cradled to my chest.

"Are you okay?" I ask her tenderly, stroking the damp golden curls back from her face. She collapses on top of me, completely exhausted, and nuzzles my collarbone affectionately.

"You keep asking me that," she points out in a small, tired voice. "Of course I'm okay. I'm having a great time. If I weren't, I'd tell you."

"I believe you," I say wryly, and I do. I already know she has no capacity for deception. I can read her every thought when it crosses her face, and she's never exactly shy of stating an opinion, after all.

"Are you cold?" I ask her, looking around for the folded duvet cover. She shakes her head and stretches her legs out on either side of me, settling herself cozily into the crook of my shoulder in the meantime.

"No, I'm not cold," she mumbles, already half asleep. "Just a bit tired. I think I'll have a quick nap."

And she falls asleep like that, right there on top of me.

She's sprawled out and comfortable, and I don't have the heart to move her off me and to the side, even though my cock is still embedded inside her and I feel certain that my legs are going to cramp up very painfully in this position at some point tonight.

Seven: I have never let any woman go to sleep in my bed before, let alone

nestled on top of me. If I bring them home at all, I send them home in a cab well before dawn. No naps. Certainly no cuddling, before or after the act.

But this is Vanessa, and the only rule is that there are no rules. And that makes sense for her, somehow.

I drift off to sleep with my arms around her, anchoring her warm, soft body to mine like a favorite pillow or a real girlfriend or something.

Boy, what a thought. I think the sex was so great, it broke my brain.

I look down, trying to shift to an easier resting position. Vanessa's full curves above and below, currently squished up against my chest and hands respectively, move helplessly when I do.

And suddenly, miraculously, I'm hard again. It shouldn't be possible this fast, but it's Vanessa, so who knows how the laws of nature bend around the fact of her very being and make the impossible real anymore?

The thought of sleep becomes a distant memory. I know I'm in for a long, long night.

9

Vanessa

When I wake up the next morning, I have a moment of very disturbing detachment from reality. *I can't believe I did that.*

Specifically, I can't believe I'm in Edward's actual bed in his actual home. I try not to overthink this part.

By renting out the club and bringing me here instead of to a hotel, it certainly feels like he wants to keep me his dirty little secret. But do I want to be that?

His status as a billionaire, and perhaps *the* most innovative genius in the tech industry, comes with rules he has to follow in order to maintain his and his company's reputation. I am not about to get myself mixed up about that. It's not safe.

I find the bed still warm beside me. Edward must have only recently gotten out of bed. I listen intently. I can hear a shower with music playing in the background.

This is my signal to leave. There are too many complications already, and I don't want to compound the problem by throwing oil on the fire. I feel that Edward is more than detached enough to understand my reasons for an abrupt exit.

I pull on what's left of my dress and see that it is still in relatively good shape, though I wish I had a hoodie and sneakers just to make my 'walk of shame' a bit easier.

I walk up to a mirrored wall that I assume holds clothes and am delighted to see that Edward is not simply a suit-and-tie guy. There are four large mirrors, and I find what I'm looking for behind the last one.

I grab a comfy-looking MIT hoodie and an old pair of Vans, which seem nondescript enough. I don't want him to miss any of the clothing. I slip the dress on, pull on the hoodie, tie my shoelaces, and finish just as I hear the shower shut off.

Shit, time's up. I look in the mirror and escape through the opposite door from the shower. There is a long hall filled with art that I vaguely remember from last night. On any other day, I could spend hours here, just going from piece to piece, but now is the time to call my driver and run like a bat out of hell.

As I approach the front door, I see it has passcodes and fingerprint scanning as it did outside. I assume it's to protect Edward's assets, but I get this creepy feeling it's also to keep people in if need be.

Aside from the fact that he's my father's friend, I begin to question how much I really know about this man.

He's a billionaire and can literally snap his fingers and get anything he likes. But you only make money if you learn to keep it. So, Edward could be a potential Ebenezer Scrooge, and maybe a narcissist?

But he sure didn't make love like one.

Feeling him spill his seed inside me last night had touched some primitive part of me I'm just not used to dealing with. I'm still lusting after him, for the chance for him to fuck me and fill me up in every possible way. This man is a drug to me, which is exactly why I need to get away.

Daddy would lose his shit with Edward just for touching me. I wonder what he'd do if he knew we were pseudo-dating and having this kind of sleepover. Fortunately for me, the biometric scanner doesn't seem to be turned on, so I'm able to escape the apartment and make my way down to the ground level with comparative ease.

Dad's town car is waiting there for me. The driver on staff gives me an odd look but says nothing. I cringe internally but say nothing either. *Awkward. Really fucking awkward.*

Upon further reflection, once I get out of Edward's house, I realize I really don't want to go home in yesterday's clothes, so I ask the driver to head to the Garment District, hoping to find an excellent buy on the cheap.

I'm also craving a shower. Edward had made me come three times, and

that involved a lot of messy fluids, including plenty of sweat, among other things. Gross under any other circumstances, but boy, was it fun.

Actually, fun is a huge understatement. I'm still in awe at the effect Edward has on my body. Older men really do know their way around.

I head into my favorite clothes store in Manhattan and let the chic sales lady know what dresses and items I want to see. They give me a free showing and let me see which accessories I might pick up, too.

In the end, I choose a black leather skirt, thigh-high boots, and a see-through white knit top for one outfit. I then buy the matching and very naughty underwear that goes with it. This is what I will wear at Edward's and my next encounter, I decide.

Then I pick up some more normal clothes for when I return home to Dad's. He's probably wondering where I am, but when I pull my phone out of my purse, I see it has died. *Fuck*. He's probably panicking by now.

I quickly pick up a peach-colored blouse with an off-white pencil skirt. I even go so far as to buy Mary Janes and a pair frilly ankle socks. Dad will expect me just to be getting home from work, not an all-night sexcapade.

When I get to the house, I try to sneak on by security, but that never works.

"A little early for shopping, Miss," says Joel, one of the guards. The other just grins. He's missing two teeth, and it doesn't improve his leer.

"You know how us girls get," I say lightly. "I just needed some retail therapy."

"Why?" asks Joel, looking concerned all of a sudden. "Did something happen?"

Yes, I think. *My world's turned upside down.*

"No," I say, shaking my head nonchalantly. "No, I just felt like getting an outfit or two."

I have to talk to Dad about these paranoid bodyguards. I wonder if he's getting more anxious with age or if he knows something was up.

Dad always had a nose for intrigues, and I loved solving puzzles with him as a kid. In some ways, it wouldn't surprise me to find out that he knows about Edward and me already.

In another way, it could spell the end of the world as far as I'm concerned.

I just don't want Dad solving *me* like a puzzle. Maybe someday, I might tell him about this.

But right now, I want to play this close to the chest until I know what was

happening with me and one of the city's Most Eligible Bachelors, according to *Variety* magazine. Perhaps too close, judging from the frantic beating of my heart at the mere thought of Edward.

Women must throw themselves at him all day long. I can't help but wonder if I'm just another fan of his or if he feels something real for me, too.

Dad's going to be so pissed if he ever finds out. I just know he'd turn this into one of my 'inadvisable decisions' and make me face the consequences.

I wonder if this time, he'll send me to military boot camp. Or possibly some kind of asylum. On balance, I think I'd prefer training with guns and explosives.

The thought intrigues me. Maybe I could ask Joel to train me? He is always friendly and polite, and I'm pretty sure he bats for the other team since he's never once tried to check out my assets. It's refreshing, really. More tough security guys should be gay.

I head up into my room and walk into the glass-walled shower, stripping clothes as I go. First things first, I need to clean up the sweat and other fluids from last night. The hot water relaxes me, and I let the massage setting take over.

All of a sudden, the Bluetooth connection in the shower starts ringing. I'm supposed to be at work, so I assume it's Luanne.

"Hello!" I answer while water runs down my face. "Luanne, I'm so sorry I'm late, I—"

"Are you at home?" Edward cuts me off. "Why the hell did you leave like that?"

Edward's voice carries the kind of barely controlled rage that I am already learning to recognize. I wince instinctively, then scold myself for being such a coward.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you wanted me to stick around," I say in a pseudo-casual voice. "I guess I just began to feel I'd overstayed my welcome."

There's a long pause on the other end of the line. I wonder what Edward is thinking. Then I wonder why it took him so long to call.

"But I had such a great time," I say hurriedly. "Though I wish we'd had dinner first, in retrospect. Might have felt more like a real date, you know what I mean?"

I suspect he doesn't. He doesn't *do* the dating aspect of this whole game. If it makes me feel sleazy, that's my problem. I was the one trying to come

off as some sexy femme fatale, after all.

"So, anyway," I continue after yet another uneasy pause. "If you ever want to do this again, let's have a regular date with normal people around and see where it goes? If you want."

The line goes silent for such a long time that I start to wonder if he's hung up.

"That's a lot to take in," says Edward. *Finally*. "However, I am willing to meet all of your demands just to spend another incredible night with you. This time, hopefully, the morning after, too. I make killer Belgian waffles and omelets. I'll even make a cheesecake!"

I don't know why he has to make it sound like I just engineered a hostage situation here, but I suppose he's trying? And he doesn't even sound mad anymore.

"You just said the words no woman could ever turn down." I'm grinning like a maniacal skull here.

I can't believe that he actually contacted me after I snuck out. I was so sure he wouldn't bother.

And I appreciate that he isn't mad and says he understands, even if he isn't necessarily happy about it. It still counts as him making an effort, right?

But I can't get too close. Edward is practically New York royalty. I desperately want Edward to be my official boyfriend, but I'm too scared to ask. Because what would that even sound like?

I know Edward's lifestyle requires the opposite of commitment and neediness, so the right thing to do is to mold myself into the woman he wants, needs, and desires above all else. Basically, I need to become his usual type of woman to get into his mind.

But where do I start?

The question is instantly made null when he asks, "Do you want to go to a movie tonight?"

I beam, happy that he thought of something so mundane and relationship-like for us to do together. It's almost like we're a real couple.

And if wishes were horses, beggars would ride, I chide myself, though still with a smile.

"Sure," I say brightly. "But no horror flicks. I always get nightmares and need to sleep with the lights on after."

"Seriously?"

"As the plague. But I do like action, and anything that's a bit Sci-Fi, and

fantasy works most of all."

"You might just be the perfect woman for me," Edward says. I can hear the smile in his voice, and my heart swells with something too painful to be called joy.

"I have to go right now, but whenever you're ready for our movie date, just swing by my apartment, okay? I'll be waiting," he says before hanging up.

I know he has to get to work, so I try not to take it personally that he cut the line so abruptly. Mom always told me to expect this sort of behavior from men. She sure saw enough of it from Dad, I guess.

But maybe this will be different. Maybe Edward is just genuinely, truly different from every other man on the planet in the history of space and time.

I get dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and take my bag of sexy date outfits to change into after my shift at the shelter.

When I walk in, I see my friend Susanna May standing there with her arms loaded with bags of her personal belongings. After hearing her story, I am still amazed by this woman's inner strength.

A scam artist made off with all her money at some point, retirement savings and all, but she still smiles and greets everyone by name. Most people would crack if that happened to them.

But Susanna May? She really seems happy to be here. Sometimes, she helps out in the kitchen, and I can't help but confide in her as we peel potatoes and wash dishes together.

"I have something to confess, Sue," I say today, turning crimson.

"Ah! I see you blushing, and I know it's got to be interesting. Tell me. I'll never snitch," says Susanna, putting a hand on my shoulder. Her faded green eyes sparkle with cheeky inquisitiveness.

"You know the man who owns this shelter?"

"Yes, Edward Rutherford, isn't it? That man who does all that technological stuff. I don't understand it myself, but he's such a kind, lovely young man."

Anyone under sixty is young to Susanna May, who will never see seventy again. But I accept her face valuation and continue.

"Well, I think I'm dating him."

"You *think* you're dating him?" She raises her wispy eyebrows. "Sweetie, that's not how it works. Either you're dating Edward or you're just sleeping with the man."

Shit. She's right.

"Crap, then I don't know where we stand." I shrug. "It's not like we even had a conversation about it. On top of that, Edward is my father's best friend, which is just really difficult to deal with."

Susanna stares at me. "Yes, I can see why that would be a problem," she says quietly. "Nessa, sweetie, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Of course I don't." I shrug defeatedly. "But he makes me feel like I can fly. It's special to me, Susanna."

She gives me a sympathetic glance, completely devoid of judgment. "Ah. One of those."

"I don't want to scare him off, either," I say helplessly. "Men like him hate neediness. They call it smothering. So, what am I supposed to do here?"

Susanna peels a potato in silence. I watch her glumly.

After a while, she says, "If you're willing to take the risk and stand up to your family, I think you might have something special here. From all I've seen and heard, he *is* one in a million. But take it easy. Don't rush it. I've found that things have a way of turning out for the best, no matter what we do. Or don't do, as the case may be."

And that, coming from a woman who lost everything and still had the strength to survive. I have to think this through, but maybe she's right. I nod slowly.

Susanna gives me a kind smile. "Well. My only other piece of advice is don't wait too long. It could blow up in your face and cause a much worse situation, trust me."

She stares off into the middle distance, recalling who knows what painful memories from the past. "You don't want the rug pulled out from under you. Be cautious. But above all..." her eyes brighten to sparkling chips of emerald. "Have *fun*."

I give her a quick two-finger salute. "Yes, ma'am!"

Susanna gives me a gentle kiss on my cheek. "That's enough potatoes for today. Now run off and meet your Prince Charming, sweetie. Good luck!"

Luck, I think. Yep. And confidence, and willpower, and some of that indomitable courage that Susanna has.

I'll need all of that and more for tonight.

10

Edward

I can't say I'm even surprised at Vanessa's sudden stance. I've come to know her well enough to realize she's nothing like the rebellious party girl her parents were stressing about.

How typical of Alyssa, I think with exasperation. As usual, she has made huge, sweeping assumptions, thrown a huge tantrum, and then punished Bob for doing nothing more than existing in the same plane of reality as herself.

Not for the first time, I find myself thinking of Vanessa with increasing sympathy. She must have had a hell of a time growing up in the middle of all that conflict and ugliness.

So of course she wants a real date next time. Not some sleazy encounter, perhaps nothing intensely sexual either, but something more comfortable, more relaxed.

In fact, given the blazing chemistry that tends to explode in our faces every time we meet, it's not the worst idea to take it slow for a bit. Establish some ground rules, make sure nobody's getting in over their heads.

Well, make sure *I'm* not getting in over my head and out of my depth, technically speaking. Vanessa is always superbly the mistress of the situation, unafraid and unashamed to take the lead, at least sexually. I'm the one who's in danger of being led on a string. Especially if it's wrapped around her little finger, sadly.

I tell myself that I haven't even seen a movie since Leonardo DiCaprio's

Don't Look Up came out, and that was only because I was trapped in somebody's fundraiser and couldn't find an excuse to leave. Going to the movies is not something that really occurs in my life, so at least it'll be a fresh experience.

And it's Vanessa, and whatever she wants, she can have. If she wanted the moon, I'd try to have it airlifted to her house. So in comparison, taking her to the movies will be a cakewalk and not a challenging or sweat-inducing experience at all.

It's only as I'm getting ready for tonight that it occurs to me to consider how much of an anomaly my behavior is right now. I was going to play it cool, and look at how I've overreacted.

At some point during the course of the day, I ask one of my assistants to book me movie tickets to see whatever the latest romcom is. But instead of receiving tickets to the show, I find myself receiving a visit from my head of security.

"A movie? Really, sir?"

I stare down my nose at Miguel Juan Carlos. Highly accredited security expert and former Navy SEAL that he is, he treats every step I take out of his direct line of sight as a nuclear escalation-level threat.

But I'm not having him ruin this for me. Not tonight.

"What's so difficult about going to a movie theater?" I snap at him. "People do it all the time."

"You're not *people*, sir," he says gently, giving me back stare for stare. "You're one of the most high-value targets alive. I simply cannot allow you to enter an unvetted public space under any circumstances."

My fingers curl into a fist on my desk.

"You cannot *allow* me?" I repeat quietly. "*I pay you*, my friend. It's not the other way around. You don't get to give me permission to do a single fucking thing around here."

Miguel gives me a level look, his aquiline features suddenly austere.

"You pay me very well, sir," he agrees. "Specifically, you pay me to keep you safe and alive. I can't do that if you go out of this building without a pre-planned route, a surveillance team, and an armed escort on high alert. All of which is incredibly difficult to pull off in a crowded movie theater. Sir."

Translation: *You're an idiot and I'm not being paid enough for this shit.* I narrow my eyes at the man.

"Thanks for the update, Miguel," I say grimly. "But you'll just have to

figure it out. I'm taking a girl to the movies tonight, whether you like it or not. This is a special occasion, so why don't you go ahead and give me a call when you figure out your plan of attack?"

His dark eyes glaze over a little. "Ah. I see. I hadn't realized it was a special occasion, sir. Could you possibly do it at home?"

"How can I possibly take a girl to the movies at home, Miguel?" I say irritably. "That completely defeats the point."

In fact, I've thought about it. Instead of going out in public, I wanted to suggest Netflix and chill to Vanessa when I spoke to her earlier today.

But then that wouldn't be a real date, just another excuse to fool around. And she's made it clear that she wants more, so what choice do I have?

"You have a home theater, sir," says Miguel, answering my unspoken thoughts. "You could explain that you have security concerns and that there's a way to replicate the experience—"

"No!" I almost roar. To my surprise, Miguel almost flinches. "She wants to go *out*! As in outdoors, in public, in front of other people, as in a normal date like a normal couple! What is so difficult to understand here?"

He opens his mouth, then shuts it. I immediately feel a stab of regret for taking out my bad temper on this innocent man.

"I apologize for my outburst," I say stiffly. "I haven't had a real date in a long time, that's all. I think I'm just nervous."

And somehow, that one admission of vulnerability causes Miguel's face to soften.

"I understand, sir." He draws in a deep breath. "I'll figure something out, not to worry."

"Thank you, Miguel," I say bleakly, knowing that I'm going to worry anyway for the rest of the day. "I appreciate the effort."

In the event, Miguel does a fantastic job. He finds a small drive-in movie theater, tucked away in one of those random leafy corner parks that New York City still retains against all the odds.

It's a tiny location, he tells me, but it's open-air, there's safe access to car routes, and he's going to station his team on the nearby rooftops on the surrounding high-rises just in case someone chooses tonight of all nights to assassinate me. So at least with Miguel on board, I don't have to worry that I put Vanessa in the line of fire.

There is also the option of dinner in a picnic basket, flowers and candy, and a variety of popcorn buckets to choose from. Miguel offers me this

plethora of regular-people dating hacks with a stolidly paternal air. It's almost as if he's more invested in my love life than I am.

I still cringe at the thought of calling it *love*. It's Vanessa and she doesn't do rules, but I have my limits, and I don't do relationships, so where does that leave us?

I try not to think about any of it as meaning more than *just a date, nothing to worry about*. Meanwhile, I also have a housekeeping team filling the house with flowers and scented candles for when Vanessa arrives.

Excessive? Yes, probably. But I don't want her to think I'm not trying here.

She shows up in something pretty in black and white, but as far as I'm concerned, she could be wearing sackcloth and ashes and still look like the most beautiful woman alive.

"Hi." She smiles at me shyly. "You ready?"

I don't know. I hope so.

"I'm ready," I say with a confidence I don't feel. I haven't felt this nervous since I got dumped the night of prom, but I'm definitely not telling her that.

"Oh, those orchids are gorgeous," she says, spotting the flower arrangement near the doors. "I didn't see those last night, but to be fair, I think I was really drunk and didn't realize."

"Oh, housekeeping does that," I say nonchalantly, though I'm pleased she noticed. "Shall we?"

In the end, it's a pleasantly relaxing night. Vanessa loves the little drive-in movie theater at the park, and the fact that they run classic romantic comedies exclusively. She perks up at the opening credits of *Notting Hill* and gives me an exhaustive rundown of every other movie Julia Roberts has ever been in as well.

I don't mind. She's tucked in next to me on a gingham checked picnic blanket, her hand in mine as she walks me through the plotlines of *Erin Brockovich*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Pretty Woman* and *Runaway Bride* in between watching this movie, which she's clearly seen a hundred times before but enjoys anyway.

There are a lot of couples here, all whispering and giggling to each other. We're stuffing our faces with popcorn and the occasional chilled beer, enjoying the mild evening chill.

I've never seen this side of NYC before. I have known it always as the city that never sleeps. but this homey, intimate, and very cozy part of it is

now inextricably intertwined with Vanessa and the person I am with her.

It's something brand-new with faint echoes of long-ago as well, and I can't figure out how and why I feel like I could be with Vanessa like this my whole life, and yet it wouldn't be nearly long enough.

Overhead, a few faint stars send their light through the overhanging smog. The towering buildings around us fade out, lights going off in sequence as the last shift starts going home from work. Below the mulberry trees planted by some loving hand in this tiny park, Vanessa and I are in a peaceful oasis of our own.

And I don't even want to do more than hold hands. Whatever she gives me is enough. Seeing her happy is everything.

She cries at the end of the movie. Julia Roberts is onscreen, telling Hugh Grant that she's just a girl standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her. There are audible sniffs and sobs from every corner of the audience. I hand Vanessa a tissue before she even asks.

And afterward, we stroll back through the narrow, winding streets to where my car is parked. I don't mention that I have a trained sniper team watching us from the rooftops because why break the spell?

It's only that I can't very well take her in my arms and kiss her when I know other people are watching. Vanessa's warm smile disappears when I give her a quick, polite travesty of a kiss on the cheek before handing her into the car.

"This was really fun," she says tentatively, right after I start the car. "What did you think of the movie?"

I nod. "It was great. Pretty good. Realistic, too. I've known damaged actresses like that."

"Oh," she says, staring straight ahead at the road. "Yeah, I suppose you meet a lot of glamorous celebrities."

She's oddly quiet after that, but I think it's probably because she's just tired. I don't try to touch her or start anything at all.

We're both being careful. She asks me to drop her off a couple of streets away from her dad's house and looks around to check that nobody's watching before she gets out quickly.

"Thanks," she says, still clutching the tissue I gave her tightly in one hand. "This was... really something. I'll see you later, Edward."

I want to say something suave and charming, maybe about making plans to do it again sometime. But before I can reply, she's scurrying away, and I

realize she's just as embarrassed to be seen outside with me as I was.

Except that my reluctance has disappeared now, and she's still nervous about people finding out about us, so what does that say about the state of my heart?

I shake my head grimly and drive away. As I turn the car around, I find myself hoping that Bob *does* see us together. It might be easier to force a confrontation early on rather than sneak around like this indefinitely.

But first, I'd have to talk to Vanessa about it, and given the way she could barely look me in the eyes right now, well...

Well, I sure don't know what I'm doing here, but at least I've tried to make my intentions clear, such as they are. I only hope Vanessa makes up her mind about what she wants from me at some point because otherwise, she's liable to make me lose my goddamn mind.

11

Vanessa

A few days later, I'm still following Susanna May's advice not to rush things. After our movie date, I have been making contacting me harder for Edward. I hope it makes him want me more, maybe add a bit of mystery to whatever we're doing.

I'm frustrated that there's been no definition of what Edward and I are entangled in. Am I just another one of his adoring fans that he happens to be using for the time being? Am I replaceable? Do I matter to him? The unanswered questions are making me feel sick pretty much all the time.

Why is trying not to be needy so difficult? All I want to do is call him and invite him over so I can kiss him and inhale the woodsy scent of his skin. I want to feel him knead my ass as I ride him. To know I have him within my grasp is so goddamn titillating. It gives me a rush just thinking about being with him.

And it isn't just about the sex, though that is incredible. It's how Edward sometimes looks at me with a soft smile, and in the depths of his eyes, I see a light that is meant just for me.

Or am I hallucinating? Maybe he's looked that way at all the women he dates, and I'm just seeing what my mind wants.

My phone rings. I look down and see Edward's number. In a spurt of panic, I turn it face down on my bedside table.

I can only imagine what he's thinking. Maybe that I'm using him and have

had enough, or maybe even that something's happened to me? I highly doubt that he would call my father to check in on me. Well, at least I hope not.

And then there's the whole issue of bringing up our relationship, or whatever you might call it. It really seems more like a booty-call situation, despite the movie date. It kind of felt like I forced him into that and he totally regretted it afterward.

I have a distinct feeling that if I allow myself to get too close, I won't be able to go back. And when Edward grows tired of me, I'll end up destroyed.

I've been crushing on him for years, for crying out loud. I may be a passing fling for him, but to me, he's the one I think I subconsciously compared all men to.

But what Susanna May said about getting the rug pulled out from under me has me paranoid. Maybe I should answer, just to find out the worst that could happen.

But when the phone keeps ringing, I don't pick it up. Eventually, it goes silent.

I look at the clock and see I have just enough time to make it to my shift at the shelter. I'm so happy working there. It gives me a sense of purpose and pride, and it still surprises me how the constantly changing environment makes me feel like I'm truly making a difference in the lives of those I help.

As I leave, I go to pick up my phone, but then I leave it there on the night table. Edward is a distraction. I have to focus on self-care and my position with the company. I don't think Edward would be really attracted to an Ivy League dropout who's also a flake, not in the long term.

Secretly, I'm hoping he stops by the shelter again. It's been a while, but a girl can dream.

Maybe he'll whisk me away to some cozy cabin, and then we'll make love on a bearskin rug in front of a roaring fire, sweat dripping as we climax. I briefly wonder if the bearskin would chafe, but it is a romantic cliché, so it must be a good time. I mentally add it to my bucket list.

I walk into the shelter and feel like a celebrity. I've made several friends here, and they always seem happy to see me. I give a few hugs to my favorite people, grab my apron, and start prepping dinner. The kitchen is always hot, and I always feel gross at the end of the day, but it's also really satisfying.

I'm elbow-deep in dishwasher when I hear a chorus of greetings from the dining area. *Holy shit, it's Edward.* Has to be. The ladies always get excited when it's him.

I scurry off to the bathroom to make myself presentable, gasping when I look in the mirror. My makeup is running down my face, all mixed up with sweat, and my hair looks like it was styled by a three-year-old with an attention deficit problem. *Fuck.*

Using a brown paper towel, I rub most of my makeup off. Leaving the mascara, though, I wipe away whatever's leaked down my face. I bite my lips to add some color and then retie my hair in a ponytail. I'm still unhappy with my appearance, but at least I look better than before.

I slip out of the bathroom and return to the dishes. Edward still hasn't made his way to the kitchen, but I know it's only going to be a matter of time before I'm face-to-face with him again. I am a bit afraid he might tell me off right then and there.

But no, I know Edward is professional enough to keep his cool. I hope.

The door swings open. Edward walks in, smiling for all he's worth.

"Ladies," he says softly. "May I have the room for a few minutes? I need to speak to Vanessa."

The women in the kitchen give me worried glances but nod and leave the room at a breakneck pace. Once the doors swing shut, he crosses the room and grabs me by the shoulders. I hold my breath.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" he says, giving me a little shake. "I've been so scared, thinking something might have happened to you. Or that you were done with me. Are you? What's going on? Talk to me. Please."

The look in his mournful dark eyes is one of deep concern, and I immediately feel sorry for putting him through all this.

"I thought you might want some space," I say, making an effort to be casual. "I don't know if you're seeing other people, and I thought you might want to spend some time with them."

"And then there's the thing about not telling my dad about us. I don't even know what *us* is supposed to mean. *Are we an us?* And should we tell my father? Or are we just fucking around here?"

My voice is quavering by the end. A single hot tear rolls down my cheek. Edward frowns darkly.

"Come with me," he says, wrapping an arm around me and walking me toward the back door. It opens up to an alley crowded with people waiting to eat. Some are on drugs, and others are at various stages of passing out. The shelter can only hold so many people, and the overflow usually goes into this alley.

Edward has a slightly shocked look on his face as he takes it all in. "We're going to my car out front. Looks like it might have been easier going through the front door. Is it always like this?"

I purse my lips and nod. "This is only about half of the daily intake, actually."

We walk through all the people and the occasional pile of garbage to where Edward's car is waiting. He opens the door to the backseat for me, and I slide in.

Edward enters behind me and then puts up the opaque divider between us and the driver.

I open my mouth to speak, and instead, he presses a finger against my lips.

"Listen. I'm not sure what's going on between us either. I think it might be a bit too early to tell Bob, but you know what? He should know.

"It's just that he's your father, not mine, so I'll leave that decision up to you. And if you want us to tell him together, we'd better decide what we're doing here. Are you just fucking around with me?"

I scoff. "Am *I* just fucking around?" I say in disbelief. "Are you serious right now?"

"You were the one who let me think you were some random girl at your dad's Christmas party. What was I supposed to think?"

"What about you?" I retort indignantly. "You have a different woman on your arm whenever I see pictures of you online! You're listed as one of the city's most eligible bachelors. You date models, rocket scientists, and doctors, while I'm just a college dropout with literally no prospects. Why are you even interested in me?"

The scorching tears feel like they're making runnels down my face like acid. I wipe them on my sleeve and look into Edward's eyes. There is more than just a light in his eyes this time. Now, there's a glow of embers.

He grabs me by the back of the head and pulls my mouth hard against his. It's almost enough to make my lip bleed. I try to pull away, but I can't resist him. I know deep down, I never would.

He tastes of peppermint, and his pliant lips begin to kiss away the tears.

"I never want to see you cry again because of me. Next time, just come out and ask, okay? We do *not* need to play childish games, Vanessa. So don't act hard to get, because that's not what I want from you. I want a woman with a heart of gold who will tear my world apart and end up making it better in

the process."

He's saying everything I want to hear. If he turns out to have invented an app for telepathy or something, I'm going to kill him.

But I'm full of happiness now, and I can't help but giggle.

"Help me take off my clothes," I say softly.

"What? Here? Now?" He looks shocked.

"Don't act so surprised. Undress me, Edward."

"I don't think this is appropriate," he says sternly. I chuckle as he continues, "And I don't know if I can take it all off without shocking the driver. He might not be able to see us, but he can definitely guess what we're doing."

"I'm sure you'll manage," I say coyly, stroking a finger down the side of his face. His eyes light up, then soften. *He's looked at me like this before*, I realize, but I didn't know what it meant back then.

He pulls my T-shirt over my head to reveal my ugliest bra. I strip that off right away before he can notice the fact that the wire is missing on one side. Then I lean back on the seat, and he kneels before me, pulling off my jeans and my not-so-sexy panties.

Edward looks at me from between my legs, and without any further ado, he dives into my moist pussy, tongue first. One hand reaches up and plays with my pink nipples, twisting them gently. I moan, catching his palm to stroke along the fiery phoenix wing searing across my blurry vision.

"I like your tattoo," I say. "It's cute."

"Cute?" His head snaps up. I look down, surprised. "It's about strength, resilience, and resurrection combined."

I shrug. "Okay. But in a cute way, right?"

He snorts but decides to ignore me. His other hand explores my pussy, and he inserts two fingers inside to hit my most vulnerable spot. His tongue feels like silk against my inflamed clit. He makes little circles around the tip, and soon, my hips rise against his mouth.

"Just like that," I whisper, his hand pumping away at my insides. My legs begin to quiver of their own accord, and I feel myself start to lose control.

I grab him by the hair and gasp. "Edward, I need you to fuck me now."

In seconds, he pulls his trousers down past his knees and reveals his hard, thick cock. His girth is exactly what I want. *He* is exactly what I want.

I want to feel him stretch out my pussy further than ever before, do things to me that blow my mind and leave me panting.

So I straddle him and slowly lower myself on his cock, inch by slow inch. It always hurts a bit when he first enters me. He definitely isn't lacking in size. I shiver and make a pained little sound.

"Am I hurting you?" he asks, holding me away from his body with his strong hands.

"No, it's perfect." I kiss him hard on the mouth and then start riding, moving in slow motion up and down on his cock.

My ass cheeks slap against his thighs, and the sound begins to push me over the edge. The primal sound just does something for me in a way I can't explain.

Soon, I start grinding hard on his cock, and he breathes heavily.

I know he is close to climax, and I go harder and faster, pleasuring myself on his rigid length relentlessly. It doesn't take long before I throw my head back and cry out ecstatically, every nerve ending in my body on fire.

This is everything I live for, I think hazily. This is all I want, which means all of him.

Edward kisses my breasts and licks my nipple right before I feel his wetness join mine below. He jerks and spasms as he comes, and I sob in his arms as they encircle me.

I have never felt better and safer, and yet I find myself crying once again.

All I know is that I never want to lose this. Ever.

Now, if only I were brave enough to just say this to Edward as he holds me close and kisses me softly. It's almost like he loves me, and I want to ask if he could ever feel like that.

But I am a coward, and each tear is more evidence of that cold, hard fact.

12

Edward

"Don't cry," I murmur, stroking a hand up and down Vanessa's naked back. "Please don't cry."

But she continues to sob into my arms, nestled close to my chest and hiccupping slightly. It would be adorable if it weren't tearing my heart out of my chest.

I'm starting to realize that I should have been a lot clearer with her. She might be provocative with sex, but she keeps her underlying emotions hidden away with some very effective camouflage.

And I, an internationally acclaimed genius of computer programming, am a complete failure with human communications. I haven't said what I should have said, haven't asked for the things I wanted.

The things I want from Vanessa are fairly clear and uncomplicated in my mind. If only I'd known that she has been making a mountain of a very minuscule molehill in her mind.

"Vanessa, listen," I say softly, touching her bright golden hair. "We need to talk for real."

She wriggles on top of me, and my cock instinctively twitches in response.

"We *are* talking," she says, her voice muted. I frown.

"I mean we need to have a real discussion," I say reprovably. "Which cannot be achieved when we are both mostly naked and in the process of

coitus. Can you take this seriously, please?"

"No," she says, burying her tear-stained face in my shoulder. "Nobody who uses the word coitus should ever be taken seriously. You sound like a Sheldon."

"What's a Sheldon?" I ask, wondering why some strange man has been inserted into this conversation and what his threat level might be.

"You know," she groans into my skin. "Sheldon Cooper, the biggest nerd on the *Big Bang Theory*. He uses the word coitus a lot. It always gets a big laugh out of the studio audience."

I pause to digest this.

"I see," I say eventually. "As it happens, I was not aware of this cultural phenomenon. I suppose I *am* a big nerd. And I don't always know how to talk to people."

It's a pretty huge admission for me, given that it involves admitting a lack of competence, and also a mostly undiagnosed social anxiety disorder. So it surprises me when she laughs it off.

"You're not a nerd." She hiccups into her usual and irrepressible giggles. "I mean, okay, you kind of are, but in a really studly way. Kind of like the perfect combination of big brain and big dick, you know what I mean?"

I think it means she's trying to give me a compliment, but it's not exactly the affirmation I was looking for.

"Thank you," I say, choosing my words carefully. "That's a really nice thing for you to say."

And it is. It's kind and sweet, and it seems like I'm the one who should be trying to be thoughtful when she's the one who's been crying, so I don't really know what to do with this now.

"I think you're really nice," I say, patting her back. She goes still for a moment, then leans back to survey me ironically, albeit with reddened, puffy eyes.

"Wow, Edward," she says, wrinkling her nose at me. "With that kind of game, you could give Casanova a run for the title of the most legendary lover of history, you know that?"

"I wasn't trying to play games," I protest, but she's scrambling off me already, looking around for the tattered remains of her clothes.

"I didn't say you were trying to play games. I implied you don't *have* game," she corrects me, holding up her T-shirt to her chest protectively. "As in, you don't have smooth moves or smart lines."

"Sometimes I do," I say, crossing my arms and pretending to sulk.

"Yeah, I bet," she replies wryly. "All those really sophisticated socialite types probably want a bit more than 'hey, you're really nice,' right?"

And how all the last vestiges of her smile are wiped away now, leaving only watchful sky-blue eyes and a few taut lines around her mouth, I really can't imagine.

"Those other women were completely different," I retort. She nods.

"Bet," she says again, automatically reverting to the exact kind of hybrid urban vernacular and textspeak I most abhor. What is the point of attempting the correct form of communication if there are no rules to communication?

"And," I persist in explaining myself against the obvious odds, "everything is different with you."

"I knew that too." She takes in a quick, gulping breath. Behind the T-shirt, her shoulders are hunched in defeat. "I mean, we both knew that from the beginning. I'm not trying to put my insecurities on you, here. I'm really not."

Well, you're doing something, I reflect morosely. I just wish I knew what.

"I guess I'm out of my depth with you," she says, and suddenly, I am reminded of how heartrendingly young she still is. She looks just like a kid sometimes, sweet and bubbly, and entirely vulnerable to the world.

And I'm closer to her dad's age than to hers, to the point where even her speech patterns feel like a foreign language to me sometimes. A dull wave of depression and self-loathing washes over me.

"I shouldn't have done it," I say, speaking more to myself than to her. "I should never have gone near you, not once I knew who you were."

Hurt flashes in her eyes, then she looks down at her shoes. Sitting hunched over in the car next to me, she really does look like an upset kid.

"I agree," she almost whispers. "I shouldn't have done it, either. Gone near you, I mean. Because I *did* know who you were and I didn't care, so technically, I started it."

"Yeah." I loop an arm around her shoulders. "And if I knew how to stay away from you now, I'd do that too. Doesn't look like I'm learning anything from my mistakes, huh?"

She swallows a sob. "Are we breaking up?"

"Idiot." Am I talking to her or myself or just about the incredible unfairness of it all? I don't even know anymore.

"No, we're not breaking up. I'm literally telling you I can't, even if I try."

"But you're not happy," she states with conviction. I'm just about to open my mouth to deny it when she adds, "I know I'm not."

I pause, a black hole swallowing the pit of my stomach.

"You're not?" I ask. *Then why were you laughing before?*

"Mostly, I'm not," she clarifies. "When I see you, it's fine, but the rest of the time, I'm just always feeling anxious, and guilty, and scared of anyone finding out about this."

"Okay." It's not okay, but I'm going to pretend it is for a second while I catch my breath. "Do you want to tell your dad?"

She stares down at her hands. "I don't know what I want." She inhales deeply. "I'm probably just overreacting. Hormones, wrong time of the month, something like that. It doesn't really matter, I guess. This is between us, right? Nobody else needs to be involved."

Yes, this is between us, but also, I want to shout your name from the rooftops.

I swallow the words whole. *Don't fucking say it aloud.*

"This is between us," I agree. *Whatever you want, you get, Vanessa.* "You don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to."

"Yeah. I appreciate that." She sounds truly miserable now, like I've introduced her to a lifetime of guilt, secrets, and lies. "Thanks."

"You don't have to keep thanking me," I say roughly. "I'm doing the bare minimum here."

"Okay." She starts to put the shirt on over her head. "I guess I'll get back to work now."

Don't go. Don't leave me here by myself. I don't know how to do without you anymore.

"Okay," I say aloud. "I should head back too."

She won't look me in the eye anymore. "I can't find my underwear," she says in a small voice.

I swear, pull myself together, and check along the back of the seat. "Yeah, got it. Here."

"Thanks." She takes the scrap of fabric from me. "Um. Can you turn around for a second?"

"Really?" I stare at her. I'm starting to get angry now. "Literally minutes ago, you were riding me bareback, and now you want privacy?"

"Um." She bites her bottom lip worriedly, leaving a pair of small red marks. "I think so, yeah."

No. Fuck that.

I reach for her. "Not happening."

She doesn't resist, doesn't even try to push me off when I kiss her. Her lips open under mine, willingly and desperately, and I taste her tears around the shape of her mouth.

"This is really stupid," I tell her, pulling her back into my arms. "In fact, it's really fucking inadvisable. If I knew how to stop, I would."

"Me too," she says, cuddling into my shoulder like she belongs there. Maybe she does. "Probably."

We stay like that for a while. I know she's still miserable, but she's calmer now. If that's the best I can do, it still counts.

I couldn't have let her go away from me without at least trying to make her feel better. I didn't know someone else's happiness could ever be so important to me.

If only I could say the words. If only she could figure out exactly what she wants.

It sucks that I'm so bad at saying the things that really matter, but there are no rules with Vanessa. So even if I were a smooth-tongued charmer, I still wouldn't be able to figure it out.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me," she whispers. It sounds almost like a confession.

I stare blankly out the car window, as opaque to myself as to everyone outside.

Me neither, my love. Me neither.

13

Vanessa

I am still unsure what to think of the sex Edward and I had, and for some odd reason, I feel hyper-emotional. We're at his apartment again, sprawled across his massive four-poster bed that is lifted off the floor by a couple of feet. I had to be thrown on or use the steps. We're naked, and I'm tangled in his sheets and his arms.

For some reason, this time, I feel like there is acid bubbling in my stomach. *I want to either throw up or get out of here*, I realize.

This isn't my place, and this was never my world. Edward is my dad's best friend, and he's obviously ashamed to stand up and fight for us. And the polar opposite swing of moods from hard, immediate sex into sweet, carnal delight is giving me severe whiplash.

Most strong, independent women would have left the minute they found out they were someone's dirty little secret. No matter how hard I try, I can't help but feel humiliated that we have to hide everywhere we go. I'm surprised that we haven't been discovered by some cheap tabloid yet.

It's only a matter of time.

This fact is making it more urgent by the day that we tell my dad. My mom would want to know, too. She would make this my sordid little love affair to gossip about and maybe prove to everyone that she was right about me all along.

Despite everything that Edward said, I still can't help the fact that I feel

there is something wrong. Is the secret sex a sign of some hidden guilt, or is it just a bit of kinkiness?

Does it matter that it leaves me feeling used and taken for granted? Or is there some other emotional problem with me? Tears dampen my pillowcase.

Edward is sound asleep, and I extricate myself from his grasp. I pick up my clothes and bag and creep to the bathroom. I look at myself in the mirror and can't even hold my own gaze.

I feel shame and wish I could be invisible. I can't pinpoint why, but so many things are bothering me.

I quickly get dressed, tie the sweaty strands of my blonde tresses up, and wash my face. Feeling a bit better, I leave the bathroom and see Edward still asleep. I walk carefully across the room and prepare to leave.

"Sneaking out again, are you?" I jump and let out a squeak. I was so sure he was asleep.

"I just need to go," I say, my eyes drifting away from him.

"What's wrong? Were you crying again?" He looks like a hurt puppy with those big brown eyes of his. It's so unfair that he can make me feel like I did something wrong so easily.

"Yes," I mutter, "and I don't know what's wrong with me. I just need some alone time. There are some things I need to figure out for myself. Don't take it personally. I'm just in a mood."

Way to dismiss yourself and your feelings, Vanessa, I can't help but think.

"I don't buy it," he says, scowling. "Tell me what's wrong. I don't want you leaving here in tears."

"I'm not cry—" I realize I am.

He gets out of bed and comes over to me. I can't help but notice his sleek, naked form and his oversized manhood.

Even in my sadness, he evokes something in me that is profoundly, purely sexual. But I'm hardly crying about that.

Edward pulls me into his arms, and I rest my head on his warm chest. I close my eyes and almost lose myself in his body's warmth before I yank myself back.

"I'm sorry, Edward. I need some privacy and some time to think about things. When I'm near you, I can't trust my own thoughts and feelings. And I don't know if you feel the same as I do, because I don't know what to think or feel about myself. Does that make any sense?"

He's now looking at the floor between us as if it were a long, burning

bridge. He drops his arms to his side, and his chest heaves.

Suddenly, he becomes icy cold, and the business mogul Edward Rutherford stands before me. His whole demeanor has changed before my eyes.

"Well, then, I guess you'll contact me when you want to. I'll give you the space you want. Are you still going to work at the shelter?"

I nod, suddenly awkward. "I don't want to quit or anything. I just need to clear my head."

I turn away from him and head to his main door, grabbing my shoes and sliding them on along the way.

He's holding the door for me when I look up, and so, as a last-minute thought, I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him on the corner of his mouth. He turns his head, and his lips press against mine.

"Don't disappear for too long or I'll have to kidnap you."

I offer him a weak smile and get the hell out of there.

I realize that my car is still at the shelter. Not wanting to turn back and ask for Edward's driver, I begin to walk to my destination, thinking glumly about my whole predicament.

A block away, I find a cute little café, and the delicious scents emanating from it make me stop. I order a tea and a cheese biscuit and call for a cab.

The soft biscuit almost crumbles in my hand, and it is as flaky and filling as I'd hoped. I had been feeling nauseous, but now I'm famished. I order another biscuit, and my cab is outside in a few more minutes.

The drive to Dad's isn't long, but I'm still exhausted by the time I get there. I'm just happy the driver isn't the chatty type, and I tip him well for his silence.

I know I've been giving off vibes to leave me alone. Hopefully, my father won't notice. He'll question me if he sees me, so now I have to be in stealth mode.

However, entering the mansion without anyone noticing would be like breaking into Edward's secured apartment. They both use Edward's state-of-the-art security systems. Likely, Dad had programmed it to be notified when I entered the premises.

I make my way in and am not even surprised when my father comes walking into the main foyer from his office.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you, honey. It's almost like you're avoiding me," he says, looking anxious.

But then he gives me a small smile and a shake of his head as if he knows I'd never do that to him. *Mixed signals much, Dad?*

"I've just been busy." I shrug.

"Are you partying a lot, still?" His eyebrows scrunch up. I can see him dreading my answer just in how he looks at me.

"Nope, not even a little bit. I've been keeping busy and focusing on myself and my job," I reply immediately. "I just came home early today because I know I need some alone time and to rest before I get overstressed again." It's the closest thing he's going to get to an honest answer for now.

I want to open up to him and tell him the truth, but Edward is flipping between hot and cold, and all my fears and insecurities are floating up from the depths of my sad and insecure little being.

"Are you going out again today?" He still has to ask. I repress the urge to roll my eyes.

"No, I'm going to take a bath and then a nap. Maybe something to eat as well." My stomach starts to grumble.

"I'll send Mary up with some food for you," he says, brightening. "She made an excellent casserole last night that I think you'd enjoy."

Typical Dad. No asking, just assuming. It makes me angry for unknown reasons that I don't want to get into right now.

"Sounds good," I say wearily. "Can you just get her to leave it outside my room in the hall?"

I don't even want to eat anymore, but turning it down is pointless. No matter what I say, I'd find a tray of food waiting for me.

Dad nods and turns away, leaving me to simmer in my own thoughts. As I stand there in the foyer of our home, I can't help but feel that I am betraying the person I love most.

I head to the bathroom. In minutes, I'm floating in my jet tub. As I scrub myself, I feel a light cramping in my gut.

Is it feelings of guilt making me feel so ill? It's the most likely explanation. I'm a terrible liar, and hiding something like this from my dad is definitely making me uncomfortable.

I wonder if it's bothering Edward too, or if he just has these torrid little affairs all the time, just for some cheap thrills.

When Edward turns on his cold front, I feel the chill strike right at my core. He's a real pro at turning off his emotions. I know it's a trait most business people have, which I learned from watching my dad conduct himself

both personally and professionally. I just don't like it when it's used against me.

I am going to be keeping my distance from Edward from here on out, I swear to myself. I don't know where this is going, but I don't like how it makes me feel. I don't want to get sucked into whatever game he's playing. At least now, I know how to protect myself. It might not be enough, but at least I'm trying. Right?

I'll just have to wait and see what happens next. All I can do is tough it out and hope for the best.

And in the end, it might all work out. Maybe.

And maybe pigs can fly, too, I reflect wryly. What I need here is a way to test Edward's real intentions.

After a few minutes of intent thought, I realize there *is* a perfect way to see how much he really cares. I have a secret weapon he doesn't know about.

I nod fiercely and call Susanna May.

14

Edward

Later that evening, I see Vanessa calling on my private number. The one that only my lawyer and two personal assistants in two different countries have.

This is my emergency line, the one that's never switched off. I'm not close to anyone in my family, which is scattered all over the place, and I don't really make an effort to stay in touch with any of them. Even Bob only calls on one of my other numbers.

So now that Mom's gone and Dad's retired to the Villages in Florida, Vanessa's the only one who has a personal reason to be calling me on my private line.

I pick up immediately. "Hi. Are you okay? Are you feeling better now?"

"Yeah, I'm totally fine," she says, and she sounds it, too. All bright and chipper, like she wasn't crying her eyes out just hours ago.

I really, really hate it when Vanessa cries. It makes me feel more frustrated and helpless than I've ever been, and I've watched the Patriots play without Tom Brady.

"Okay, that's good," I say cautiously. "Where are you?"

I want her to say she's done with work and she'll come meet me at home and then we can spend more time together and this time it won't end with her in tears, ideally. And I could just ask, but if she says no, I don't want to hear it.

"Oh, I'm at the shelter," she says. "Listen, can you do me a favor?"

Anything. Anything at all.

"Sure," I say. "What is it?"

"Okay, so there's this friend of mine," she says, dropping her voice a little. "Her name is Susanna May, and she's living at the shelter temporarily. I think you met her when you dropped in, actually."

"Maybe," I say slowly. "Sweet little old lady, blue streaks in white hair?"

"Yeah, that's her," Vanessa confirms at once. "So anyway, the reason that she's at the shelter is that some terrible person scammed her out of everything, basically. He managed to convince her that she owed back taxes to the IRS, and then he acted like he was going to do her a huge favor and let her pay back the money with Apple gift cards, or otherwise, she'd go to jail."

My jaw drops open. "And she believed this?"

"She's in her seventies, okay? She's not tech-savvy," Vanessa shoots back. "And she doesn't have any close family to look after her or warn her about this type of thing, so that's how she ended up losing everything. Her retirement savings, her apartment, her car—it's all gone, Edward."

"Fuck." I scrub a hand through my head. "What can I do to help?"

I mean, I'm perfectly happy to sign a check and get Vanessa's friend back on her feet. But I'm really not prepared for what she says next.

"I want you to help us get revenge," says Vanessa viciously.

This voice is odd, coming from her. I've often heard her upset, but this is the first hint of anger she's ever displayed.

My jaw is about to hit the floor now. "Sorry, but did you say *revenge*? Are you serious?"

"I'm dead serious," she replies, grimness threading through the words. "Susanna still has a contact for this guy, but obviously, he's not picking up anymore."

"Yeah, no shit." Because why would he after he'd already bled his mark dry?

"We want to find him, and we want to make him suffer," hisses Vanessa. "We know he probably already spent the money or at least put it somewhere so that we can't touch it."

"But you know encryption, right? *You* used to be a white hat hacker, originally. So you can find him, and then we'll report him, and then we'll bring a lawsuit for damages or something."

There's a distinctive note of hopefulness in her tone. I can just picture it

now—Vanessa with her septuagenarian buddy in tow, marching off on a crusade to defeat evil at all costs.

"I can try, I guess," I say reluctantly. Though to be honest, signing the check would have been much less of a pain. "Send me the contact details for him."

"Really?" she squeaks. "Susanna, he said he'll do it! Edward, you're the best!"

"No, I said I'll *try* to do it," I interject hastily, but it's too late. I can already hear multiple people celebrating in the background as if Susanna May's revenge is an accomplished fact.

Maybe I should be flattered that these people at the shelter have such touching faith in my ability to solve Susanna's problem, but this is just making me queasy. I wonder how Vanessa might react if I disappoint her and gulp. *I think I need a Pepcid, among other things.*

"Okay, so send along that number and I'll see what I can do," I tell Vanessa warily. It's not too early for me to try and manage her expectations in a downward direction, but she just sounds so goddamn happy. I don't want to crush her optimism by telling her the truth about what a long shot any of this is.

"Okay, sending," says Vanessa excitedly. "It's in your text messages. Can you see it?"

"Yeah, got it." I can hear someone talking frantically in the background. "So, um. I'll call you back later when there's an update." If there's any update at all.

"Oh, wait!" Vanessa shrieks over all the background noise. "Susanna wants to say thank you."

And next thing I know, her phone's been passed on to some old woman whom I can barely remember meeting but who is so touchingly grateful for something I haven't even done yet that I can't possibly interrupt her while she's expressing her feelings.

"This means so-oh, so-oh, so much to me, Mr. Rutherford," says Susanna, breathing heavily with what I can only hope is the weight of her emotions. "It's been s-such a long time since anyone even oh-offered to help me with this. You just h-have no idea. I really thought it was all over for me."

I instantly resolve to move heaven and earth if I have to if it means helping this poor woman. Not only will it impress Vanessa, but Susanna May is either having a huge panic attack right now or has some other reason for

needing an oxygen tank on standby. She clearly can't continue to live at the shelter like this.

"I'll do everything I can, Ms. May," I say in all sincerity. "We'll work together to fix this."

"Bless you, young man," she says, and I think she might be starting to cry now. I feel terrible.

It's been years since anyone called me a young man, and it must be half a lifetime ago that I last worried about some random stranger's wellbeing. I remember giving some cash to a homeless dude outside a convenience store once, but that's about it. The rest of my charity has all been conducted through my PR people.

I'm just starting to realize that I am an extremely selfish and self-obsessed person. Which is probably the exact opposite of what a girl like Vanessa wants from a man.

No wonder she's always so eager to leave. It's probably only the sex that she can't stop coming back for.

What a profoundly disillusioning thought. Susanna is still talking, but I've zoned out, thinking of how easily I could end up like Scrooge McDuck, old, lonely, and loathed by all.

Vanessa comes back on the line. "Hey, Edward? Are you still there?"

"Yeah. Yes," I say hurriedly. "I'm just, you know, thinking. About how to track this person down. I can probably get the scammer traced by tonight, but it looks like an international number, so our options for, um, retaliation could be limited."

"Yeah, but we'll just report him to the authorities where he lives," says Vanessa triumphantly, with a supreme disregard for the state of police corruption in jurisdictions far, far outside the United States.

"I guess," I say weakly. "I'll call you back when I have something, okay?"

I hang up with her joyful *thank you so much, Edward, you're such a star* still ringing in my ears.

Okay. I crack my knuckles. Time to see what we have here.

I put all of my other work on hold, tell my PAs I don't want to be disturbed until I say otherwise, and put in a personal call to Jimmy, one of the brightest stars in Phoenix R&D.

"Boss man!" he chirps as he picks up immediately. "What can I do for you?"

"Hi, Jimmy," I say. "Look, this is a bit below your pay grade, but can you

track a number for me? It should already be in your email."

"Sure." He takes a brief pause. "Yeah, I see it. What is this about?"

"It's personal," I say. "A favor for a friend. She, um, got scammed and lost her pension or something."

"Oh, man. That sucks," sighs Jimmy with ready sympathy. "Yeah, let me see what I can do. Do you want me to call someone in our white hat list, see if we can get the money back?"

"If it's doable by today, sure." I shrug, making a mental note to check the exact amount with Vanessa. I'll still end up signing a check to Susanna May, probably, except I'll pretend I managed to recover it from the scammer instead of letting her feel bad about accepting my charity.

Though I might mention it to Vanessa at some point, in confidence. I don't want her to think I don't care about her friend.

Jimmy calls back within an hour. I've tried to focus on other things in the meantime, but I have ended up scanning every phone number I could track within a digit filtering program with the same sequence just because I can't resist the challenge.

"We have a location match!" he announces gleefully, and I feel a stab of envy for the younger, clearly more skilled man. "It's in the sketchier type of business park in India. They have multiple bad reviews for their scam tactics on their business page, too, right out in the open. I can't believe people still fall for this."

"The lady's in her seventies. She probably can't even connect to the internet without help," I reply curtly. "Give me the details, Jimmy."

"Okay," he says, sounding abashed. I feel bad because that was my gut reaction to Susanna May's predicament, too, and I promise myself that I'll add a bonus to his monthly paycheck. "I've put it in an email. Should we make contact?"

"No," I reply. "I'll handle it. Thank you, Jimmy."

It's the middle of the night in India, and yet their so-called director of operations picks up the phone on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hello," I say. "Is this TechWhiz?"

"Yes, speaking, how may we help you, sir?" he recites in a way that makes me instantly want to laugh. I suspect he thinks everyone with an American accent must be an idiot.

"I'm happy to see you're still working on the night shift," I say lazily. "Gourav Sharma, is it? Is that your real name?"

"Excuse me?" he says with manufactured outrage. "Yes, that is my name. May I be knowing your name, sir, and what is your reason for calling?"

I roll my eyes. With that accent and dialect, it's a miracle even an innocent old lady like Susanna didn't smell a rat.

"I'm Edward Rutherford, CEO of Phoenix Incorporated," I reply. "I'm calling because you owe me money."

There is a pause.

"You're Edward Rutherford?" he says weakly. I know he's heard of me, because otherwise, he wouldn't sound so intimidated. "Sir, I'm very happy to speak with you, but I don't think we have ever had any financial dealings to the best of my knowledge."

"We did, you just didn't know it," I tell him. "You stole a lump sum of money from an elderly friend of mine. Her name is Susanna May. She's" —I check my texts—"seventy-five years old, and you made her believe that she owed money to the IRS. Ringing any bells?"

There's another pause. The next time he speaks, he sounds downright plaintive.

"Sir, you're making a very serious mistake," he says. "We don't do anything like that here."

"Listen to me," I say calmly. "You and I both know that's not true. You know what I'm capable of, and I know where you live. Are you going to give me back my friend's money?"

"You don't know where I live," he protests, bluffing for all his life's worth. I respond by reading out his home address, his work address, his national ID card number, his personal bank account details, his wife's bank account details, and his car's registration number to boot from Jimmy's very helpful email.

"Sir," he almost wails. "Sir, don't do this. Why are you targeting me? I am innocent, I swear."

"Okay." I shrug. "Tell it to the cops in your city. If you do manage to bribe them, tell it to my lawyers in India, then tell it to my good friends at the CIA. There are ways to handle business you haven't even heard of, my friend. Do you really want to test me?"

"Oh, my God." And now he's sobbing. That's the third person who's cried because of me today. "How much money do you want?"

I glance down at Vanessa's number. "Fifteen lakh in your currency."

It's several times more than what Susanna May lost, but I think she

deserves the compensation for everything she's suffered since. Plus, Vanessa will be even more impressed.

I'm just disappointed when he agrees immediately. "Okay, sir. Okay. How should I send?" *I should have held out for more, then.*

"I'll send you the details," I tell him softly. "I have friends in Indian banking circles, you know. Remember that the next time you want to steal from anyone. I'll be keeping an eye on you, Mr. Sharma. Have a great night, though."

I hang up, grinning. *God.* This takes me back to the old and heady days in my dorm when I and my friends at MIT used to bait scammers for fun all the time.

It only takes me a few minutes to make arrangements with a senior vice-president in the same bank Susanna's thief uses to get her money back. And I didn't even need to make a call to my liaisons with the Pentagon and Langley respectively.

And then I call Vanessa.

"Hey." She picks up quickly, sounding breathless.

"Vanessa?" I'm still grinning widely. "I have some good news."

15

Vanessa

Edward is a hero. The people at the shelter are ecstatic that Susanna May is finally getting restitution for all the trauma she's been through.

Living on the streets is far from easy, but her huge heart and give-it-all attitude make the woman glow with something special that I can't describe. It's genuinely so fulfilling to see how happy she is to get her life back.

I still can't believe he did it. He actually did it. For *me*.

I want to make it up to Edward, but I'm not exactly sure how to do that. It's not like I can afford anything huge, not on my salary. But I muse over some ideas as we celebrate Susanna May's big win.

She has enough money now to set herself up with a nice little apartment and live comfortably for many years. I am so happy and relieved for her. I know being at the shelter at her age must have been so hard.

And Edward is here, socializing and talking with everyone who approaches him. No matter their age or appearance, he treats everyone as his equal. I sigh wistfully.

Edward notices me watching, and his face lights up. He gives me a conspiratorial wink, and I can't help but beam back at him. He looks so good in a T-shirt and jeans. I especially like the back view with his cute ass.

Susanna May hurries toward me with a grin that could light up a Christmas tree. She looks so beautiful and happy. It's hard not to feel motivated by her positivity and enthusiasm.

She takes my hand. "Thank you so much, Vanessa. I owe you so much, too. I know you're the one who asked him for help. Bless your heart."

And then she kisses my cheek and whispers, "Your man can't keep his eyes off you, can he?"

I blush. "I wouldn't go so far as to call him my man," I tell her in a low voice. "Things are as up in the air as ever. I left his place crying the other day. You should have seen how easy it was for him to shut down."

Susanna looks concerned.

"And it gets worse," I continue. "When we, uh—*did it* in his car, he told me that I'm very nice. Who even says that to a woman he just had coitus with? Which is how he referred to it, by the way."

"Oh, dear. That's very Sheldon Cooper of him, isn't it?" says Susanna May instantly.

"That's what *I* said!" I can't help but grin. "He didn't even get that reference! I'm starting to think that we're just too different to be together. And having to hide all the time makes me feel like a sneaky little traitor, as well. It's making me feel sick literally all the time."

"Are you leaving here with him tonight?" she asks tentatively.

I shrug. "We'll probably leave in separate vehicles, since my car is here. Last time, I didn't bring it, and I wished I had. It would have made it easier to escape."

"Well, here's some more ancient wisdom," she says comfortingly. "Don't let your head rule your heart. You two accomplished a miracle for me. Enjoy the time you spend together because you never know when it might all disappear, do you?"

"Really?" I stare at her. That's not at all what I was expecting her to say.

She pats my arm and walks away, smiling over her shoulder at me. I blink.

Then I turn back to see Edward walking up to me, confident and sure of himself as ever. He comes up to my side in almost a possessive way and whispers, "You look gorgeous."

I am in my usual workwear, an old 90s rock band shirt and a pair of acid-washed jeans. My hair is up in a butterfly clip, and I'm wearing minimal makeup. The last thing I feel like is gorgeous.

"Are you sure you're talking to the right person?" I can't help but ask sarcastically, self-preservation firmly mode on.

"Of course," he says, his brow furrowed. "You have to stop doing this

sort of thing, Vanessa. You really need to work on your confidence. You're a beautiful woman, and you should know it."

Actually, it's the last thing I want to do, seeing how it's my excessive confidence that got me into this weird fuck buddies situation with him in the first place, but I hold my tongue.

Everyone always thinks that because I'm busty, blonde, and have a rich dad, the path I tread through life is laid out on a red carpet. But if anything, it's more complicated because everyone sets completely unrealistic expectations about my self-worth.

"Thank you for the compliment, Edward. But you're the hero here."

"Well, this hero wants to spend some special time with his damsel in distress."

I went from being a beautiful woman to a damsel in distress in thirty seconds flat. That is such a typical male thing to do.

"Is there anything in particular you feel like doing tonight?" I've been working on an idea for a surprise, and I'm actually quite excited about it.

"No. I just can't wait to be with you."

I smile, tempted to tell him to reveal our secret here and now. Maybe by asking him to grab me and kiss me in front of all these people at the shelter. The news will reach my parents in a matter of hours, and then volcanic drama will ensue.

"Head to your place. I'll pick up a few things and be there in an hour or two."

Edward gives me a wicked smile. "A little mystery? Okay, I'm game. I'll be waiting." He grabs my hand and kisses the back of it before turning back to the crowd of people.

He announces to the room, "Thank you all for having me. I am so very happy I could help out Susanna May, and you guys have given me a hero's welcome. You all do so much for the community. I think all of you are the real heroes."

I practically roll my eyes at the clichéd ending to his speech, but then again, I don't want to offend anyone. I just want to avoid drawing any attention to myself, so I leave before anyone comes looking for me.

I head to the grocery store on my way home. The casserole Mary had made at the mansion the other day had been delicious, so I got the recipe out of her later.

I go through the grocery store at lightning speed, buying all the

ingredients and then some for a nacho dip I always make for special occasions.

No one greets me when I arrive home. It's just as well. I don't have time to dawdle when the food is still in the trunk of my car. I have to shower and pick out a sexy outfit. The shower part is easy enough, making sure my body is as smooth and supple as a baby's bottom.

I add my usual makeup, going with a light blue-green eye shadow that I've been told makes my eyes pop. I finish the look with liquid highlighter, blush, darkened eyelashes, and soft pink lip gloss.

It's the clothes that are the hard part to decide on. Since I'll be cooking, I don't want to wear anything special. So I dig out an old baby blue chiffon dress that is a bit outdated yet still looks great on me. I slip into a white strapless bra and matching panties, put on a pair of hose and kitten heels, and am out the door.

I think this is the fastest I've ever gotten ready. But I can't wait to see Edward's face when I surprise him.

Hopping back into the car, I speed over to Edward's place. The security detail carries in the groceries, looking a bit put out that I had asked them for help.

Edward greets me with a roguish grin. "What's all this?"

"I'm making you dinner, and then I'm dessert." I give him a look that I hope comes off as sexy, but he's making a face for some reason. I can't help but ask, "What's wrong?"

"You don't need to act like some suburban housewife for me," he says, almost with a cringe. *As if the thought disgusts him.*

I feel a pit form in my stomach instantly. Why would he say something like that to me?

"I didn't mean to come off that way." I'm at a loss for words.

"It's just the dress and then the groceries. Honestly? I'm surprised you even know how to cook. Don't you have everything made for you? I know for a fact that neither of your parents are home chefs."

I wince. This is not the first time I've been called spoiled, but it's the first time it's hurt so badly.

"It's coming off as a bit fake," Edward continues. *I wish he'd just stop talking already.* "You don't need to do this type of thing for me. Just be yourself. It's okay."

I don't know whether to burst into tears or smack him upside the head.

"I did actually take a few cooking classes growing up," I tell him. "I make my parents' meals all the time. To tell you the truth, I feel offended. What do you think, I'm just the typical empty-headed blonde and incapable of finding my way around the kitchen?"

It's actually funny to see how his face changes. Or at least it would be if I weren't feeling so upset.

"What? No. I mean... it's just..." he mumbles, suddenly at a loss for words. "Never mind, forget I said anything. I'll show you to the kitchen."

I don't know what to think. All I know is that I'm hurt, I'm pissed off, and I don't feel like cooking for Edward anymore.

But I follow him as he leads the way because anything else would feel like sulking. The bags of groceries are stacked on the island countertop. The kitchen is a chef's dream, with everything organized and cleaned to a pristine shine.

"How can I help?" he asks innocently, knowing damn well that I am pissed.

"You can take out everything from the bags and start washing and chopping the vegetables. I'm making a casserole and nacho dip."

"And are you still going to be my dessert?"

I give him a chilly look but neither confirm nor deny what may happen after dinner. He deserves *some* retribution, after all.

We begin to work in silence. Judging by how he works the knife, he's either an accomplished serial killer or genuinely knows his way around the kitchen. Maybe both, like Hannibal Lecter. With his complete lack of emotional intelligence, I wouldn't put it past him.

As always, when left alone in my head, I begin to feel uncomfortable. I come back to the same question that bothered me before. How much do I really know about Edward, aside from what the tabloids say or whatever my father has casually mentioned?

Sure, we're on fire when it comes to sexual chemistry, but I don't want to base a relationship on just that. Well, if it's a real relationship at all.

While I'm stirring the cheese sauce over the burner, I feel the tears coming on. *I'm so insecure*, I can't help but think to myself.

Edward is going to see right through me one of these days. He'll tire of me and find an older, more sophisticated and more attractive woman, maybe some tech-savvy socialite with a trust fund bigger than mine.

A tear slips down my cheek, and I quickly wipe it away. I see him out of

the corner of my eye as he notices my quick motion, but he fails to comment, which I'm grateful for.

I feel a little spiteful, wanting him to feel bad for his comment. Maybe I'm just being passive-aggressive here, waiting for him to apologize without demanding he do so in the first place.

"Why are you blushing?" he says with one black eyebrow raised.

"I'll never tell," I say with artificial brightness, accompanied with a wink and a smile.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love your dimple?" he says. I cover it instinctively.

He reaches out and pulls my hand away from my face. Then he pulls me into his arms. "I don't want to eat a casserole, Vanessa. I want to eat you."

"Okay, Hannibal."

"I bet your ass tastes delicious," he says with an outrageous smirk.

Then with a swipe of his arm and a huge clattering, half the kitchen island is cleared. He grabs my waist and lifts me onto the counter, pushing me so I lie back as he pulls up my dress.

"Turn off the cheese sauce first!" I cry out as his tongue delves into my slit.

"Oh, how I love your pillow talk," he says as he turns the stovetop off.

"There's no pillow here!" I say as his tongue returns to exploring my nether regions. He scoffs, but soon enough, I can barely breathe.

He's gripping my ass cheeks, one in each hand, pulling my groin onto his nimble tongue. All I can do is repeat, "Oh, my God, oh, my *God*, don't stop," as I feel my juices flowing.

He flips me over and bites my ass before sliding his stiff cock into my tight, wet entrance. I whimper softly as he enters me slowly, inch by inch.

"You feel like heaven," Edward says as he pulls his cock out and re-enters me. "Nessa, you're amazing."

I almost stop him, then and there. It feels far too weird, hearing him call me by my nickname for the first time like this. It's just too intimate for us, at least with the way I'm still feeling.

But all too soon, the exquisite sensations he causes with his fingers on my sensitive clit, coupled with the rough pounding he's giving me throughout, makes my muscles clench around him. My pussy muscles start throbbing as he starts to come inside me. I feel our juices drip onto the cold marble counter, and my chest heaves as I come down from one of my most intense

orgasms yet.

"You're incredible," says Edward, kissing me on the forehead as he pulls out of me and carefully pulls down my dress.

I don't say anything, but I want to.

Because if I'm so incredible, why don't I ever feel that way around him?

16

Edward

I cradle Nessa in my arms and carry her to bed.

Odd, how long it took for me to start thinking of her as that. Nessa is the name everyone else she knows uses for her, but I have always found it easier to say Vanessa. I'm not really sure why.

Maybe I just wanted to think of her as that scarlet seductress from the Christmas party instead of the girl whose dad is worried about her. Maybe that mental compartmentalization helped.

Maybe it helped me fuck her without guilt, but only for a while. She's Nessa, she's a whole person with a whole bunch of things I don't know about her that have been going on this whole time. And if I'd paid more attention to those things, she wouldn't be crying so easily.

Sometimes she does it secretly so she thinks I don't know. I always know. It's there in the raw skin around her eyes afterward, though I pretend not to notice.

I lay her down on the bed gently. For the first time in my life, the word *cherish* in other people's marriage vows makes sense to me.

I freeze. What an unusual and terrifying thought that was.

"Edward?" Nessa reaches up to me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say, and she looks at me like she knows I'm lying. "Take your dress off."

She pulls it off over her head immediately, tossing it aside. I start to feel

bad about this.

"It's a nice dress," I say coaxingly, leaning over her. "It's pretty. I didn't mean I didn't like it before."

"I know," she says, a flicker of the memory making her wince. "I know I'm not your usual type."

"Don't say that." My hands pause in the act of caressing her naked body. "Whatever happened in my life before I met you isn't important."

"Am I important?" she asks, scanning my face intently. I open my mouth, but then I fall silent. I don't know how to say this, I realize.

The moment stretches on and her face falls. I reach up to her face, but she turns away, getting up quickly.

"Forget I asked," she says, looking away. At the floor, for her clothes, anywhere but at me. "I'll just plate up the food."

I might be an asshole, but I'm not stupid. I grab her arm before she leaves.

"You're important," I tell her. "You're really important to me."

"Okay." Her smile doesn't reach her eyes. "Let's go eat."

I follow her to the kitchen. "And I didn't know you could cook. I guess I could have asked, but I never did. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she repeats. "Just tell me if you like the casserole, and be honest. I won't take it personally if you hate it."

I spoon up a healthy chunk of it before she even reaches for a plate. I'm prepared to lie through my teeth and say it's wonderful, even if it tastes like shit. But it doesn't.

"Oh, fuck," I say as my eyes go wide. "This is delicious!"

It's just something simple, brown rice with spring vegetables and layers of grilled chicken, just slipping off the bone. It's accompanied by a dip any Michelin starred restaurant would be happy to put on the table. I'm in heaven.

Nessa immediately starts looking more cheerful at my instinctive and appreciative reaction. We end up eating the casserole and dip right at the kitchen counter, half-naked and laughing together.

"Not that bad, right?" she says, peeking at me shyly through long eyelashes. "I learned most of the recipes I know online, but this one is a specialty of our cook at home. Her name's Mary and she let me have the recipe as a special favor."

Yeah, I knew she didn't get it from her mom. I can't picture Alyssa getting her hands dirty in the kitchen, but Nessa looks right at home there.

Home. There's another word I don't usually associate with women.

I push the random thought away. "Are you finished?"

"Yeah," she says, licking her spoon. My groin immediately tenses and I grow hard. "Almost."

"Can I have you for dessert now?" I ask plaintively. My hand is already under her skirt, my mouth on her neck, dropping kisses lower and lower.

"Maybe," she says slowly. "Okay, yes!"

I carry her back to bed in triumph.

The next day, I'm whistling when I walk into work. It's rare for me to be so cheerful this early in the day. I'm a lifelong night owl, and I tend to get grumpy when dawn comes.

But it's almost like I'm a new man now, with something to focus on in my personal life. Something to look forward to after I get home from work.

A number of people look at me, surprised. I don't know if they're happy for me or just relieved for themselves, but my good mood persists until it's almost time to get done with everything and head back.

"Car for you, sir?" says one of my PAs. Her singsong intonation would normally annoy me, but not today.

"Yeah," I say crisply. I'm planning to head to a flower shop on my way back to the house. I want to surprise Vanessa with something gorgeous, something that looks handpicked and customized just for her.

I kind of regret not telling her about the flowers last time. I didn't want to make a big deal of it, but she deserves to know I care about her happiness.

I pick out a huge bunch of Italian roses, dark red centers unfolding into perfectly soft petals fringed with pink. It's a hybrid variety, arranged to look like a spiral effect in motion inside a gold basket. She's going to love it.

My whole body is thrumming with anticipation in the lift up to my place. She's going to love it, and I'm going to love the way she rewards me. I'm hard and ready for her before the doors even slide open.

Only to see a dark house.

I freeze in my tracks.

"Nessa?" I call out. "Everything all right?"

There's no answer. Wild visions of her falling ill and needing to go to the hospital or being kidnapped from here or run over on the street cross my mind.

It takes me a while to accept the inevitable. *She's not here because she doesn't want to be here.*

I text her four, maybe five times before she replies.

"Hey, where are you?"

"I thought we'd planned to meet at my place?"

"Did you get late at work?"

"Are you okay?"

"Nessa, I'm getting worried now."

Finally, she replies.

"Sorry, sorry, Edward. I was just really tired after work today. Came right home, took a nap, just woke up. Can we reschedule?"

I stare at the phone. "Sure."

"Awesome. Talk later. I'm going back to sleep now."

"Okay. Take care of yourself."

I put the phone on the table in the hall, next to the huge basket of red roses, and walk slowly through the dark house.

Weird, how things hit you when you least expect them to.

I realize that the thought of seeing Vanessa tonight was all that got me through the rest of the day. And now that she's not here, it all seems futile somehow.

I reach the ceiling-to-floor windows looking out over the brightly lit expanse of the five boroughs and stare out, feeling depressed.

Weird, how you get used to having someone in your life. And then when they're not around, you feel even weirder for missing them.

I don't think she feels the same way, though. Why couldn't she just have slept here? The only answer is that she doesn't want me around tonight.

And I, the idiot that I am, thought it was all that I wanted, and so it was going to fall into my lap.

I head to bed, trudging painfully up the few short stairs as if it's the real-life equivalent of the torture of Sisyphus. Always pushing a heavy rock up a hill, only to see it fall back down.

I'll just watch something tonight, I think miserably. I don't have the energy to go out, but I've heard good things about this show called *The Expanse*. Watching a civil war in space is probably going to improve my mood, if anything.

I settle down glumly to start the first season. It would be better if she were here, obviously.

And I try not to worry about other things. For example, if she's ever coming back.

17

Vanessa

I wake up feeling like I've downed a dozen tequila shots or something. My stomach is bothering me a little, but not enough to call into work sick over it. I take a ginger tablet and suck it up. It was my fault I devoured a good chunk of the casserole plus the nacho dip. Having sex in the kitchen can really help you work up an appetite.

The sex was delicious, but I am still hurt by his comment about acting like a housewife. I think it's time to admit to myself that this relationship is not going to go much farther than fuck buddies.

The thing is, I don't think I can handle a casual relationship like that with anyone. It doesn't matter who it is. That just isn't me and has and never will be me.

I throw on a vintage Madonna shirt, pull on a pair of black tights and ballet flats, and then enter the bathroom to do my makeup. After a few minutes of primping, I head to the shelter for the day. I've been working there long enough that I've developed a routine. I stop at the same place for coffee and cheese biscuits if they haven't sold out already and munch my breakfast in my car until it's time to start work.

I can see people already lining up for their free meals, and I shake my head sadly. We are now serving almost double the amount of people than we had when I started working here. Unemployment rates are higher than ever, and drug use and overdoses, too.

Dad is now donating to all of Edward's shelters on top of all his other philanthropic work. I secretly hope he'll make himself a millionaire instead of a billionaire by donating all his money. But I know Mom and her alimony checks would be affected, and then there'd be hell to pay.

Speaking of Mom, it's been a while since I heard from her. She's probably too embarrassed to admit to her friends where I've chosen to work and has figured that ignoring my existence is the best course of action. I sigh and take a mental note to call her after work or on the weekend. She is my mother, after all.

I can't help but chuckle at how much she'd freak out if I told her who I was sleeping with, but now it looks like it would never matter whether I tell her or not. Who am I kidding? Edward sees our time together as temporary and only driven by our carnal desires.

My stomach grumbles. My breakfast still isn't agreeing with me. I don't feel nauseous exactly, just full and crampy. My alarm goes off on my phone, signaling that it is time to head in and start my shift. I climb out of my Volvo and head inside.

I greet my coworkers and the volunteers, and I discover they don't need me in the kitchen today. Instead, I'm in charge of setting up the seating area. I'm lugging chairs to the tables when I feel shaky suddenly. I go to sit down and everything goes blank.

Next thing I know, I find myself waking up in someone's arms and they are waving something under my nose.

"Are those smelling salts?" I ask.

"Yes, my dear," says a voice to my right. I recognize it immediately. Of course. Who else could possibly still be using sal volatile in the twenty-first century?

"Susanna May, did I pass out?"

"Yes, hun. Did you eat enough breakfast today? You look a little pale."

I start to sit up and realize that one of the volunteers is propping me up while everyone surrounds me anxiously.

I hear Susanna May start waving away people, telling them I'll be okay. I'm beginning to feel my head clear and tell her, "I was feeling a bit ill this morning. Maybe I should have stayed home."

Then I notice her eyeing my stomach in a significant way. "I think you should go home for the day and rest. Maybe stop by the pharmacy on the way," she says.

"I—" and then I clue in as to what the look means.

Susanna May thinks I might be pregnant? But I can't be. I'm on birth control. Sure, it's low-dose estrogen, but—*oh, fuck*.

Susanna suggests that my father's driver should pick me up, and I feel even more anxious and shaky now that I am seriously considering that I may be pregnant, so I agree. She walks me out of the shelter and waits until Ted arrives in the Lincoln Town Car. She even directs the driver to stop at a pharmacy.

I don't pick up just one pregnancy test. I grab three different brands. I ask the pharmacist about birth control failure rates and discover that it is uncommon but depends on whether you miss a dose and if you take your pills at the same time each day. I rarely forget a pill, but it has happened. I'm not sure when the last time I forgot was, but forgetting one pill can't make that big of a difference, can it?

All the pharmacist says is that I should use condoms, too, if I don't want to get pregnant. On the way out, I buy a box of condoms as well. Because if these tests turn out negative, I won't go without a condom again. I ignore the cashier's pitying look, get back into the car, and head home.

The first thing I do once I arrive is take a test. The three-minute wait is agonizing, and I have to remind myself not to look before the timer on my phone runs out.

I look at the stick and compare it to the box. *Oh, shit*.

Test two.

Oh, fuck.

Test three.

I'm sobbing uncontrollably and praying to God that it is all a big mistake. What am I going to do?

I hear a knock on my door and jump.

"Nessa, are you okay? I thought I heard you crying." It's my dad.

"From all the way in your wing of the mansion?" I snap. I know he saw me come home early on the security footage and received a report from Ted that I had stopped at the pharmacy.

"What's going on? Come out and talk with me."

"No," I sob. "Just leave me alone."

"Did something happen? At the shelter? Or is it a guy? What? Please talk to me. It's been forever since we had a good chat. I have been starting to think you are avoiding me for some reason."

"It's my job," I lie. "I don't think I can hack it any longer."

"I thought you loved your job."

"I do," I say. "Well, I did. I just don't think it's a good environment for me anymore. I think I need something new. New scenery, maybe working on a ranch outdoors. I don't really know."

"You would rather shovel shit than serve food and run Edward's shelter?"

"Yes."

"Could you open the door and come out and talk? It feels weird speaking through the bathroom door."

I look around at the pregnancy tests and boxes. He most certainly cannot come in here.

I start bagging up everything. "I've been sick. Give me a few minutes to tidy myself up, and I'll meet you in the rec room."

"Okay, but if you're not out in fifteen minutes, I'm coming back."

"I promise I'll be out. Maybe while you wait, you can find somewhere I can go. I need to get out of town and start fresh somewhere."

"We'll discuss it when you come out of hiding." I hear him walking away, and I'm freaked out because of how on the nose he was with that comment.

I bury all the evidence in a bag and hide it underneath the sink. Then I hop in the shower to wash away the sick feeling that seems like it's seeping out of my pores.

While I'm toweling off, I nearly retch again. *I'm pregnant*. I still can't get the thought through my thick skull, and I begin to think that maybe I am in shock or something.

I check my pulse and find that it's definitely faster than usual. That can't be good for the baby.

I can't let Dad know how his best friend in the world knocked up his only child. Edward is in for quite the confrontation when it comes out into the open.

And there is no way I will get rid of the child. It's not the baby's fault that its parents made poor decisions. I may put it up for adoption, but I will let it have a chance at life, even if I'm not in it.

But then there is the fact that Edward also has a say in the matter. Or does he? Most people nowadays believe a woman has a right to what she does with her body. I have supported that way of thinking my entire life. It's just that nobody's ideals survive first contact with reality, I suppose.

I get into my comfy pajamas and wrap my robe around me. Adding my

bunny slippers completes the "I'm home and sick" look I'm going for. I do not want my father digging into my personal life more than necessary. I can't even keep track of everything I have to keep hidden from my dad—one more reason to leave the city and keep this conversation as noncommittal as possible.

Walking to the rec room, I can hear him playing billiards. I head to the buzzer.

"Mary, can you bring down a pitcher of your strawberry lemonade and whatever you have for snacks? Dad and I are in the rec room."

"Sure can, darling." Mary is magical in the kitchen, and I don't know what she adds to her lemonade, but I ask her to make me some so often that she must think I'm addicted by now.

I walk into the room, and Dad gives me a skeptical look that I think he believes I don't notice. I keep forgetting he can smell weakness like a shark. I need to keep things honest but brief.

"Hey, Nessa," he greets me as he chalks his cue stick. "Feeling any better?"

"Yeah," I say softly. "I felt sick and passed out at work. I think I haven't been eating right lately. I'm always on the go."

"Well, you need to prioritize your health because everything else takes second place if you're unhealthy," he says, giving me a concerned glance. "Anyway, I thought about what you said and I made a call while I was waiting for you to come out. If you're overstretched working at this shelter, there's a ranch in Rochester that could use some help. They're a rehab facility, and you get to work with the animals and help the people like you did at Edward's shelter.

"All you need to do is sign some papers to maintain confidentiality, and then you can get on the therapy training program. The work isn't too strenuous, but I figured it was the best place for you. I know how much you love horses."

I give my father a sincere smile. "Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it. When can I leave?"

"How fast can you pack your bags? I can help you get to Rochester tonight."

Tonight? I pause, then think better of my hesitation. *Not the time to hesitate.*

"That's perfect, Dad. You have no idea what a relief this is."

He nods, looking expectant. I clear my throat and continue.

"And, um. If Edward speaks with you, can you tell him I'm pursuing a different opportunity? If this program works out, mention that I might attend school for a psychology degree or something. And also, thank him for his patience in working with me. It was a pleasure. Something like that?"

I stop babbling. Dad has a grey eyebrow raised and his fingers steepled, which isn't a good sign.

"Are you back on drugs, Vanessa?"

"*What?* No! I've been sober since I started working with Edward."

"Aha." He subjects me to a keen gaze, Mr. Suspicious at his best. "So it's Edward, not Mr. Rutherford. That's interesting. I'm relieved to hear you're not on anything, but I still feel like there's something more to this abrupt departure. I just hope that one day, you can trust me with it."

The pit of guilt is now a gaping wound filled with pus. I want to be grateful for his help, but as I watch my father walk away, I'm filled with an unreasoning sense of resentment. Why can't he just give me the benefit of the doubt for once?

Way to make me feel like a piece of shit, Dad.

18

Edward

It's been three days, and there's still no sign of Vanessa.

I push my hands into the pockets of my Armani suit, glowering at the impressive skyscape outside. Behind me, there's a small cough.

"Mr. Rutherford? Is everything okay?"

One of my PAs, Ismail or something, I can't remember, is hovering with a nervous smile. I hate it when they get nervous around me. I feel like I'm being constantly monitored for signs of dangerous insanity, and it makes me itchy.

Though it's a necessary precaution, in a sense, because it only takes one temper tantrum for all of Wall Street to decide that Phoenix Inc is going to collapse due to the CEO's lack of mental stability. That affects share prices, the confidence of stockholders, and God knows what else.

I jerk my shoulder. "I'm fine."

"Okay." Ismail takes a deep breath. "Um. I'm only asking because the directors seem concerned."

Oh, right. The board of directors are here to meet me. I almost forgot about that.

"I'll be right with them, Ismail," I say, lifting my chin to give the impression of a thoughtful business leader considering his strategy instead of a depressive drunk missing his girlfriend. Which would be more accurate, but not helpful to my public image.

"I'll give you a few minutes before I bring them in," says Ismail respectfully. "Just let me know whenever you're ready, sir."

Fuck it. I can't go on like this.

"I'm ready." I square my slumped shoulders. "Send in the jackals."

Ismail releases an uneasy laugh as he hurries away. He's young and earnest enough to have an exaggerated respect for senior leadership, and one day, he'll find out the hard way that nobody is to be trusted. Nobody.

I turn and give the men coming through the door a nod. They look wary, which surprises me.

"Ah, Edward," says the de facto spokesperson of the small but select group of businessmen who act as my checks and balances system. "How have you been?"

"I've been busy," I say curtly, taking my seat at the head of the long marble conference table. "Let's get to it."

"Everything okay?" he murmurs, giving me a narrow-eyed glance as he takes the seat at my right. He's known me for a long time and knows how to read my moods in my body language as well.

"No," I say, knowing that he's going to keep pestering me if I keep lying. "But it's nothing to do with the company. I'm just dealing with some things on the personal front, that's all."

He strokes his chin. He's significantly older than me, not wealthier but significantly better connected. His mother was one of the Kennedy family, to start with.

"Why, Edward," he says softly. "I didn't know you *had* a personal front. I'm relieved to hear it. All these years, I thought you went home and plugged yourself into a USB port to recharge until daybreak."

"Oh, hilarious," I say darkly. "Are we going there? Wait till I tell your wife about some of your yacht parties, my friend."

"God forbid." He laughs. "Well, we'll talk about it later, I guess."

No, we fucking won't, I promise myself silently, but I only offer him a tight, polite smile as the presentation deck kicks off.

Any other year, any other board meeting, projections like this would have made my hopes soar and my heart sing. The last few years have been fantastic for the cybersecurity sector, now that everyone and their mom is a digital entrepreneur.

"And work-from-home is here to stay," proclaims my head of department for Growth and Sales triumphantly. "Nobody thinks this is only temporary

anymore, so talent retention depends on trusting systems to be secure, which means us. We are close to market monopoly here."

Market monopoly is the one term in corporate jargon that translates to global domination in the marketplace. Everyone at the table starts looking very, very happy. *Yay me.*

There was a time all of this would have meant something. This used to be the stuff that kept me going, gave me the reputation for being the ultimate apex leader in my particular field.

I'm staring at the tattoo on my hands, thinking back to all those years ago when people told me it was a bad idea. Now it's my signature, that phoenix soaring on my hand. Bravado translates well into recognizable market-branding.

And she thought it was kinda cute. My fist clenches.

"Can we hold the celebrations for later?" I say without raising my eyes from the table. "Finish up the action planning points, please."

My unfortunate employee does a double-take, then hurries to the next deck.

"Of course, sir," he says obediently, and I feel bad. He put in the work, and here I am, kicking a good dog for being well-trained.

Bad, Edward. Bad example to set.

"I don't want us to get complacent," I explain swiftly. "There's a watershed moment where a company like ours starts getting top-heavy, and slow, and ends up falling behind. We need to stay competitive, even if our only competition is ourselves. Everyone in our sales teams is a killer, and they need to stay that way."

The balding, tired-looking man who heads my sales department brightens up at being called a killer. He probably hasn't felt so enthused in months.

"Oh, we will, sir," he says, eyes shining. I almost want to throw him a treat, but I think I just have.

"We're counting on it."

The rest of the meeting takes a couple of hours. We go through everyone's questions and suggestions. Functionally, this translates to a lot of people congratulating themselves and a few getting some much-awaited stabs in the back behind the scenes.

I'm not amused. I'm not entertained. I spend most of the meeting staring at my hands on the table, trying and failing not to feel empty.

She's not coming back, is she?

They all leave eventually, filing out with painful slowness. The mutual congratulations don't cease, and I can tell a bunch of them are planning to head out to nearby bars to celebrate this victory. They all feel like they accomplished something today.

I feel nothing. I wait until the last of them is gone and it's only me and Ismail left.

"I need my car," I say, finally looking up at him. He looks concerned, not smug like the rest of them.

"Are you feeling okay, sir?" he asks in a hushed voice. "Can I get you something to eat? The executive dining room is still open."

I blink. I need to cycle him out of the assistants' pool and into a department where he can take real responsibility for something because the way he's acting right now is like a mother hen with only one chick to fuss over.

"I'm fine, Ismail." I give him a smile that could more easily be interpreted as a grimace. "Car, please."

I walk out of the conference room and into the executive lift with the same aura of contained depression, hoping that the building is empty enough that nobody will notice. Ismail accompanies me to the lift and stares worriedly as the doors close.

Maybe something in HR would suit him better because he seems to enjoy worrying about people. Or maybe he's just scared I'm headed for some kind of collapse, which might cost him his job if he doesn't keep an eye out.

The thought lowers my spirits even further. By the time I'm navigating the endless hell that is NYC traffic, I'm ready to give up on everything.

I feel an irrational sense of anger rise against Vanessa. She has no right to make me so happy to be with her and then vanish off the face of the earth when it suits her. It's unfair, and unjustified, and I've done nothing to deserve it.

Except I didn't really want to commit to her because I'm scared of what it might mean. I don't want to change anything about my life. I want to have my cake and eat it too, and maybe she's picked up on that.

I walk into the darkened penthouse. I haven't even bothered to switch the lights on over these past few days. Drifting like a ghost in the dark, I fetch myself my usual Scotch and soda and settle in for the night.

On the *Expanse*, the crew of the *Rosinante* are trying to fight off the existential threat of a devouring alien species which threatens their entire

civilization. *Lucky bastards.* I wish I had aliens to fight instead of just my own pathetic sadness to battle.

One episode turns into three and evening turns into midnight. I sit in my chair until dawn, pretending to watch the show while trying not to think.

She's not coming back. She's probably found someone else by now. I might never see her again, and I don't even know exactly what I did wrong to deserve it.

I hate my life, I find myself thinking. I haven't felt this way since I was a kid, when I was poor and struggling and insecure about my future. *I hate this and I want it all to stop.*

Around the time dawn breaks, I've got two empty bottles of Scotch next to my chair and a decision to make.

I want to see her again. I want to know the worst. If my world is ending, I need Vanessa to tell me to my face.

I need to go find her, right now.

19

Vanessa

The farm is everything I hoped it would be. All those years of saving pictures of idyllic cottage retreats on Pinterest have finally paid off. Despite always having lived in the city, I'm able to recognize a haven of peace when I see it.

The patients here mostly all have their own cottages, and a multitude of trails lead to all sorts of hidden nooks and crannies in the surrounding woods. There are some areas where they have danger signs put up to warn off tourists, but if you use common sense, the danger is minimal. Or so I am told by a skinny blonde as she takes me on a tour.

Her name is Nadine, and she is in severe danger, having found out she's carrying a child while being addicted to cocaine. She is all belly and bones. She had sobered up quickly when she learned she was pregnant, but she is still unsure of the toll it has taken on her baby.

"If I can find a nice family for her, she'd be better off. I don't want her to grow up like I did."

I wait a few seconds to see if she will elaborate on how she grew up, but my chatty tour guide is suddenly silent. One of the social workers is heading our way, and neither Nadine nor I want to speak to someone else.

"Watch out for this one," she says in a hoarse whisper. "Christopher can get a little handsy and might try to grope you if you are left alone. I'll help keep him off your ass for as long as possible. Okay?"

I nod and eye the stout, hairy man strolling toward us with a big smile on his face. He reminds me of Randy from *The Trailer Park Boys*. When he smiles, I notice the majority of his teeth are missing.

"You must be Alyssa," he says, holding out his meaty paw.

"No, Alyssa is my mother. I'm Vanessa."

I don't take his hand, and he holds it out for a few more seconds before realizing I won't shake it. He bangs down a plate of sandwiches cut into triangles onto a nearby table and turns crimson in the face before he gives us a sarcastic salute and strides off like he's the boss around here.

"See what I mean? God only knows what he touched before he made those sandwiches," mutters Nadine.

I snort and almost choke on the small bite I've already taken.

"Sandwich tastes fine to me," I mumble with my mouth full. Nadine winks and takes a bite too to make me feel less horrible, but I quickly turn away from her and begin to retch uncontrollably.

"You know, they say after the first trimester, the nausea goes away," she comments, sounding very far away. I have my hands on my knees just a foot away from her, overtaken by dizziness.

Nadine just stands there and watches me, though there's dispassionate kindness in her eyes. I vomit again, and it feels like my stomach is coming up my throat.

"Is this heartburn part of it, too?" I ask eventually.

"Yep. They say the worse the heartburn, the hairier your baby will be."

I swivel my head. "Are you serious?"

"It's just an old wives' tale, but some people believe it." She shrugs. A strange sense of surreal detachment descends upon me.

After a while, I'm able to walk. Nadine's playing with a long stalk of grass and whipping dandelions away as we stroll to our cottages.

Nadine's cottage is close to mine, and I'm relieved to have someone familiar nearby. As far as I know, no one else is in the other cottages. This is an isolated place, meant for the lonely and abandoned, I suspect.

My new home is as neat as a pin, homey and well-scrubbed. All signs of the last inhabitant are gone. The curtains are checked gingham, there's a small but abundant pantry, and someone has left a bunch of small yellow daisies in a glass jar on the counter of the tiny kitchenette.

My room at home was a palace compared to this, but I love my new quarters. These cottages sit like bright yellow boxes with red rooftops in the

midst of rolling greens. The one I have is reserved for staff.

I have a bedroom the size of a ship's berth set into a curtained alcove in one wall. There's a surprisingly large closet, a small but sparkling clean bathroom, a desk with a functional lamp and chair in the open living space, and three mismatched but comfortable chairs around a plastic foldable table, gaily painted with stars and rainbows.

The ranch has strict rules on cleanliness for everyone on the premises, patients and volunteers alike. So I go through the two small rooms with a broom and mop, tidy up the kitchen, and wipe the windows down since I notice they've been neglected.

Unpacking takes hardly any time since I brought very little with me. Farm life does not require you to wear fancy clothes, but I did bring a few nicer dresses with some give in the stomach for when my belly grows. I couldn't resist shopping for maternity clothes, though most of my clothes are T-shirts and stretchy pants. My belly is growing surprisingly fast. I already can't fit into my skinny jeans.

I grab my work boots and put them on, deciding I want to go muck out the stables. I enjoy getting to work with the animals, even though it can be messy. Cleaning the stables takes me a while, but the hard work gives me a sense of accomplishment and sore muscles. The best part is that now I can feed the horses and brush them down.

I'll have to polish their tack later and rub oil into the harnesses to keep them from cracking. It may seem like tedious work, but seeing my efforts pay off is really satisfying to me.

Best of all, it's peaceful out here, with just the gentle snickers of the horses, the smell of fresh hay, and the quiet. We're a dozen miles away from the nearest traffic snarl. It's utter bliss, and I can pretend to be a different person in an alternate timeline for a while.

Eventually, I hear the bell signaling that dinner is ready and realize that I'm famished. I head to one of the old-fashioned bathrooms near the dining hall and wash up. Normally, I would have changed my clothes, but I'm just too tired and the smell from the kitchen is too heavenly.

I haven't worked in the kitchen yet, which is a relief. Ever since I left the shelter, making food for others gets me down. I wonder if I have been permanently turned off from cooking since Edward's suburban housewife comment. For some reason, that still really grates on me.

I sit down to a large, wholesome plate of shepherd's pie, the steam rising

off a perfectly flaky crust. I love this meal so much, especially since it's the first one I've been able to keep down in a while, so I dig in with a hearty appetite.

About a few bites in, I see that they are bringing a new group of patients to the dining hall. I wonder if I looked as rough as this bunch when I came here just a couple of days ago. Many of them are thin from prolonged drug use. I can see track marks on some arms, and others look around vaguely as if they are still high.

I know these people are going to have a rough few days, but at least they're in the right place to get help. I decide to make an effort to reach out as soon as possible. Maybe if I'm proactive, it'll make a good impression on my supervisor in the therapy training program.

The ragtag group comes to the table and are served by the kitchen helpers. The older girl who shepherds them in gives me a curious glance.

"Hi," she says. "I'm Clarissa. Are you the new recruit? Can I join you?"

"Of course," I say, gesturing to the empty space next to me on the wooden bench. She sits with a tired sigh, ruffling a hand through her mane of red hair.

"I'm Vanessa Kazinsky," I say a little shyly. "I'm only a trainee, currently, though I hope to make it to the permanent staff. How long have you worked here?"

"Four years now," she replies, sharing a small smile. One of the helpers hands her a plate and she digs in as enthusiastically as I did. "My son and I love it here. He's seven and a half, and running wild on a farm is his idea of paradise."

"Mine, too," I say. "Are you from the city? I grew up in New York, and I dreamed of living like this one day. It's so peaceful and calm."

She snorts. "Wait until you have to deal with some of the patients. When one or two are having nightmares or going through withdrawal, that's still okay. But sometimes, that type of uneasiness spreads through the place like wildfire, especially on full moon nights for some reason. It's no joke, I promise you."

I nod gravely, undaunted. "I worked in a homeless shelter in NYC before this. We saw that pattern too. My friend Luanna says it's something to do with lunar tides and madness, but personally, I think it's just Murphy's Law. There are nights when if something can go wrong, it will go wrong."

"Ain't that the truth." Clarissa chuckles. "I put in a stint at a rehab center for ex-cons in New York before I was here, and I kid you not, we had gang

members from the Night Wolves howling at the moon every time it was full. They weren't even going through anything specific, they just said it was helpful as a bonding exercise."

"What, like actual werewolves?" I ask, blinking. Melissa giggles.

It's such a bubbly giggle that I'm surprised to hear it coming from a person who seems so very calm and in charge. I can't help but chuckle with her. She's not that much older than me, and I warm to her sense of humor.

"Maybe, though not the hot kind like in Twilight." She snorts. "So listen. I'm usually in the clinic if you ever want to talk. And maybe we can go riding together sometime. You took the stable detail, right?"

I nod eagerly. "Let's do that. It's really nice to meet you, Clarissa. I was starting to feel a bit isolated here."

She gives me another of her warm smiles. She's a tall, almost queenly woman, and she towers over me when she gets up with her empty plate in her hands.

"It's good to make new friends in new places," she says, and I get the feeling she's not just talking about me, judging from the faraway look in her sea-green eyes. "See you around."

I finish my meal at a more leisurely pace, since I'm off for the rest of the afternoon. Maybe it's time to ride a horse for a while. I have been hesitant to ride, worried that it might hurt the baby, but a gentle pace around the paddock should be fine.

It's only long after Clarissa left that it occurs to me that she didn't tell me where she was really from or her full name. Maybe it's her therapy training that holds her back from sharing too much, even with colleagues, but I have an intuitive feeling there's more to it than that.

I dismiss the thought from my mind and head to the stables instead. There's a smaller horse named Billy, a beautiful roan with chestnut highlights. I have brushed him quite a few times since I arrived, and he seems content and mild-mannered enough to keep me safe.

I take his tack down and saddle him up, making sure I check the girth strap twice before I lead him out and walk around to warm up. When it's time to climb into the saddle, I pause, feeling like I'm taking a step into the unknown.

I could get used to this, I think dreamily. A quiet life out in the countryside, nothing to worry about except whether to go for a ride or not. I have a brand-new future now, one that I never really saw coming. After a

year full of disappointments and setbacks, I feel a new sense of hope start to rise up in my chest.

The horse skips a few steps, as if infected by my newfound optimism, and then continues around the circuit. I let him get used to the feel of me on his back and my hands gently controlling his reins. Soon, we are picking up speed, and I can tell he wants to run. I walk him over to the gate, and a young boy opens it for me.

"Want company?" he asks casually. He's clearly been watching me for a while, though I haven't noticed him until now.

"No," I say, "but thank you. I need some alone time. Maybe later." He nods diffidently.

Billy starts prancing, and I slowly bring him up to a trot, but this spirited horse wants to run. I can feel the impatient energy coursing through his body. In seconds, we are cantering, and minutes later, we progress to a gallop. I love the feeling of the wind in my hair and the power of this animal between my legs.

I don't feel any pain in my muscles anymore, only an odd sense of freedom. It's like I am taking my life back from the utter state of confusion I've been in. It's a much-needed break from all the anxiety surrounding me and Edward and the baby.

And now that I'm here, I can afford to take some time to plan ahead. I can take classes for social work, psychology, or something related for a career. I know that my strengths lie in my passion for helping others to heal.

The possibilities are endless. Being pregnant early on in life isn't a death sentence, regardless of what Mom might think. It just requires extra work, long hours, and a willing heart. I could do all that for Edward's child, for my child.

I slow Billy down and start heading back to the circuit. I see the gangly boy still standing there and watching me. I walk Billy over to him and slide off the horse. "Would you like a try?"

"Are you sure?" he asks. "I don't want to bug you."

"No." I smile. "It's no bother. Pregnant women shouldn't be riding anyway, or so I hear." He looks from my face to my stomach and back up again. His green eyes are wide now.

"How far along are you? You're not showing much."

I smile. "That's nice of you, but I'm definitely carrying some extra weight. I'm about three months along now."

"Are you scared? Are you a drug addict?" he asks immediately. I shake my head no, wondering how often the answer has been yes on this farm. *I should be careful how I talk to this kid*, I realize, especially since I don't know why he's here. Judgment doesn't help people in need.

"Well, yes, I am scared. But no, I wasn't a drug addict, per se. I would say I was a party girl more than anything, at one point." Though I find talking to this kid easier than to most other people.

"I don't even know your name," I say, holding out my hand for him to shake.

"Tyler," he says shyly. "Nadine told me your name is Vanessa. It's a pretty name."

He sounds like a sweet, simple child, despite being taller than me. I realize he's a lot older than I thought at first, now that I'm up close enough to see him properly, and I wonder what he's been through in his life. Everyone's got a story, but something about this kid's aching innocence makes my heart clench in sympathy.

He accompanies Billy and me back to the stables. "Do you have a boyfriend? Like, the baby's dad?"

From anyone else, this would be a major intrusion of my privacy. But the way Tyler asks the question is entirely free of prejudice and very matter-of-fact. I relax my hunched shoulders, willing the thought of Edward not to hurt me anymore.

"No," I say offhandedly. "And no. It's none of his business, I think. Given that the relationship wasn't going anywhere."

I should have known. I really should have known. Nothing in this life is that easy.

I should have known better than to tempt fate by even thinking of Edward. It's literally never been a good idea before.

"Wasn't going anywhere?" Edward's voice drawls from the door of the stables. I freeze.

"Well, that's information you failed to impart to me before you dropped off the face of the earth, Vanessa," continues Edward, still in that chillingly calm voice. "I'd have appreciated a heads up, but never mind."

Tyler is visibly intimidated by this older man, and no surprise. Edward gives him a scathing look, too, for some reason.

"I think I'll go," the kid mutters to me, but he can't slide past Edward's looming figure in the doorway of the stables.

"And who is this guy? Is he the one lucky to get anywhere with you?"

That unfreezes me instantly.

"If course not, I only just met him," I snap back. "Which is none of your business, by the way. What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here?" Edward's eyes glitter. "Do you know what I've been through, trying to find you? I almost went to your dad, I was so desperate!"

"Hey, I think I'm gonna leave," says Tyler, loudly and defiantly. "But just so you know, my dude, it's not what you think. I just met your lady here a few minutes ago."

I flinch at the use of the phrase *your lady* as Tyler grimaces apologetically at me and scurries away.

Lucky kid. If only I could follow him.

Because from the look on Edward's face, this is only about to get uglier.

20

Edward

After what seems like endless centuries of freaking out, I arrive here just to find Vanessa totally wrapped up in some random lanky guy. Maybe it's because he looks closer to her own age than I am, but I can't help but feel like the giant nerd I used to be called, having my girl snatched away by someone bigger, better, smarter.

But then I remember I am not that scared kid anymore, hiding behind my computer screen. I'm a grown man, a very wealthy one with a high public profile, who's spent the last decade and a half dating some of the most beautiful women in the world.

And even if I know they were mostly gold diggers, hoping to get a wedding band, a quick divorce, and an alimony check from a *Forbes*-ranked billionaire, I don't care. That's why I always ditched them first, after all. No harm, no foul.

But having Vanessa ghost me is like a slap in the face. It was supposed to be different with her.

So to catch her here with a good-looking young man feels like someone punched a hole in my chest. I feel my anxiety rise, even as I shake with anger. A number of emotions are at war within me. Primarily, betrayal and hatred.

Vanessa looks at me, and there's a pretty exact reflection of my feelings mirrored in her tired blue eyes.

"Edward," she says, "what are you doing here?"

She looks paler and more washed out than she did before. There is something different about her, but I am so wrapped up in my own emotions that I can't focus.

"No, Vanessa." I hold a hand up. "Why are *you* here? I thought we had something good going on. Then you just up and leave for Rochester, of all places. Would you care to explain? Who are you fucking behind my back?"

My voice rises against my own volition. A part of me is appalled at my loss of control, while another takes savage delight in finally venting my feelings on her.

I deserve to know if she picked somebody else, damn it. She owes me that much.

"No one!" She's on the verge of yelling, too. "I'm not—I'm not *fucking* anybody else, Edward."

I stare at her accusingly. Her voice fades away as suddenly as her spurt of temper.

She shrugs and turns to the small, fat horse beside her.

"I'm going to put Billy in his stall. Do *not* scream and scare him. If you can't control yourself, then leave," she says icily.

I watch with mounting impatience as she coaxes the horse into his stall. I was right, she does look different here. It's not just the tiredness. Her movements are slower, and more awkward, and her figure seems a bit more rounded.

It takes a second for it to click before the hammer swings into my gut.

"You're pregnant," I breathe. Vanessa tenses, and her taut posture clearly delineates the line of her protruding belly against her shirt. The horse pulls on the reins and snorts unhappily.

"Don't be ridiculous," she replies after a beat, but I didn't spend the last few months learning to read her every infinitesimal expression to be so easily fooled now.

"You are," I reply. The imaginary wound in my gut deepens. "Is it mine? Do you even know for sure?"

Her eyes flare into anger at that.

"Or have there been so many poor suckers like me, you literally can't decide whom to blame?" I bite out. The horse pulls at the reins recklessly.

"Stop it, Edward!" Vanessa almost yells. "The horse could hurt me or the baby."

"Whose is it, then?"

"It's the ranch's horse."

"Stop being obtuse, Vanessa. I want to know who fathered that child."

"What? Because you think I'm just some random slut?" Her mouth is slack, furiously trembling.

"Most women don't just disappear unless they're hiding something," I respond curtly. I mentally calculate the time frame against the odds of this being a mistake.

It's too early for a paternity test. *Vanessa must have come here to bide her time before gathering the DNA evidence for a fat payout.*

She doesn't respond, simply closing the door of the stall on the horse.

"If you can't be civilized about this, you can leave," Vanessa murmurs in a flat voice. She's kinder to the irritated horse, petting him as she goes to remove the saddle. I can't help but move to help her.

"Pregnant women aren't supposed to be carrying heavy things or riding horses," I remind her. "What were you thinking? You're going to be a parent? You? You're showing complete disregard for the safety of the baby."

She flinches. *Now tell me whose baby that is. Who did you sleep with? Didn't I show you how much I care?*

Because misery loves company, and if I have to hurt like this, I want her to have a taste, too.

"I don't have to answer you," she says stubbornly. "I know you don't want the baby. I know you barely wanted me."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" I stare at her in outrage. "What kind of gaslighting is this? *I didn't want you?* Sorry, am I the one who ran away to a different postcode like someone in a witness protection program?"

"You know it's true," she replies, glaring at me. "You told me so in every way possible. You know, like telling me you don't want me to be a suburban housewife. Playing mind games with me. Acting like hanging out with me without having sex was somehow a waste of your time."

Now it's my turn to flinch. *Shots fired.*

"And one minute, you blow so hot and the next, so cold," she goes on breathlessly. "And we don't even know anything much about each other besides what we do best in bed. Not to mention the age gap or the fact that you're my dad's best friend, supposedly. Which reminds me. When are you going to tell him you fucked his daughter, huh?"

I swallow a gulp. Despite my previous doubts about honesty, telling Bob

is the last thing I want to do right now. Some of Vanessa's accusations are too on the nose to be ignored, but especially that one.

Eventually, I know it'll have to come from me. I had hoped that Vanessa and I would do the big confession together.

But judging by how she's acting right now, I realize that I might have to tell Bob on my own. Alyssa might try to claw my eyes out. And her daughter?

"I don't want you here, Edward," says Vanessa. "That's why I left. I needed time to heal and think. I need space. I needed..." Her words tail off, stymied by my utter rage.

It's like the word *space* has triggered something elemental in me. All this time, when her absence was like a gaping void in my life, but the *space* she needs happens to be the exact size and shape of me.

I don't believe it. I don't want to believe it. But I'm starting to think she slept with someone else just to enact some imaginary revenge on me.

"Whose baby is that?" I say, except that I'm suddenly yelling without realizing it, causing all the horses in the barn to become skittish.

Vanessa's face shows a mulish determination to punish me, if nothing else.

"Get off this farm right now, or I will have you thrown out," she says, daring me to reply. The look on her face could turn the sun into ice.

She's not going to tell me the truth. It must not be mine, and she knows it. *I can't breathe. I can't do this right now.*

Instead of yelling again, I pivot on my heel and walk purposely out of the stable. As I exit, I turn and lean against the wall, looking up to the sky to pray to a God I'm not sure exists. I don't think I have ever been as torn up as I am now.

I debate staying to pounce on her once she leaves the building, but I don't think that will get me any further.

I must calm down, but I'm practically vibrating with a mixture of emotions I have never felt before. What is this woman doing to me? I feel like she's dangling me on a chain. But it's a chain I was all too willing to wear until I found out about the child inside her, and I don't know how to face that now.

I need to find out who the father is. If, by the longest of long shots, it is me, then I know what I must do.

I start pacing at the thought. I have to tell Bob about Vanessa and me, and

if the baby is mine, I have to get my shit together.

Reentering the barn, I try to calm down, but just looking at her causes a sensation in my stomach like butterflies from hell. She sees me out of the corner of her eyes as she curries the horse. Her forehead scrunches up just like her dad's when he is concerned, catching me off guard. *I wonder what the baby's going to look like.*

"Please, Vanessa. Tell me why you ran away, aside from the pregnancy." I find myself clenching my jaw. The thought of it being another man's is destroying me inside.

But I can't bring myself to hate her for it, I realize. It's only natural that she would want to be with someone her own age. Maybe I was just her experimental phase, the one that wasn't supposed to go anywhere.

I still can't help myself. I ask Vanessa again. "Who else did you sleep with?" *Just tell me a name.*

Her face is disillusioned, tired and defeated. "Leave me alone, Edward. You shouldn't be here. I came here to get away from you."

"Is it because of another man, or is it about the baby?" I persist. I have never felt so raw and ragged. I want to tear my hair out or grab her by the shoulders and shake her or something.

She looks up as I stand there. Her tights and T-shirt reveal only the bare outlines of her body as they fit so loosely, but I can still picture her nubile form below mine and how it responded to my touch.

I wish I could reach out and pull her to me. I want to smell her scent again and taste her lips as her mouth meets mine.

One look at her tells me that is the last thing she wants.

She is outwardly calm, but inside, I can see in her eyes that there is a storm brewing. I suddenly dread when she leaves the barn and no animals are holding her back. I unconsciously shiver. I've seen her angry before, but this time, I know I might be in for a whirlwind-class ass-kicking.

I am so fucked.

I start questioning why I bothered to take a helicopter here to see her and try for a reconciliation. She clearly wants to be left alone, but I can't leave before I know which man's baby that is.

I never wanted children. I never wanted a home with a wife to come home to. I enjoy the limelight and the constant switching up of women, don't I?

I realize that I can't answer that anymore. I suddenly feel like puking my

guts out and feverish like I'm on the verge of passing out at the same time.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do if it is my child inside her. If. *If*.

I know I will have to support it. I could always stay out of both their lives and send them money on a regular basis. I know Vanessa has her trust fund. I don't know if she is getting paid by the ranch.

It was Bob who told me where she was. He had sounded proud that she wanted to work in a rehab facility like this one.

I hadn't even directly asked him about her. He just shared what was going on in his life, like I was his best friend, as always. It took me a quick internet search to find out which rehab she was at.

I watch her hang up all the horse's tack and put away the brush.

Vanessa stalks by me and heads to the main hall. I follow and grab her hand.

"Please," I plead. "Stop and talk to me. If the baby isn't mine, I will leave and never bother you again. But if it is mine, I deserve to know and will make sure you and the child never lack for anything. Just stop, Vanessa. Please."

"You don't get it, do you?" She twirls to face me. "To you, I'm just some dumb blonde dropout who has never worked a day in her life. Right? You date models and celebrities and attend every major event in the tech and elite world, while I barely know how to use my phone. Despite the fact we both have money, we have nothing in common. I mean nothing to you."

"You mean a lot to me now that you're pregnant, don't you get that?"

I realize that is a huge mistake the moment I've said it.

The muscles in her face slacken, and I see tears start welling up in her eyes.

"I left before you could leave, and you don't like it." She says it like she's trying to convince herself. "That's all this is."

"Apart from the million-dollar question of paternity, right?"

We're both yelling now, and people are coming out of the cottages and the dining hall to stare. I hadn't meant to cause such a scene, but now that the cat is out of the bag, I decide to go in for the kill.

Fuck the consequences.

"How much is the baby in your belly worth, Vanessa? Or are you waiting for a DNA result to find out?"

She stares at me, aghast. I can't believe what just came out of my mouth.

The tears run down her cheeks as she crumples down in the dirt, curling

her knees up to her chest as if to protect the fetus inside. The look on her face is of utter desolation.

I kneel in front of her, ready to tear my own tongue out in apology. But Vanessa turns her head away and looks around at the audience we've drawn. She takes a deep breath and then looks me in the eye.

"It's not yours, and thank God for that, because I don't think I can stand to look at your face for one more second," she says in a wobbly voice. "Get the fuck out of here, and don't come back. I don't want to hear your voice again, so don't call."

I want to say how sorry I am, but the words are stuck in my throat, and I'm paralyzed.

"And stay away from my parents," she says. "I don't want them to know how ashamed I am for even touching you in the first place. I'm done. Go! Please, just go."

I'm shaking as I get up and walk away.

Goodbye, my Venus. I'm so sorry for what I've done.

21

Vanessa

I sit on the dirt in the open space between the cottages and the dining hall, watching helplessly as Edward strides away. Clarissa comes up and sits down beside me.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" She seems overly and almost annoyingly concerned, but then I realize she is scared for the baby. She must have heard everything.

"I'm fine."

"Was that the dad?"

My protective instincts kick in, and I can't help but lie.

"No, that was my dad's friend," I say automatically.

She gives me a severe look for a second, and then it disappears from her face as if wiped from a board.

"Okay. I'm not here to judge," she says, twisting a piece of grass in her hands. "Do you feel like getting up?"

"Yup." I struggle to my feet with her help. She gives me a sideways glance.

"I know he seemed awfully interested in who the dad was, but I'm not ready to talk about it, so can we not do this right now?" I beg. "I need to shower and go to bed."

"Okay," she accedes, "but you do know that you don't have to carry this on your own, don't you?"

I don't meet her calm, friendly eyes, but I'm touched.

"Yeah, sure. I'll come to you if I need to talk. I promise."

I'm lying through my teeth, though. I have no intention of speaking with anyone here. I can't help but miss my friends back in the city, especially Susanna May. I could talk to her about anything, but she's going through enough.

I wonder if she is settled in her new apartment yet. I sincerely hope so. That was the one good thing Edward did that I can still hold on to for comfort.

Clarissa follows me back to my cottage for safety and goes away without saying another word. I think I just lost a potential friend, but I can't afford to feel bad about this when I have bigger fish to fry.

I use my key to open the whitewashed door and enter my little cottage, heading immediately for the shower. The tears start pouring again as I let the water from the showerhead flow over my face.

I want to wash away the tears and how horrible I feel now for lying to Edward. I need advice, but I can hardly go to my parents with this. Edward would likely be found dead within a day. My dad's not exactly a forgiving man.

He's probably going to be mad at me for years for hiding the pregnancy from him. I have no idea how my mother would even react. Some snobby soap opera drama shit, more than likely.

I'm toweling down when I decide that I need to talk to someone, and the only person who knows the details about my pregnancy is Susanna May. I'll call her tomorrow, maybe, vent it all out and hope for some of her reassuring wisdom.

Despite my best efforts to relax and calm down, it still feels like something is caught in my throat. I go to the fridge and take out some juice and an apple. I grab a knife and sit down on the couch, still in my towel. I'm uncontrollably hungry, which is happening more and more these days.

There's a sudden twinge as something twitches in my stomach. I drop the apple, and it rolls to the floor. *Oh, shit.*

The feeling hits me again. I rest a hand on my belly in a state of shock. Briefly, I am reminded of the movie *Alien* and how the creature burst from the torso of the victim. Was this how he felt?

I shake my head at my twisted thoughts.

This is the first time I have felt the baby move inside me. It is such an odd

sensation. I didn't know it was possible so soon, and part of me is convinced it's just gas or something, but what if it's not?

I can feel the pressure of having a child mounting. I'm not ready. I am barely an adult, I'm useless at taking care of myself, and I don't have anyone to help me.

Panic hits me, and I know I can't wait another moment without talking to someone.

I pick up my cell and dial Susanna May.

"Hi, this is the Phoenix Foundation shelter. How may I help you?"

"Susanna? What are you doing there?" I say, shocked.

"Well, volunteering, silly."

Huh. I guess that makes sense. She is the definition of a people person, after all.

"Are you all set up in your new place?" I am eager for news, slightly homesick, even.

"Almost," she says chirpily. "I'm still looking for furniture that doesn't cost an arm and a leg, though. You should see what they're charging nowadays. How do they expect people to live and eat at the same time?"

"You should try the auctions," I say. "Sometimes, you can get a deal of a lifetime. I think you taught me that."

I can hear the smile in her voice. "But how are you, sweetheart?"

I love the soothing way she talks. It's like having an adopted grandma. My parents both lost their moms early, so I haven't had this kind of comfort in years. I already feel more relaxed.

"Susanna, I think felt the baby move," I say tentatively. She gasps.

"Congratulations! That's a great sign."

"Then why don't I feel like it is?" I ask.

There's a pause, then I hear a long sigh. "Sweetie, it's normal to have moments when you're scared and worried. About the baby and your future and everything else, really. If you weren't worried, I'd be more afraid."

"I guess." I sigh. "And that's not all."

"Tell me," she says. I take a deep breath.

"Edward showed up here at the ranch today. He yelled at me and accused me of sleeping with other men. He basically showed me exactly what he really thinks of me, which is very little. And I know it shouldn't hurt, but it does." I draw another shaky breath. "And he said I'd be a horrible mother."

Susanna tsks, more sorrowful than shocked.

"Oh, that man. What was he thinking? He could have put you at risk for a miscarriage. Are you spotting? Maybe the baby is in distress, and that's why it's kicking. Check for signs of blood right now."

Great, another reason to panic. I stand up and look at the couch cushions. There is no sign of any blood. I head to the bathroom, grab a tissue, and wipe myself to double-check. Nothing, thank God.

When I come back, Susanna is still holding the line. "It's all good, Susanna. Nothing there."

"Well, if you start feeling cramping, see blood spots or clots, or are worried about anything, get the nurse on duty at the ranch to have a look at you. But I have a feeling you'll be fine."

Her voice is filled with warmth and relaxes me immensely. Why can't I talk to my mother like this?

"The baby is Edward's," I feel impelled to say. "I haven't been with anyone else."

"Child, I know that. Only a fool would think differently. I saw the way he would watch you while you worked, and I saw the way you looked at him, too. The whole crew at the shelter knows, and probably half our guests, too."

I'm blushing furiously. *And here I thought we hid it well.*

Who did I think we were fooling? For fuck's sake, we had sex right outside the shelter in his car. Sure, you couldn't see through the tint, and I'm pretty sure the doors had some soundproofing. But still.

"Edward hasn't been back to the shelter for days, maybe weeks," says Susanna. "We put two and two together and thought you must have separated, or he kidnapped you for a fancy vacation. Well, I hoped."

I throw my head back and chuckle darkly.

"That might have been an excellent idea. Except for the part where he doesn't actually care about me. Anyway, now that he's found me and I told him that the child isn't his, I think that bridge is officially burned."

Susanna tsks again. "Dear, dear. Sweetie, was that wise?"

"I don't know," I say weakly. "It felt like a good idea at the time. You didn't see him, Susanna. He looked so pissed off, and he doesn't trust me at all. Whatever I hoped for, I got it wrong."

Susanna goes quiet for a while.

"Oh, sweetie," she sighs after a while. "Take it from me, there are worse things in the world than missing a bad father from your child's life. One day, you might be grateful for this, you know."

And it's as simple as that for her. She takes my side, no questions asked. I wonder wistfully what my life could have been like if she were my mom instead of the one I got.

I don't really know how I feel about that, but I know what kind of mom I want to be when it's my turn.

I chat with Susanna for a while, though I still feel a bit lost.

Sitting and moping is clearly the mood for the evening for me, but maybe that's okay. I have lost so much in this short period, and I need to rest. My damn ankles are getting swollen. I can't wait to wake up to a new day where everything is different. But I might as well wish upon a fallen star.

"Don't lock yourself up and curl up in bed crying," says Susanna. "The flesh of the eyes is hyper-sensitive, so don't rub them after crying or you'll burst tiny blood vessels and cause dark undereye circles. Use an eye pack to prevent that."

I think Susanna is trying to subtly remind me that I am beautiful and need to take care of myself.

"There are other men out there, and some will know how to treat a woman," she continues. "But the looks you and Edward used to give each other were almost enough to trigger me, and I feel bad for everyone who would look at you and become instantly jealous over how perfect you looked together."

I sigh. I don't want to think about the past anymore.

"We need to fully get away, Susanna. I want to go somewhere where I can hide and raise the baby without having to deal with him, my parents, and their expectations."

Even though lying to my child doesn't sit well with me, plus, it would be horrible if he or she found out and resented me one day.

"What do I do, Susanna? What would you do in my place?"

Her next words surprise me, but maybe they shouldn't have. I know her to be an incurable optimist, after all.

"Honestly, I wouldn't do what you are doing, Nessa, sweetie. I would give the man a chance. It may not seem like love right now, but it can grow from mutual respect."

I stiffen. "Okay, but hear me out. Clearly, he doesn't respect me at all. He embarrassed me in front of half the people here at the ranch. And you should have heard what we said to each other. I don't think I want to be with someone who will talk to me like that."

And just like that, I'm almost sobbing again.

"Vanessa, listen to me. Give love a chance. A man doesn't go all that way to see a woman he doesn't love, or at least cares immensely about. He'll probably ask for a paternity test, but after you told him the baby isn't his, I wouldn't blame him for double-checking. However, I am willing to bet that he won't and he'll want to be in the baby's life. I'm sure he loves you."

Sweet, comforting words. I want to believe her so badly, but I can't.

"If he does, then he doesn't show it," I say, chewing on my nails. I haven't done that since I was a young kid. My anxiety is still higher than I thought.

"Nessa, how many times a year do you think Edward usually comes to the shelter?"

"I have no idea."

"It was maybe once a year if we were lucky, I'm told, and he just watched us like some corporate boss. Until you came, which is when he started showing up all the time. I would say that was pretty significant."

"He was probably off with other women all the other years. I just happened to be there this time, Susanna. They say whatever someone accuses you of, it's due to their guilty conscience, right? Projection or whatever. So maybe Edward's the one who's been sleeping around behind my back."

"Hogwash, child. That may be true in some cases, but I don't believe Edward is like that."

"Well, I hope he doesn't come back anytime soon. I'm just not ready to deal with him. I'm still trying to figure myself out and worrying about how I want to raise my child. You know, I think I want a small condo with a little fenced-in yard where they can play. Maybe I'll get a kitten or a puppy when the baby is three or so."

"It seems like you've been doing some serious thinking about your future. I'm happy to hear it," Susanna says calmly. "I was worried you were going to put it up for adoption or have an abortion."

"I thought about that," I admit. "But I can't bring myself to end the life inside me. And I know I can't let another person raise my baby."

My phone beeps. I ignore it, not even looking at who else is calling.

"Sorry about that, Susanna. It's probably my dad."

The other line beeps again. That's unlike my father. He usually leaves a message and waits for me to return the call. It must be urgent.

"Susanna, I'll call you back. This might be important."

I suddenly feel like someone's punched me in the gut. Something is

wrong. My instincts are screaming it.

I answer the other line. "Hey, Dad, what's up?"

"I think it's your turn to tell me what's up," he says, breathing heavily. *No hi, hello, how are you?* "I just heard something very interesting from Edward. I think it's time to come clean."

Shit, shit, shit. Fucking Edward.

This is the last thing I need right now.

"Nessa," he says, and it's the pleading in his voice that gets to me. "Tell me it's not true."

It *is* true, though. I need to face it. I can't be just the daughter scared of losing her dad's love any longer. I'm going to be a mom, and I'm going to stand up for my kid no matter what.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I say hoarsely.

"Sorry for what?"

It's time to tell him. If I can't find the courage now, I never will again.

Okay. I'm doing this.

I choke back the fear and start pouring my guts out to my dad.

Edward

"It's not yours, and thank God for that because I don't think I can stand to look at your face for one more second."

I still feel the sting of Vanessa's words.

I seethe in the helicopter on the way back from Rochester. How could she treat me like that? Especially in front of a crowd of people at the rehab facility. If anyone has recognized me, I'm sure to make the tabloids tomorrow.

Feeling down and guilty bites at me, and the inevitable result is rage. I do what I swore I wouldn't just hours ago.

I call Bob from the car in New York, though the thought still terrifies me. There's a friendship and a lifetime's worth of mutual business contacts at stake.

She pushed me to this, I think savagely. If she won't give me the answers I need, I'll delegate the job to someone she will talk to, whether she wants to or not.

"Edward," he says brightly. "How are you?"

"I think you should sit down," I say curtly. "I need to talk to you about something."

"This sounds serious," he says, startled. "Did something happen to you or your company?"

"No, something happened between Vanessa and me." *There. I've said it now.*

There is a long pause. *Fucking say something, Bob*, I think, knowing my anger is misplaced.

"Does this have to do with your asking where Nessa was the other day?" he says eventually. "I thought you sounded off, in fact, very unlike your normal self. What happened between you and my daughter?"

"I'll start from the beginning," I say. *And I hope you don't kill me for it.*

"It was at your Christmas party last year," I continue doggedly. "I met someone amazing. Beautiful and smart and funny. She literally took my breath away. I swear to you, I didn't know who she was, Bob."

He says nothing. I hear him waiting, and I have to go on with this now.

"I didn't realize it was Vanessa until after she showed up at Phoenix Inc," I say. "And I know I should have stayed away from her. I tried. She wanted to go work for the shelter instead of in PR, and I thought, well, at least it gets her far away from me. But then I ended up dropping in there anyway, and then one thing led to another, and—"

"And?" says Bob tightly. In all the years I've known him, he's never used this voice to me before.

"And she's pregnant now," I say, wanting to shrivel up inside. "I'm not even sure it's mine. I mean, I'm nobody to judge, because you know what my own past is like. But she's not in the same position, is she? I was financially secure and I had my future all planned out. I don't think that's true for her, and she won't talk to me, so that's why I'm talking to you."

Bob is silent. I hold my breath.

"Let me get this straight," he says eventually. "You're telling me that you slept with my daughter, and now she's pregnant, and you want to know if it's yours?"

An admirably crisp and concise summary of affairs. Bob was always quick on the uptake, but he's never sounded so savage as he does now.

"And to say I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I'm sorry. I knew it was a mistake from the beginning, and I should never have touched her, and if I could take it all back, I would."

"I believe you," says Bob hoarsely. "If I could wipe out the last twenty years since I've known you, I'd do that, too."

"I deserve that," I reply grimly. "But there's a child involved, and if it's mine, I take full responsibility for that. I'll do whatever's necessary to support

them both, but I can't do that if Vanessa's blocking me out, Bob. So now you need to get involved."

He takes a deep breath before he speaks again.

"I'll speak to her," he says curtly. "Don't call me, I'll call you."

And then nothing else. He just hangs up.

Fair enough. I threw away his friendship because I have basically no impulse control around his beloved only child. If he wants to cut me off forever, he has every right.

The world goes quiet as I put my head in my hands. I think I've just lost two of the people I need most in the world.

Fuck.

I realize I've been crying. I don't remember the last time I cried in my whole life.

I head home, knowing that there's no chance of being able to focus on work anymore. Everything has to be on hold until Bob calls back.

If he ever calls back.

I wonder if he's going to call Alyssa or Vanessa first. I'm betting on Alyssa. After all these years, the woman still drives him crazy, and yet he can't move on.

And maybe there's a reason for that. Maybe the woman is his Kryptonite, and he can't walk away without feeling like he's dying.

I should have said that, I think. I should have told him I feel that way about Vanessa on our call. That I know what it feels like to want to grow old with someone, even if they can't stand the sight of you anymore. Maybe he could understand that.

And I shouldn't have accused Vanessa of recklessly endangering the child. She was simply trying to stay somewhere she felt safe.

I just wish it were me she felt safer with. *Maybe one day.*

And what if the other man doesn't want to have anything to do with his child? I wonder how much of a difference that would make.

And I realize something. It doesn't matter. I'd still take care of her if she let me, and the paternity of the child wouldn't be relevant as long as I were the only man in her life from now on.

And if only I had realized that at the farm, if only I hadn't let my feelings of hurt and betrayal take over, maybe I'd still have a shot.

I have to find a way to make this all up to her. I would take care of the baby with her if she'd still have me. I don't think the other man who

impregnated her could still be in the picture, or else, she would be with him instead of alone on a farm, trying to find herself.

But I keep remembering the look of fury in her eyes, and I genuinely feel that she hates me after everything that's happened. And no wonder, because I know she has severe trust and attachment issues.

Growing up with a mother like Alyssa must have been hard. I never met a woman who was more demanding than Alyssa. She comes first, in her mind. Everyone else is a poor second, and for the most part, that has been Vanessa and Bob.

Oh, so here's where Vanessa got her iron core. Not only is she her mother's daughter, she's also the girl who survived Alyssa.

I wonder what the baby's going to be like. I wonder if this was my only chance to be a dad, and I threw it away in a fit of temper.

Pride, my besetting sin. The phoenix tattoo on my hand stares aggressively at me. There are disasters one can't come back from, and I should have known it long ago.

It's going to be a long night, waiting for someone to call and tell me how much I've lost.

I reach for the bottle of Scotch. *Hello, whisky, my old friend.*

I settle down to wait.

23

Vanessa

There is nothing worse than hearing Dad talk like this. I can handle Mom's screaming, but when Dad is upset, the disappointment is hard to bear.

Part of me just wants to hang up the phone now. But I know he'd show up in a heartbeat if I start to ignore him, especially since he got me into the program at the ranch in the first place. It's not like he doesn't know how to track me down.

It's time to face the music.

"Dad, I am so sorry I didn't tell you I'm pregnant. I just... I didn't even know whether I was going to keep the baby or not. I figured I'd give myself some time to really think about it. It's not a decision I took lightly, just so you know."

"That's no excuse for lying by omission, Nessa," he says heavily. "I deserved to know. When have I ever failed to support you before? When have I ever blamed you for anything?"

"I know, Dad," I say with a lump in my throat. "I know Mom didn't want you to give me a place to live or hook me up with jobs after I dropped out, and I'm so grateful you stood by me, I really am. But this is several orders of magnitude more serious than a college degree, and I needed time to be sure."

"And are you sure now?" he asks neutrally. I sigh.

"I realize this might be disappointing to you," I say quietly, "but I want this child, more than anything else I've ever wanted in my life. I think I felt it

move inside me today, Dad. I'll never love harder than this."

"Okay," he says. "Let's talk about a plan."

"What?" I say stupidly. "Just like that?"

"Well, you might be reckless occasionally, but you've never been stupid, Nessa," he says a touch impatiently. "If you've decided you want to keep it, then that's your call. I'll be here for you no matter what your mother has to say, though she'll find a way to blame me for it all, I'm sure."

Oh, shit. I never even thought of that.

"Although," he continues, "you just described the way we felt when we found out we were having you, so I suppose she'll come around in the end. Now. When are you coming home? Do you want me to come pick you up?"

I burst into loud sobs, shocking him considerably.

"Nessa! What is it?" he exclaims.

"Sorry, sorry," I hiccup through my tears. "It's just that you don't know what it means to me to hear you say that. I've been so scared, Dad."

"It's okay, it's okay," he soothes me, just as he used to when I was tiny. "I'll drive up there right now."

"No, don't do that." I swallow my tears with some difficulty. "I'm happy here, I really am. I feel safe and productive and everything, and my living quarters are so nice! You saw the pictures, right? I'm just upset because I get hormonal all the time nowadays and I don't know how to switch it off."

"And I'm guessing seeing Edward didn't exactly help," he says grimly. "You want to tell me exactly why you told him the baby isn't his?"

"Oh, because *he* wasn't sure," I burst out indignantly. "He thinks I'm some kind of party-going slut who sleeps with every man in sight, and he came all the way up here to tell me that."

"It's my fault for telling him where you were in the first place," says Dad gloomily. "And I think your mom has a strange way of expressing her disappointment with you sometimes, but she definitely never said anything like that in my hearing, so I don't know where he picked that idea up. In fact, he mentioned he was impressed with your work at the shelter, if anything."

"I've been running myself ragged, first at the shelter, then here," I agree in a petulant voice. "Even if I wanted to cheat on him, I wouldn't have had the time. But he was so convinced that the reason I left New York, and by extension him, must be because of another guy. Not because I was unhappy because of anything he did, because he's so perfect, right?"

"Apart from sleeping with his best friend's daughter behind everyone's

back, sure," says Dad in a voice that bodes ill for Edward. "Look, without getting into the details of this alleged relationship which I definitely don't want to hear about, exactly what did he say to you?"

"I can't remember exactly," I say, feeling dispirited all over again. "But the gist of it was that I'm a liar, I'm a slut, I've treated him badly, the baby isn't his, and even if it is, he wouldn't want me to be the mom because I'm reckless and irresponsible. As if the child is the result of immaculate conception, somehow? I mean, he's at least half responsible."

"Oh, at least," Dad agrees, and now he sounds really angry. "Given that he's a grown man and should have known better than to go after a girl half his age."

I pause.

"Um, actually," I say tentatively, "That's on me. I kind of started it, mainly because I used to have a huge crush on him back when I was a teenager and I thought, well, if he sees me as an adult now, especially since he didn't even recognize me at first..." I let my voice trail off.

"So it's true," says my dad. "He really didn't know who you were at first?"

"No, he didn't," I say hastily, "and in fact, I don't think he would have done anything afterward either if I hadn't made the first approach. I thought I was being empowered and all, which I realize now was false, because I got way in over my head, Dad. Sorry. But Edward didn't come after me like that. He's a horribly mean person sometimes, but he's not a creep."

For some reason, I need everyone to know this. The father of my child isn't a creep, and I'm not his innocent little victim. Yes, I made bad choices, but I made them by myself. He didn't pressure me into anything, and it would be so wrong for anyone to think that.

"And why didn't you use protection?" asks Dad, goaded by the fact that I'm defending Edward, probably.

"Dad, I've been on birth control since I was fourteen. For my period. You knew that, right?"

He clearly didn't, because he takes a moment to process. "Well, why didn't you use condoms? Wait. Never mind. I don't want to know."

There is a lull in the conversation that lasts so long that I think he hung up.

"I'm coming to get you," says Dad after a while. "You need prenatal vitamins, ultrasounds, blood work, and a proper diet."

I cut him off.

"I know. It's all taken care of. There's a nurse on staff here who's aware of my situation, and she'll help me organize everything. Everything is fine, Dad. Please take me seriously when I say that I can manage on my own."

But the line is getting weird and crackly and I don't think he got all of that.

"Vanessa, are you still there?"

"Unfortunately," I murmur half under my breath.

"Vanessa, listen!" roars my dad. "I want you to come home, and I want you to stay here for a while. You need your family's support right now, and you're all I care about, you know that. But later on, maybe you and Edward can have a conversation about visitation. It's only fair, even if I can't stand the sight of the man anymore."

Well, that's a huge concession. I know my father is saying this from his own experience with Mom trying to take control of me when they split up.

Just remembering it gives me a headache, even now, just from all the screaming I was put through and the legal back and forth. I had been so torn at first, but as I grew older, I came to realize that it was my father who had my best interests at heart, while my mother did what she did to keep up appearances and score points off him.

"Please don't say anything to Mom," I plead. "I can't handle her. She's one of the primary reasons I'm hiding out right now. Please, Dad."

"Okay. Are you sure you don't need me to come down there?" I can tell that he's tense and ready for action.

"I can take care of myself and my baby, Dad," I say, "but it means everything to me that you offered. Everything. You're the world's best dad, and I need you to know that I love you with all my heart."

There's the sound of a gruff sob, and I smile through my own tears.

"You can't do everything on your own, Nessa. Trust me. There's a reason they say it takes a village to raise a child. You need a support system. Your mom and I are here for you, and we are willing to do whatever it takes to make sure our grandchild has a good upbringing."

"I know, Dad." *And I believe at least half of that.* "I'll figure things out, but for now, I want to stay here, keep this kid, and keep this job. I think this could be the life I always wanted, even if I don't necessarily like the way I got to it in the end."

"Okay." He releases a sigh. "And anything I can do to help, I will. Always remember that."

I smile mistily. "Always."

I'm not alone, I think, my hand resting on my belly. I can do this. I can have my baby and love it with all my heart, and that's all that matters.

No matter what comes.

24

Edward

I am on my fifth shot of vodka today, and my third rum and Coke. In fact, I'm well on my way to being thoroughly fucked up.

I don't have a care in the world. Well, at least that's what I'm telling myself.

But I'm not really believing my own bullshit right now.

To tell the truth, this is what Vanessa always does to me. All I want is her in my bed and by my side. I have never felt this way about anyone in my life.

And like the wind, one moment she is here, and the next she's gone, leaving me behind.

I feel like an idiot. I should have known that she was never going to be a permanent fixture in my life. I'm almost double her age, and there are swarms of men out there who are ready to snatch her up in an instant, just like the kid flirting up a storm with her at the ranch.

I know I made a fool of both of us at the ranch. I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself, but it's too late now.

As it is, I think the tabloids have gotten wind of the scandal. Though I've been sequestered in my penthouse for days, locked behind the most expensive state-of-the-art security tech in the world. No one is getting through those doors without my say-so, and I don't give a flying fuck about what is happening beyond them.

The phone has been ringing off and on for the past three days. I haven't

showered, and I've barely eaten anything. The only thing that I 'm doing is clearing out my liquor cabinet, slowly but surely.

What am I even doing to myself aside from destroying my liver? All this drama, and over a woman, no less.

Though I have to admit, she is no ordinary woman.

But when I picture the look in her eyes as I yelled at her, it still breaks my heart. I feel terrible knowing that I might have put so much stress on her that she could have lost the baby. *What had I been thinking?*

I should have just left her alone. She deserves so much better.

Suddenly, I hear a faint thump, and my alarm goes off, signaling that someone is trying to enter the premises. I look up, sneering through my drunken haze.

They can try, but they won't get in, I think. At least until I look at my security screen on the wall and see men dressed in black.

Great, now what? Did Bob put out a hit on me instead of just calling me back?

I put in my earbuds, wrap myself in a blanket, and continue to ignore the group of men trying to bust through my door. I briefly wonder if someone's called the police, since I haven't answered a single one of my calls for however many days it has been since Vanessa sent me away. But with the amount of liquor I've consumed, I can't bring myself to care.

I biff my phone at the wall in a fit of spite and turn to the wall-mounted security screen. Squinting, I see that there is a SWAT team trying to break in.

Well, shit. Bob isn't fucking around. He must think that I'm dead up here. Either that or he's actively trying to make that happen. I vaguely recall that he was always tight with a police commissioner or two in New York.

But that's a reinforced door. They could batter at it all day, and it should still hold.

I sent my guards away the minute I got home from seeing Vanessa. They argued with me about my safety, but I swore I wouldn't leave the apartment without calling them. Instead, I've been using DoorDash for my meals.

I didn't let the maid in either, though I am sure she's going to love cleaning up the mess I made.

The shame hits me. I am causing more work for my employees, and not a single one has complained. They deserve a raise. Well, if I survive this depressive episode, I'll make sure they receive what pay they deserve and give them shares of the company, I swear to myself solemnly.

The thumping is getting on my nerves. I notice that they're using a battering ram. It may take forever, and it also depends on the strength of the SWAT team, but busting down the door should be nearly impossible. If it doesn't hold, I'll just have to design a better one for my clients after a major product recall.

I debate opening the door and accepting my fate, but first I want to get some more liquor into me. I slam back a few more shots and drink another rum and Coke. Finally, I feel ready to meet Bob's wrath.

I'm just happy I didn't see his harpy of an ex with him. I think he knew she would make the situation worse. *Wise man*, I can't help thinking.

They are starting to make progress on the door. I walk into my bedroom and wash my face, neck, and hands in near-boiling water. I also use my toothbrush in an attempt to wash away the moldy taste in my mouth. Then I get some clean clothes from my closet. I chose an all-gray jumpsuit. If I'm going to get my ass beat up, well, at least I'll be comfy.

This is really not how I planned my day. But if I die today, it'll be on my feet and facing the consequences of my actions. I owe myself that much.

I pull out a flask I had tucked away in the couch at some point and begin to chug the fiery contents. One for the road.

The door blows in with an almighty *Boom*. Wow. They brought explosives?

From my vantage point in my armchair, I can't actually see the door, but I can hear footsteps approaching. Surprisingly, it's not police boots on the ground. In fact, I can tell from the gait that it's Bob. He comes into sight in a single rush.

I can't even recognize my old friend. Bob's face is distorted with a snarl. If he were a wolf, I'd already be disemboweled.

"How fucking dare you!" he roars. I cringe, waiting for the punch. It lands square on my gut.

Bob is not a large man, nor is he used to violence, but he puts in a stunningly good impersonation of a made man from the Mob. I take the hits because I owe him. But after a few rounds of pummeling, it doesn't seem like his heart is even in it anymore.

I crack an eyelid open. There's my old friend, huffing and wheezing as he glares at me, with a crowd of SWAT police with perfectly immobile faces for backup. I realize he could basically kill me right now and none of them would lift a finger to help me. Whatever favor the police commissioner owes

Bob, it must be a big one.

Fair enough, because maybe I deserve that. But he also deserves an apology, so I stand up straight and look him in the eyes.

"I'm sorry, Bob," I say through a bleeding lip and three days' worth of a permanent alcoholic stupor. "I fell in love with your daughter. I shouldn't have done it, but it happened. Who would take better care of her than me, I thought? I was genuinely that stupid, and I'm so sorry. I wish I were a better man. I wish I could take it all back."

Bob gives me a look as if I am indeed the dumbest person on earth. "You should be. She deserves so much better. But from what I can tell, she's stuck with you. You're the only man she has been with. It's definitely your child. Now. How do you feel about her? Answer honestly."

I draw in a deep breath. Then another, then a third.

"Jesus, Bob," I say at last. "You could have just called. I've waited days to hear just that."

"I don't care," he replies. "Answer the goddamn question, Edward."

I take a long pause. I haven't even tried to figure out how to tell anyone how much Vanessa means to me.

Then I think of how she looked asleep in my bed, her hair like a halo around her head. Such innocence, and I defiled her.

"I'm sorry, Bob. You're not going to like hearing this, but I think I love Vanessa."

I was right. He doesn't like it. He stares at me as though I'm the scum of the earth.

"You bastard," he says. "You're lucky I'm not a violent man."

Given the fact he just beat me up, this feels like a scary level of self-delusion from Bob. Unless he means he's not going to have me killed, which is good. I think.

Actually, I *can't* think straight. I'm pretty sure I'm hallucinating right now, which is why his words are making zero sense to me.

"Then it's settled," he seems to be saying. "I've talked to Vanessa, and I don't want her to have a child out of wedlock. It will reflect poorly on all of us."

"I never knew you were so concerned about how people feel about you," I snap, but there's a rising elation in my chest where the pain used to hollow me out.

"I'm not. It's Alyssa, not to mention my PR team, who advises me on

what I need to do. When I presented this sticky situation to them, they recommended a romantic elopement. Especially since she's been pregnant for a while now. We can say that she didn't feel like revealing the baby news until she was all set up and out of the first trimester."

"But, Bob," I say hazily. "Bob, the baby isn't mine. She said so."

I am so confused. The flask has not improved my mental processes, or perhaps I have a concussion and nobody's realized.

"Well, she lied about it, bald-faced. You are the father of the child."

"That's the best news of my life," I say sincerely. Bob's face grows even darker, but he refrains from comment. "But to be clear, I would gladly raise another man's child with her if she needed me to. I was just hurt when I said those things, but I never did get the chance to apologize. She's blocked my number, did you know that?"

"Too little, too late," Bob mutters. "But you can do it now. Pack a bag and get sobered up. You're going to Rochester. Alyssa and I will accompany you. After all, it is your wedding day."

I choke and begin to cough. Behind Bob, the SWAT team watches dispassionately.

This feels like the most passive-aggressive display of police brutality ever, I think with whining self-pity.

After I'm done, I try to straighten up.

"Feeling okay?" says Bob.

"Yeah," I grunt. "I'll just go get packed."

"Good," he says. "Just one last thing."

And with a fist that is almost the size of a small plate, Bob socks me right in the gut.

It's a while before I can think coherently again. I lie curled up on the ground, groaning. In fact, I'm pretty sure I passed out for a bit there.

I guess it was well-deserved, but fuck, does it ever hurt.

25

Vanessa

I wake up dreading the day. Outside, the heat of summer is in full force. I'm not looking forward to living in this cottage without an AC. I make a mental note to pick one up as soon as humanly possible. Already, the air is stifling me.

I stretch my hands over my head and frown.

When I last spoke to Susanna May, she had an eerie quality to her voice, like she knew something that I didn't. There isn't a specific thing she said, but it still bags at me somehow.

Then, a day later, I'm lounging on my chair in front of my cottage, trying to tan and get the additional vitamin D that is so beneficial to both the baby and me.

Clarissa walks by. "Vanessa, make sure you're using a good sunscreen and don't stay out so long. You should also be wearing a hat."

Since the secret is out about my pregnancy, people are always providing unsolicited advice, nowadays treating me like a queen one second and a child the next. Clarissa's one of the few people I can take it from without wincing.

I'm really frustrated, too, because they banned me from the stables. I had a meeting with the manager over letting me back in later, but what's the point of staying at a ranch if I can't take care of and ride the horses?

The nurse, Janet, warns me not to ride the horses again repeatedly, too. "It's not really safe past a certain point, dear, and you have reached that point

now. I believe your due date is sometime in December, isn't it?"

I shrug, disappointed. "Can I still brush the horses and clean their harnesses and tack? Maybe I could still clean their stalls, too. I just love being near the horses. They have a soothing effect on me."

"As lovely as that sounds, you shouldn't be lifting anything heavy anymore. And what will happen if a horse gets spooked and runs into you or something? What are you going to do then? Is playing with horses worth the life of your baby?"

I shake my head. "I see your point, Janet. But I've never been hurt by brushing a horse before. And polishing tack is harmless. What could possibly go wrong there?"

Janet sighed heavily. "Vanessa, listen to me. There are chemicals in the polishing gel that can harm a fetus. You are at such a vibrant moment in your child's development. I know I can't order you to stay out, but I strongly suggest it for the health of both you and the baby."

"Okay," I say morosely.

Janet looks a bit crestfallen at my complete lack of positivity but nods her head, continues with the tests, and finishes the physical exam.

"Everything looks good, Vanessa. As for other activities, there are quilting, archery, and hiking, but bring someone with you for that."

I nod, still gloomy.

"You can also swim, but slowly. You can use the canoes and do some gardening if you don't bend over too much. Not to mention all the various art projects. We have so many activities to help those suffering with their addictions. It keeps them busy and out of their own heads for the most part."

I hop off the examination table and pull on my underwear and tights.

"Thank you for the help and advice." I give her a more cheerful nod, and I leave feeling better about my health, if not my social life.

But when I head back to my cottage, I'm greeted with a delightful surprise. It's Susanna May, beaming and holding her arms out.

I run to her, and she chuckles as I almost pick her up with my hug.

"Take it easy," she scolds. "You'll hurt the baby if you're not careful."

"Oh, no," I say. "You're like everyone else, either giving me advice I don't want or worrying that I am going to lose the baby just from walking." I flop onto the couch, feeling moody all of a sudden.

Susanna raises a wispy eyebrow at me. "Nessa, you should be happy right now. The baby is a blessing."

"I'm sorry, Susanna. You're right. I sound ungrateful, and I don't mean to be."

"It's all right, sweetheart," she says, giving me a warm hug. "I think you're doing amazing."

"How long can you stay?" I ask her. "We haven't talked in ages."

I'm just about to settle down into a long chat with her when a knock on the door makes me jump.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Susanna asks. I shake my head, wondering who it might be.

"Hello?" comes a familiar voice from outside, and suddenly, my joy evaporates.

All I have time to think is, *oh, shit, it's Mom*, before she's walking in like she owns the place. I suppress my instinctive groan.

"What are you doing here?" I sputter.

"Don't give me that tone, young lady," she retorts. "Your father told me to come here. As if I would come to a farm on my own. I can smell the horseshit already. Ick."

Nice. One minute, and already, my life choices are beneath her.

"Mom," I say, realizing I've forgotten my manners, "this is Susanna May. She's here to help me with my pregnancy. You know, the one I specifically asked Dad not to tell you about."

Because of course she knows. Nothing else would bring her all the way here.

My mom waves the comment away, however.

"Don't worry. I'm only here because your father has some hair-brained scheme. He said to meet him around this time. He's already late. I don't want to be here any longer than I have to."

She sits on one of the plastic chairs, ignoring the fact that I haven't made her welcome at all. Across the painted table from her, Susanna is widening her eyes, and I can't help but smile.

"It's nice to meet you," Susanna says quietly, holding out her hand for a handshake. My mother takes the older woman's fingers and releases them quickly. I'm surprised she did that much.

"What has Dad got planned?" I ask apprehensively.

"How would I know?" She shrugs.

"Well, you are his primary confidante. Doesn't he usually let you know when he takes a dump, too?" I snap.

Mom rolls her eyes. "Do you always have to be such a drama queen?" she asks, not really expecting an answer.

"If I'm being ambushed, then yeah," I retort. "I know you didn't come here because you give a damn about me, Mom."

She ignores me completely as she inspects every inch of the cottage. It's like I haven't spoken, like I don't deserve a reply.

"How quaint," she muses instead. "All you need is a white picket fence, and you'll have your biggest dream come true."

It's a reiteration of such an old complaint, that she, such an accomplished woman, a feminist of long standing, could have raised such an underachieving, unremarkable child. Too bad her barbs have lost their sting now. I just roll my eyes.

There's a sound outside, and suddenly, my mom sits up. I look at the woman and see that she has a curious look in her eyes.

Whether she admits it or not, I think she's actually looking forward to seeing Dad after a while. She goes to the bathroom and touches up her already perfect makeup. *That's right, Mom. Make this all about you.*

I go to the bathroom after her and splash cold water on my wrists, trying to lower my heart rate. I'm nervous as hell. Dad's not picking up his phone, and I have a feeling that this is going to turn into an intervention of some sort.

I wish Susanna weren't here to witness whatever drama is about to go down. The sound grows nearer, helicopter blades chopping through the air. We all remain silent as we hear it land nearby.

It takes only a few minutes for Dad to walk in, looking stern and determined. He takes me in his arms.

"No matter what happens, Nessa, I want you to know I love you, and I am proud of you."

Why does that sound like a threat, somehow? I think... until I realize he didn't come alone.

My mouth drops open when I look over his shoulder. A few steps behind is Edward, looking like a man back from Hell.

"Nessa?" He sheepishly smiles at me. I scowl.

Instead of being happy to see them all, I feel the exact opposite. I don't know what any of them were thinking, but they've completely ruined poor Susanna's visit.

"Why are all of you here?" I ask bluntly. "I hope you know I'm well past the legal limit for abortion."

Edward looks horrified, and Dad winces.

"Stop it, Nessa," my father says to me reprovngly. "We are going to make an honest woman out of you."

My blood boils. "You what? How dare you? I am an honest woman."

"Yeah, that's why you lied to me about my baby, right?" says Edward, palely sneering. "Because you're the epitome of truth and honesty here?"

He looks like he's suffering, he really does. I guess he didn't take the news of his impending fatherhood all that well.

But I did lie. He has me there. I have no idea what I am supposed to say to that.

I drop my head and look at my feet. "I—"

Dad cuts me off.

"You're getting married. Right now. Right here. Then you are going on your honeymoon with Edward."

My head jerks up in shock. "You can't be serious."

"You've done enough damage, Bob," says my mother warningly. "Please don't compound your mistakes by making your daughter somebody else's problem."

"I'm my own problem!" I say furiously, wheeling to face her.

"Oh, I completely agree," she says. "But your unborn child shouldn't suffer from that. I can't believe nobody's considered adoption yet. Really, Vanessa, you're not anywhere mature enough to be either a wife or a mother."

"I refuse to talk to you," I growl, stabbing a finger in her direction. "Dad, what's wrong with you? Why would you bring her?"

Dad says firmly, "Because she's going to be a grandmother, whether she approves of it or not. And you're going to be an amazing wife and mom, too. I've got everything set up. Just trust me, okay?"

To my horror, I see a pastor walking up behind Edward.

"Edward's already agreed to it," Dad continues briskly. "Now all we need is your 'I do', and we will have this whole mess cleaned up."

"You're serious? I thought this was a joke of some kind," I say, feeling sick to the pit of my stomach. "My baby is not a mess."

"As I said to you before," says Dad, "the father has just as many rights as the mother, and since the child is his, he knows he must do his duty and make sure you are well taken care of."

Now I really want to throw up.

"He's doing this out of duty? Oh, how romantic," I sneer. "An arranged

marriage? Are you serious? You're forcing me to do something even he doesn't want to do, and I will have no part of it."

My father frowns darkly at me. Something is different about him.

"We are dead serious," he says, "and yes, you will play your part, Nessa. Now, will you marry Edward or not?"

26

Edward

My thoughts are so conflicted, and I think I'm still a bit hungover. Today is not the day to make big decisions, nor have them made for me.

But here I am, dressed in a designer suit and carrying a wedding ring set in my right pocket. Every once in a while, I take it out and stare at it, as if the sparkling conflict-free diamonds will show me some solution other than a shotgun wedding.

It's not like our social circle won't notice the fact that Vanessa had the baby too close to our wedding date, but it barely matters nowadays. All I see is Bob trying to fix his kid's life for her according to his own standards, and I'm just being swept along.

We aren't having much of a wedding anyway. It will be scandalous when it finally entirely comes out in the open. The tabloids will have a field day with this tidbit of gossip. Unlike Bob, I know it's too late to try and cover this up. He just doesn't realize how the media landscape has changed.

What I'm worried about is that Vanessa will capitulate just because her dad forced her hand.

But Bob basically admitted to me on the helicopter ride over here that he's prepared to pull whatever strings he can with the police, the Mob, or Satan himself if it helps him protect his kid, and I believe him.

It's just that I can take the consequences of my actions, but Vanessa shouldn't have to be punished for my shitty behavior too.

And who are they to try and force *me* into a marriage? They're not even giving their daughter a chance to choose for herself. That's what really bothers me. The fact that Vanessa is being forced into this as much as I am. She deserves better than me, and I don't want her on these terms.

But then I think of Vanessa and the way she smiles and reveals the dimple in her chin. How her hair feels as it is draped across my body in bouncy, golden waves. And the smell of her and her sex. My cock twitches in my pants. *God, I hope the pastor hasn't noticed.*

Yes, I know I want her sexually. But what about the list of reasons she spewed at me during our last conversation at the ranch? Have all those issues magically disappeared?

No, not for me. I have a bad feeling about this whole endeavor.

Even while I'm too busy taking in the beautiful view of Vanessa. Lit from the back and with a stern face, she looks like an avenging angel.

Bob is speaking to Vanessa. "We are dead serious," he says, "and yes, you will play your part, Nessa. Now, will you marry Edward or not?"

Everyone is staring at Vanessa, waiting for the answer to her dad's question.

I can barely breathe and I still feel a bit light-headed. The entire helicopter ride, I was wondering whether I should just jump out of it while we were flying or meet the fate that Bob is laying out before me.

Me? Edward Rutherford, married? I never thought I'd see the day.

But do I really want to marry Vanessa?

Yes, the answer comes to me as if a bubble popped inside my skull. Even if the child isn't mine, I would still love it and her, simply for the fact that the baby is half of Vanessa.

But I never got a chance to tell her that, so how would she know before she turns me down?

I step forward as if propelled by some invisible force.

"Bob, may Vanessa and I speak privately?"

He whirls around and glares at me.

Then Alyssa, of all people, takes my side. She places her hand on Bob's shoulder.

"Bob, we shouldn't be forcing our daughter to marry someone if she isn't sure. It's just wrong."

Bob whirls again to face Alyssa. I don't think he's ever done this before, but she meets his furious gaze calmly.

I glance at the pastor, who is rocking back and forth on his heels silently, watching the exchange. He looks really concerned, but I can tell that he is afraid. He's sweating profusely.

I can relate.

"Alyssa," says Bob, "stay out of this."

"I will not." She says it very simply. "Vanessa is my daughter, too, and I want her to be happy with her partner. Just because you became unhappy with our relationship doesn't mean you have the right to control hers."

"Control? *I'm* not the control freak in this relationship!" Bob shouts in her face. I almost take a step back.

"We don't even have a relationship anymore, so why does it matter?" says Alyssa, her own voice level and undisturbed. "Let Vanessa and Edward talk it out. Then, if they decide to, we can have this impromptu wedding or, you know, have a proper wedding like normal people."

Vanessa blinks. I don't think she expected her mom to take her side either.

The pastor speaks up now. "God is everywhere, and the vows will be recognized in Heaven and on Earth no matter where they are said."

He's only trying to stop the argument, but Alyssa is so angry that she casts a severe gaze on him. "Yes, thank you very much for your input. Please refrain from commenting on our family matters until we have asked for your advice, however."

Alyssa's stare could compete with Medusa's herself. I'm not surprised when this man of the cloth takes an uneasy step back.

Meanwhile, I'm watching Vanessa over her father's shoulder. She is putting shoes on and reaches out to grab a light jacket off a hook by the door. Then she squeezes by her mom and disappears into the dark.

I want to follow hard on her heels, but I figure that she needs some time to herself.

"Look what you did!" Alyssa exclaims. "Now she's run off. Knowing her, she'll be gone for days. All she knows to do is run away from her problems, and I don't think she picked up that habit from me."

"Of course she did. She watched you fall into a wine glass instead of working on our marriage." Bob sounds bitter.

"You were never home! It was all about the business. You could have delegated your responsibilities better so you could have spent more time with us. You were a workaholic, and that can kill a relationship just as fast as wine can. I'm just as responsible as you are for how things turned out."

It's the first time I've ever heard Alyssa admit she was at fault for anything. This marriage stuff seems to be getting under her skin.

Or maybe they aren't as separated and uninvolved as I thought they were? Weird.

I grab the pastor by the upper arm, guiding him away. "Let's give them some privacy."

We're both silent, then he pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes away fresh sweat.

"Are you going to be okay?" I ask.

"Sure. I'm just happy we're not there anymore. Thank you for extricating me from that scene. I have a hard time walking away from issues. I always feel like I could help."

I shake my head. "Trust me, getting in between those two will do nothing but make it worse. I learned a long time ago to just leave them be. They've been fighting like this for almost thirty years."

"How did you meet them?" he asks, still dabbing at his face.

"Bob invested in me when I developed my first startup. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be where I am now."

"Is that why you feel like you have to marry his daughter? Out of duty, he said. Is that how it is?"

I chew on the corner of my lip while I think. "It was, but the second I saw Vanessa again, all I wanted to do was hold her in my arms."

There is a prolonged silence.

"Then I think you need to do something about this situation," offers the pastor, forgetting his own advice. "Take control of it. Don't leave it up to Vanessa's parents to force you two together. Do it on your own. If you want Vanessa, then show her and tell her how much she means to you. Then you two can decide if you want me to marry you here in the little chapel or wait to have a larger wedding at a later date."

"I can already tell you that if she agrees, we will be getting married tonight. I don't want her to doubt my love and sincerity. And I want to be with her as man and wife, not as a fix to her problems."

The pastor nods his head sagely. I realize I never caught his name and attempt to ask rather shamefacedly.

"Oh, I'm the Reverend George Florence. But don't worry about that. I think you have somewhere to be. Go look for Vanessa, and I will stay here and pray that all the chaos blows away from you."

"Thanks, Reverend. It was nice to speak with you. I hope to return with good news."

"Me too, Son. Me too." He pats my arm.

And on that note, I head to the stables, sure it's where I should go to seek out the woman I want to marry by tonight.

Vanessa

How could they put me on the spot like that?

In front of Edward, at that.

I'm at a loss for words. I have seen the look on Edward's face, and he looks sick and intimidated. Shaken, somehow. I wonder what Dad's been saying to him.

I can't believe they even brought a pastor. What am I even going to get married in? My work dungarees? No, I remember I packed a few different dresses just in case I needed one. If my parents get their way, I'll be dressed up and walking down the aisle within the hour.

I want to start crying, and I ignore the heated argument between my parents like I always do and sneak away while they're distracted.

So I put on my sneakers, grab a coat, and slip past my mom, scurrying away in the direction of the dining hall. But at the last second, I decide the best place to hide would be the stables, since I am essentially banned due to the nurse's decree. Nobody would expect to find me there.

It's been a while since I last entered the stables, but they are as warm and inviting as I remember. I grab a brush and head to Billy's stall. I start brushing his coat, and he leans into me. I think he must have missed me.

Leaning into his coat, I let the tears fall freely. All I can remember is the look on Edward's face and how unsure he was about being with me.

And when my dad said he was there out of duty, I almost started

screaming.

Being with someone should not be about duty or sacrifice. It should be about mutual love and adoration. Do I have that with Edward? *Not a chance in hell*, I think darkly.

I hear a door open. There shouldn't be anyone else in here at this time of day. Most people are getting ready to eat dinner and taking naps. I stay still and listen.

"Hello?" calls a voice. Of course.

I should have remembered. There is actually one person on the premises who doesn't know I've been banned from the stables and would therefore come straight here.

"I'm here," I call out, recognizing Edward's voice. "Please tell me you're alone."

"Yes," he replies. "Your parents are still fighting, I think. I left the pastor near the dining hall. He's trying to avoid them, too."

"You're scared of them, too," I say sulkily. "Or else you wouldn't be here doing my dad's bidding for a shotgun wedding to an uneducated trust fund baby."

"Vanessa, stop putting yourself down and feeling sorry for yourself. You're a strong, independent woman, and you know it. That's how you can stand up to your parents all the time."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Those two are tearing me apart, like always. But why did you agree to come along and be a part of this wild wedding crap? I thought you had more sense than that."

"Great, now you're putting *me* down," says Edward, sitting down on an overturned bucket and watching me as I run a brush through the horse's coat. "I can't tell whether that's supposed to be an improvement or not."

I can feel his gaze on my body, and it's making me uncomfortable.

"Is there something you need, Edward?"

"Don't be like that. You know why I'm here."

Do I? I know he sounds exhausted, mentally and physically. But I still have no idea what makes the man tick.

"You're acting like you're my shining knight on a white horse, riding up to save me. Did I ask for you to do that? I'm not a damsel in distress, Edward, no matter what you might think. I just need some space, so can you please leave me alone?"

I know I'm being rude, but he's bothering me. His proximity is too much,

and so is the deep rasp of his voice.

He looks at me with haunted eyes.

"No, Vanessa, I can't just leave you alone. Do you think I haven't tried?"

I don't move. I can't react to this, otherwise I might fall apart.

"That baby is mine, too, and we are going to figure this out together, one way or another. We can take the easy route and share custody, or we can battle it out in court. And you may not want to marry me, but the more I think about having you as my wife, the more I fall in love with the idea."

I give him a dark look. "The keyword is 'idea'. Do you honestly think I'd agree to something as demeaning as this? I've thought this through as well, Edward. Do you think I don't know what it means for a kid to grow up with two parents who can't stand each other?"

His dark eyes narrow. "Stop nitpicking at my words when you know what I mean. We don't have to argue like your parents. We can have a civil discussion, can't we?"

I sigh deeply.

"I don't know," I admit honestly. "But I'm sorry I told you that the baby wasn't yours. And I am sorry my father forced you to come here. That wasn't right."

He visibly shudders.

"No, don't be sorry. I wouldn't have been surprised if he was taking me to some isolated place to kill me. But when I saw the pastor, I calmed down significantly. Unless maybe he was bringing the pastor to say my last rites."

I can tell he's half joking, but only half. I see anxiety in his eyes, but I don't know if it is for himself or for me.

"What's got you so worried?" I ask casually.

"Well, I had a SWAT team break into my house and then I was punched in the stomach by your dad so hard I vomited, twice. I've been on a bender for days, I've stopped showering or eating, and I've been heartbroken, to tell you the truth. And when you told me the baby wasn't mine and that you no longer wanted to see me, I was destroyed. I've never felt that way about anyone before."

No, I definitely can't afford to react right now. I think my brain just died.

"I'm usually the one to end relationships, you know," he continues as if I haven't spent months stalking him on the internet to find out exactly that. "I can count how many of those women I ever even took home overnight on the fingers of one hand. It was always hotel rooms, and then I always made

excuses about work, and then I'd 'accidentally' lose their numbers if I ever ran into them again."

I realize I don't need to hear much more about all these random women, so I raise a hand to stop him.

"Your past doesn't matter to me, or at least not anymore," I say quickly. "I'm more concerned about the future. How do you feel about having a baby?"

"Honestly, I'm terrified." He shrugs, looking ashamed. I nod.

"Me, too," I reply. "I never even considered being a parent before, but when I felt the baby move the other day, I became strangely possessive about it. I didn't want to even consider sharing custody of the child at that point. I wanted it to be strictly mine. And when I made you leave, I was happy. You know why? It's because I figured I could move some place where no one knows me and raise the child how I wanted. Just me and my baby and nobody else to worry about."

He looks so sad at that moment that it makes me want to cry. I realize that this is somehow worse to him than my sleeping with another man.

"Do you really mean that?" he asks painfully. "Has it been so bad for you that you'd rather vanish permanently than let me be around our child?"

And there it is. There's the nub of it all.

Because it's Edward, and I've loved him for longer than I've even really known him, and no, I don't want to raise my kid alone when I could have him around. Even if he doesn't necessarily think I'm a great mom, I think he's going to be a great dad.

I reach out and put a hand on his knee. "Do you genuinely want to be a father, Edward?"

"I don't know." He exhales deeply. "But I know I want to be with you. And if you want to have the baby, I want to be the man at your side who helps you do that. Even if it's not mine. This is about you and me, the way you make me feel. There are no strings attached, even at the wrong end of a shotgun."

I stop breathing completely. "What did you just say?"

"I said I love you without strings attached," he says, almost brusquely. "I've loved you from the beginning, Vanessa. How can you not know that?"

He sounds irritated and impatient and everything I hate about him when he's in a mood. I don't think I've ever loved him more.

Wait. Wait a second. Nothing is this easy.

"I am scared that we are going to end up always fighting like my parents," I say when I could have just said *I love you too*.

But it's too soon, and it's not safe, and it's not that I don't trust him, it's also that I don't trust myself.

"Why would we?" he asks, mystified.

"Well, I'm stubborn like my mom, and you're a workaholic like my dad. I was—no, I *am*—scared that you'll get tired of me, and then we'll end up divorced and fighting over our child just like them. I don't want that for our baby."

He nods. "That makes sense. I can see why you'd think that. But we are not your parents, Vanessa. We get to write our own story, and we know ahead of time the mistakes we want to avoid, right? We can do better than them. I know we can. I just need you to give me a chance."

"Won't you resent me for taking you away from your single life? Can you really stand to be with just one woman instead of the parade of females I've watched you date over the years?"

He leans in and gives me the lightest kiss on the cheek. "Those women were nothing compared to you. I'd pick you a million times over. No, a billion times. And as for resentment, you've got to be crazy. I thought I was going to die without you. If we're doing this, I'm with you and just you until the end. I can't settle for less if it's you, Nessa."

For the first time, I believe he means it when he uses the short form of my name. It's an endearment, and I have never felt so dear to him before.

I feel tears well up. "Okay. Thank you for saying that. I love you too."

It's almost agonizing to watch how his face lights up.

He leans forward for a kiss, and when our lips touch, I feel a warmth emanating from my core. It is almost as if my soul recognizes his.

I wrap my arms around him and deepen the kiss. I'm not ready for much more intimacy than that. But it feels so sweet, and I decide something right then and there.

"Can I be a suburban housewife, or do we have to have a nanny and a maid?" I ask, only half teasing.

"I'll leave that up to you, my love. You can have whatever you want." And when he says *that* term of endearment, it doesn't sound fake.

"Sounds good to me," I reply, beaming. His smile transforms him, turning him into the man I've always dreamed of, looking at me like I'm someone special.

"Nessa," he says, tugging on his collar. "Now, there is one thing I have to ask you."

"Okay," I say, my eyes fixed on his lips. I lean in for another kiss, but he ducks.

Then suddenly, he gets down on one knee in the hay, ruining his designer suit. He pulls out a black velvet box, and my heart leaps into my throat. *This is it. This is the moment.*

He opens the box and displays a beautiful ring made up of three twisting bands, intertwined like a stream of stars. I stare shamelessly.

I can tell he's choking up a bit. "I know I'm not the man you deserve, but I will spend the rest of my life trying to be. I will be the best father in the world if it kills me, and I will love, honor, and cherish you till death and beyond."

"I think you mean to infinity and beyond," I say. The look on his face is comically stunned.

"*Toy Story*? You don't get it? Buzz Lightyear?" I tease him. He shakes his head in confusion.

"Never mind," I say. "It's a beautiful ring, Edward. But you know you don't have to marry me, right? We can be in a relationship and still be good parents to our kid. The wedding is my dad's thing. It's not mine."

"No, it's *my* thing. I want you to be my wife, the mother of my child, the grandmother of their kids, and the woman I grow old with." He kisses the tip of my nose. "I should have told you long ago. I've known it for months, but I could never find the words before."

"That tickles," I say lamely. "You really want us to grow old together?"

"I know somewhere else I'd like to kiss you that tickles." He's grinning like a madman, but then his face becomes serious.

"Yes. I want to see you when you have wrinkles. I want to sit next to you on our porch and watch you shake your walking stick at kids and yell at them to get off our lawn. Will you accept this ring or not? Because I'm just going to keep asking until you say yes."

"Of course I will." But I reach for him instead of the ring. I really, really want to kiss him now.

He meets my lips gladly. Before, he always had walls up, and maybe it was because I was trying to break them down instead of taking my time to climb them that he had never felt comfortable showing me this side of him.

"Want to make love in the hayloft?" I ask, suddenly feeling adventurous. I figure it will be a while before someone comes looking for us.

"Do I ever!"

He immediately swoops me up into his arms and takes me up the ladder to the loft. The horses neigh softly below us in prudish astonishment. Billy looks downright outraged.

"No, wait," says Edward suddenly. "Is it safe for the baby?"

"I don't know," I say, drawing him down to me. "But if we're really gentle and slow, it might be."

And we are. We are everything I ever wanted and nothing I ever imagined. It's like realizing what stars really look like up close, being in Edward's arms and having him kiss me everywhere, and I mean *everywhere*, before he finally lets me come.

And the stars shatter into a thousand rivers of light as I scream my joy to the night sky up above.

Edward

Vanessa and I head back to her cottage, a little worse for wear. I'm plucking pieces of hay out of her hair and off her clothes while she does the same for me.

As we approach, I see that the door is closed and the lights are still on. I am dreading facing Bob, especially after I just made love to his daughter, but I figure he might as well get used to the fact.

We swing by the dining hall first to pick up the Reverend and to prepare him for the upcoming nuptials. He looks us up and down quickly and holds back a chuckle. I guess we look dirtier than I thought.

"I see you have fixed things with your fiancée," he says gently. "Does that mean we are having a wedding this evening?"

Vanessa nods while her hand rests in the crook of my arm.

"I'm sorry, Reverend," Vanessa says guiltily. "This isn't exactly the way I wanted to have my wedding. But now that Edward and I have reached an understanding, we can't help but say we want to be married now before a few people, instead of later with a bunch of meaningless guests."

"I understand completely," he says, "but I wondered if you would enjoy the limelight and prestige. Some people do."

"The exact opposite, really. The tabloids never get anything right, and we have to walk around with people staring at us because they saw us in a magazine or something." Vanessa shakes her head briskly. "No, let's do it

now. Shall we see if Mom and Dad have killed each other yet?"

"I wish," I say without a trace of irony. The pastor gives me a gently forgiving smile.

"No, wait," says Vanessa. *Nessa*, I remind myself. My *Nessa*, now. "Susanna's still there, right? She'll break things up so subtly, they won't even know they're reconciling. If that woman can do anything, she can provide advice that leads to fixing wounded hearts."

"That would be a nice change," I can't help but say. I make a mental note to thank Susanna May for being there for *Nessa* throughout. I suspect she helped make my case for me at least somewhat.

We head past the chapel, and the pastor says, "I'm going to go make sure everything is set up."

I grab *Nessa's* hand, and we run through the darkness to the cottage. She opens the door and sees that Susanna and her parents are having tea.

"Oh, look who's decided to grace us with her presence after we all came here to see her," says Alyssa, snide and condescending as always.

"Mom, you're here for a shotgun wedding and the drama, not for my best interests," says *Nessa*. "Can you not lie to yourself anymore?"

"Can you decide what you're going to do with your life?" her mom shoots.

"Yes," I reply. "We want to get married. Are you two paying for the honeymoon? I hold both of you completely responsible for today. I hope you know that."

If I've hoped to upset Alyssa, I've failed. She smirks at us.

"Of course, but that means four people getting married today. How do you feel about that?"

Nessa's mouth drops open. I look at Bob, who looks at the floor.

In between the two of them, Susanna May sits smiling gently. Is there no end to the miracles this woman can perform?

"You're getting married again?" *Nessa* bursts into laughter. "It won't last five minutes. You two can't stand each other on your *good* days."

"No, Vanessa, it's different now," says Bob. "We have both been at odds a great deal, but we always come to your rescue together, and your mother is just as invested in your happiness as I am."

Then Susanna May interjects. "Yes, don't you two see the rare passion you have when you fight? It wasn't just pure aggression about your past issues. In fact, if anything, your issues have brought you two closer together."

She beams. "Your parents both want you to be happy and successful, Nessa. They just tend to disagree on how to achieve that. But they can focus on themselves instead from now on."

Alyssa eyes the elderly woman silently. I can tell from her glance that she thinks the woman has magical powers or something.

I don't know. Maybe I feel the same. There's definitely something special about Susanna May, something akin to a fairy godmother, perhaps.

"Jesus, Edward," says Bob dryly. "What did you do to your suit?"

"I spent some time rolling on the barn floor. That's where Vanessa went to get away from everyone, and I had the idea she might be there, and she was. Hence, the dirt."

"Forget I asked," mutters my oldest friend. "Are we going to do this thing or not? George is here whenever you're ready, and it is getting late."

"We're ready." Nessa and I look at each other.

Bob reaches across the table and takes Alyssa's hand. It's a gesture I haven't seen him make in years. They look as if they were never divorced at all. Pure love shines in their eyes.

Susanna follows us as we exit the cottage, carrying what looks like a dress bag. She is to be one of the witnesses, I hear her overtell Nessa. They link arms, and we casually stroll behind her parents.

The pastor is puffing away as we approach. I can tell he isn't doing so well.

"Who's going to walk down the aisle first?" Susanna asks.

"I expect my parents would be first, and then Edward and me. Thank you for bringing a dress. I wasn't prepared to get married wearing horse manure."

"But the manure is so sexy on you," I murmur. "Didn't you read *Cosmo*? It's all the rage as the modern woman's newest accessory."

She nudges me playfully in the ribs. "You stink just as much, and *you* don't have a change of clothes." She laughs.

"I do have a change of clothes, but it's not a suit."

"Well, since I am not going to be wearing a wedding dress, maybe you should wear something more casual."

I think this is a good idea and run to the helicopter. I rifle through my navy blue travel bag, dig through the jeans and shorts for a honeymoon, and find a pair of nice khakis and a white shirt. I slip them on, apply aftershave liberally to cover up the smell, and head back to the chapel.

When I get there, Susanna tells me that Vanessa is changing.

I can't wait to see what she looks like. I suddenly wish I'd brought a tie.

I hear the bathroom door open, and Nessa walks out shyly. She's wearing a cream-colored dress with a layer of lace over top of what I think is satin. The effect is of a peach shaped like an hourglass, crowned with gold.

Her hair is tied up at the nape of her neck, and someone has woven flowers into her hair. Her eyes are like stars, and the ring on her finger fades in comparison.

When I take her in my arms, she smells of coffee and chocolate. It's a great scent on her.

Susanna approaches, shaking her finger at us. "The bride and groom are not supposed to see each other before the wedding."

I can't help but point out, "But how are we supposed to watch Vanessa's parents re-tie the knot if we can't see each other? I plan on sitting with her in the pews and snuggling."

Susanna throws her hands up in the air but joins us in the pew.

I look at Nessa's parents. Bob has turned into a handsome silver fox, while on the other hand, Alyssa is lit up with a shine I have never seen on her face before. Is this what she looks like when she's truly happy? If so, I can finally see why Bob is smitten with her.

The ceremony goes on without a hitch. When they say *I do*, they look like a much younger couple. The years have rolled back as they come down the aisle hand in hand and sit in the pew opposite us. They can barely keep their hands off each other.

Now it's our turn. My legs feel like jelly when I stand up. I make my way carefully up the steps to where the pastor waits patiently. He reminds me of a smiling Santa, minus the beard.

Vanessa stands across from me, and we hold each other's hands. I look down and see how tiny they are compared to mine. I still can't get over how beautiful she is, and I can't wait to see what our child looks like. *Let it take after her*, I pray to whichever deity is listening.

"You're gorgeous, baby bump and all," I tell Nessa with sincerity. She beams at me, and I can't help but kiss her quickly.

"Later, please," says the Reverend. He begins the ceremony.

It's as simple as the one he did for Bob and Alyssa. But while he spoke about reunion and eternity for them, he speaks about strength and loyalty for us. About honoring and cherishing each other. Speaking with one heart and other things that I'm not really paying attention to, because Nessa's smiling

face fills my whole horizon.

I realize the pastor is asking me something. I reach into my pocket, extract the gold wedding band, and slip the ring on her finger with shaking hands. Nessa has the other one in her hand, slipped to her by Susanna via Bob. I must remember to thank him afterward because he really thought of everything except the engagement ring.

Soon, we say our vows, each following the traditional sacraments since neither of us had any time to write our own. When it comes to saying *I do*, we both have tears in our eyes.

Vanessa clears her throat so it comes out clearly. "I do," she answers.

"And do you, Edward Rutherford, take Vanessa Kazinsky as your happily wedded wife?"

"I do."

"Then I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

"You don't need to tell me twice," I say, wrapping my arm around her and dipping her so quickly and dramatically that she squeals.

Her parents and Susanna laugh.

Later on, Alyssa and her daughter hug and then dissolve into tears at exactly the same time. Like mother, like daughter, even if neither of them wants to admit it. Bob meets my eyes and smiles.

He approaches me, and I want to cringe away from his handshake, but when I do shake his hand, he pulls me in for a hug.

"We'll always be buddies, Edward. I wish I didn't find out in such a weird way. You could have come to me. You should have asked for my permission for her hand."

Guilt consumes me.

"I thought she didn't want me until today. What would be the point of asking about a girl who didn't want me back? And you, by the way. I know you, and I know that you don't think that I'm the right man for her." And I'm oddly okay with that.

"Don't take this the wrong way," says Bob, a steely light in his eyes, "but the marriage contract is ironclad, and I hope you looked at it instead of blindly signing it. You don't even have a prenup."

"I don't need one," I reply. "Vanessa can have whatever she wants."

For once, I get it right. Bob smiles approvingly.

"See you later." I go up to Vanessa and her mom. "Well, we're done here."

"We sure are. Bob and I are going to Belize. It's a five-star resort." She grins.

"Meanwhile, Edward and I are just going somewhere else, I guess," says Nessa quickly. I want to laugh at her involuntary panic of double honeymooning with her parents, but I too would rather slash my own jugular open than let it come to that. Today has been weird enough.

Alyssa walks toward Bob in the darkness, and we return to the cottage.

"Where's Susanna May?" I ask, peering around.

"She's staying in an empty cottage," says Nessa shyly. "She insisted. I love that woman."

"So I have you all to myself?"

"Yes." She looks up at me through her lashes.

"Good," I say, and swing Nessa up into my arms to take her over the threshold.

She clings to my shoulders, laughing. I take her to the tiny bed and lay her down gently.

"You're all mine, now," I whisper in her ear. She reaches up to me.

Soon afterward, our clothes go flying everywhere, and we have sex that makes me beg for mercy. Twice.

But that's not even the best part. Not anymore.

Afterward, before we fall asleep, I listen to Nessa's belly. I can't feel anything yet, but I want the baby to hear the sound of my voice.

"Hi, kiddo," I say gently. "I'm your dad. You're going to be our Christmas miracle, do you know that?"

EPILOGUE

Vanessa

*C*hristmas Eve

"Push, Mrs. Rutherford! Push!"

I pause between contractions and give the nurse a tired smile.

"You know," I gasp, "I really think it's fine if you call me Nessa like everyone else. Seeing as you're staring straight down my intimate parts, anything else just feels too formal right now."

Next to my bed, Edward cackles. He actually cackles and hoots, like a scary sound effect gone wrong.

"Brilliant," he exclaims with delight. "I'm so glad I brought the good camera. Our child needs to know his mom was a comedy legend even during her labor pains."

"I'm trying to lighten up a difficult situation," I tell him, bracing for my next push. "Can you be quiet, please? I'm trying to focus here."

"Yes, Mrs. Rutherford," he replies with faux servility, the obnoxious man. "Oh, my God, is it coming out now?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Edward, your son is impatient to arrive. Now for the last time, be *quiet*."

In the end, he doesn't have a choice. I deliver a healthy, bouncing boy. He's a whopping eight pounds and nine ounces, he has black hair like his dad, and I scream bloody murder the whole time.

Afterward, while I'm getting my strength back, Edward hovers anxiously

over the delivery room cot, counting fingers and toes obsessively.

"It's ten each," he reports back to me. "It's definitely ten. I miscounted last time. Not that it matters."

It really doesn't. From the moment Edward decided he was going to be a good father, he set himself extreme goals of perfection and never looked back. This includes a very wholesome sense of inclusivity because we seriously discussed what would happen if our son Bobby didn't have the right number of fingers and toes.

"Ten's just the average number, but it's not necessarily optimal," my adorable husband once told me. "Technically, eleven's a mutation, twelve's accelerated evolution, and thirteen is evidence that superpowered aliens exist in our bloodlines."

And I, knowing full well what it would mean to my dorky Sci-Fi loving husband if the baby came out with tentacles like Cthulhu and the power of tongues, just tend to nod and smile when he spouts this nonsensical crap.

Our son is superlatively handsome, of course. His parents, his grandparents, assorted distant relatives from Edward's side of the family, and a motley crew composed of Susanna and Luanne from the shelter and Nadine and Clarissa from the ranch have reached complete consensus on this one important matter. Robert Kazinsky Rutherford is objectively the sweetest, most intelligent and winsome infant in the history of space and time.

My parents act possessive around each other, as befits relative newlyweds, until they suddenly disagree on the proper way to raise a grandson. I lie back in Edward's arms and watch as they squabble with more enthusiasm and volume than ever before.

"What did I tell you?" I whisper. "They'll be divorced by New Year's."

"Not a chance," Edward murmurs in reply. "They live for this shit. They love it. It's the reason their relationship works."

"Maybe," I say slowly, watching Susanna, bless her heart, try to de-escalate the quarrel by reminding them that little Bobby needs good role models in his life. "I don't know. Maybe you're right."

My husband nudges me gently. "Listen. I got you something."

"Yeah?" My heart melts again, as it always does.

Edward makes a daily routine of surprising me with tiny gifts and silly notes, but he's really ramped it up over the holiday season. He's showered me with diamonds, fake furs, perfume, a whole bunch of new mom stuff like cocoa butter lotions and extra-soft nursing bras made in France.

Over the eight days of Christmas, he's filled our home with joy. But now, in the birthing suite, he brings out the best one of all.

"Wow." My eyes glisten with happy tears. "Just wow."

It's a happy dream of a snow globe, containing a tiny model of our very own house near the ranch.

Ever since our desperate dash down the aisle, Edward has committed to the Cottage Core lifestyle with the same drive he brings to developing encryption code. Our house used to be a bed and breakfast, but before that, it belonged to an old Welsh family who first settled in Rochester before the War of Independence and put down roots.

It's large, it's old-fashioned, with gables and wooden floors and a conservatory filled with orange blossoms, even in the winter. There's a massive pantry dating back to when refrigeration didn't exist but famine deaths during winter most certainly did.

There's a ballroom, several bedrooms, servants' quarters, and extra dressing rooms converted into modern ensembles, and a real, live, marble fireplace of Italian origin with a chimney reaching up through the house.

And best of all, there's the white picket fence and the honeysuckle and roses on the trellis that I always dreamed of. All the things on the inside aren't even that important, but when he had this snow globe made, he made them put the white picket fence right up in front, with a tiny sign that says *Merry Christmas, My Love*.

"It's so beautiful," I choke out. "It's everything I ever wanted."

But I'm not even looking at the snow globe, precious though it is. I'm looking at Edward, who's looking at our son.

Not too far in the distance, church bells begin to toll. I shake the snow globe quickly to make the snowflakes fall and show it to Bobby.

"Look, sweetheart," I say to my son. He blinks drowsily at me from his father's arms. "Snow!"

The clock strikes twelve, and our little Christmas miracle arrives. Edward and I look at each other in awe.

Our son smiles for the first time.

EPILOGUE II

Clarissa

Christmas, just after midnight

I watch as Vanessa and Edward look at each other over the head of their newborn and sigh wistfully. My own son clutches at my elbow, eager to be moving.

"Mom, can we go already?" he whispers. "It's lit'rally just a baby, there's lit'rally nothing to look at."

"Agreed," says his adopted Aunt Nadine, "but you remember how my Adrian was even littler, and then he got bigger, right? This one will, too."

"But it's not happening *now*," says Simon, ever the go-getter. "So can we go, please?"

I was never that impatient, nor that blunt. With every day that passes, he reminds me more and more of his dad.

I swallow the memory of tears long gone by. This is a happy occasion tonight, and my son and I have had a good life, no matter what we had to leave behind. If I didn't get what Vanessa has, so what? I regret very little, after all.

It's not as if anyone even wanted me to stay behind in Sea Hollow. I'm well out of that smallest of small towns, crowned with a ridiculous creepy castle atop a cliff.

"C'mon, Simon," I say, and we wave our goodbyes to the happy new parents. The new grandparents are too busy squabbling to notice us, but Susanna May waves back cheerfully.

"Merry Christmas!" she carols out, which is nonsense. I'm going to have a horrendous Christmas, driving back home in this weather. The roads are piled high with snow, and we'll probably get stuck midway.

Nadine comes with us but bobs to a stop at a vending machine. "Oh, they have cinnamon chocolate!" she says with delight. "Simon, do you want some?"

"Yes!" he confirms enthusiastically. "Please and thank you."

I'm heartened that he's remembered his manners and drift off to one side, idly watching the passersby. Then I blink.

It can't be. I'm just imagining it.

He can't be here. He's hundreds of miles away, and eight years ago is a lifetime.

It's just that I've been thinking about him lately, and that's why I'm confused right now. *That* can't be the same man.

He strides down the hospital corridor in a long astrakhan overcoat, as tall and confident as if he's the ruler of a kingdom. The gangly boy I knew never had this much swagger.

But it's the jaw I recognize. The awkward hatchet lines of the teenager have filled out into an almost aristocratic jawline, and he has the same tawny streaks in his hair that I used to run my fingers through, bleached raw by the sun.

His gaze falls upon me, and his stride breaks for a pace. The world slows down as we stare at each other.

It's him. He's here.

I'm not hallucinating. I think I'm not. Unless I am.

My incoherent thoughts are interrupted by a small hand tugging at my shiny suede jacket.

"Mom? Mom! Aunt Nadine wants to know if you want the coffee or the chocolate?"

The man's gaze switches to my kid. He blinks and then smiles.

"Oh, hi," he says charmingly, and it's the same voice I remember, layered over with a deep baritone. "Clarissa, right?"

I take a deep breath. *How kind of him to remember*, says a small, jeering voice in the back of my mind.

"Hello, Eric," I reply. Beside me, Simon looks up curiously.

I almost take a step back. I'm just not ready for this.

But the man notices nothing. Or if he does, he's too polite to say so. I

fumble for a few polite phrases, my sanity, anything. But it doesn't work.

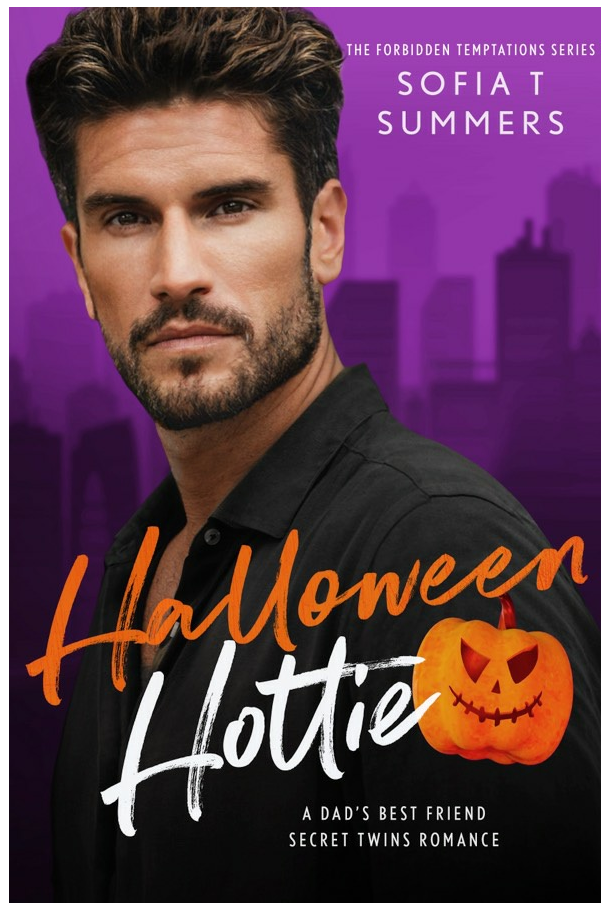
Because he's going to know. How can he not see it?

But he doesn't.

"And who's this?" He smiles, stretching out his hand to his son.

Eric and Clarissa's story will be available soon. Meanwhile [**check out the entire series here.**](#)

HALLOWEEN HOTTIE (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**My Halloween treat?
A one night stand with a HOT Dracula lookalike.
Turns out it was more of a trick than a treat.
My mystery man was my father's best friend...
And now the secret daddy to five-year-old twins! Yikes!**

Six years later, my blast from the past decides to come looking for his daughters.
Jeremy Steele... you tricked me once. But I won't let you trick me twice.

PROLOGUE

Melissa

I trudge up the hill, hoping against hope that I will find a place to rest for the night.

It had rained not too long ago, judging from the smell of wet earth and the gentle mist uncurling over the valley ahead of me. It almost covered the small, picturesque town I crossed six miles ago, and there is something in my heart that is soothed by the sight.

It feels like home. Not my home, but someone's. A place that is loved and cared for and remembered fondly, a place where a child would be happy to grow up.

My throat constricts. *Oh, Mom. Oh, Dad.*

I feel much older than my seventeen years, and I'm sure I look it as well. Being homeless for months does that to a person. I'm ragged and filthy and so, so tired. Every step I take feels like an unbearable effort.

I wish I could be with my dad, more than anything. If only he could see me now.

Oh, Dad. Just because I can't live with you doesn't mean I can't miss you.

The house looms suddenly through the mist, large and bleak and imposing on a jutting cliff top. I stop in my tracks and stare.

Is it real? I haven't eaten for a couple of days, and I could be hallucinating.

Because what kind of person would build a house on a cliff? Only a

madman, or someone with a lot of money and a death wish, perhaps.

I don't know much about architecture, but the house looks old. Very old, to the point it might be a ruin. A part of my scary-movie-loving soul shivers in delight.

The practical side of my brain reminds me that I don't have a safe place to sleep tonight, and if I can find a dry corner in this admittedly moldy looking house, I can make it to the morning without getting attacked by a random drug addict or something.

Hopefully. I've been out on my own for too long to take anything for granted anymore.

I go up toward the house, my calves aching with every step on the muddy incline. The place looks deserted and overgrown. I can see the remains of a broad gravel drive and a broken-down pair of iron gates, but everything else is covered with weeds and ivy.

The ground levels up after a while. Just as I pass the ruined gates, hanging on their hinges, a dark cloud passes over the sun. It feels like a bad omen.

It means that there's going to be rain, says the practical voice who lives in a corner of my brain. *It's almost sundown, so get ahold of yourself, Melly.*

I glance at the front door. There's something that looks surprisingly solid, given that it guards this place. This is not a house so much as the skeleton of an abandoned mansion. There'll probably be a broken window around the back.

"Looking for something?" says a voice at my elbow.

I jump and nearly fall to the muddy ground. "Holy shit!"

"Language, young lady," says the owner of the voice primly. I back away at once.

"I didn't mean to trespass," I say, holding my hands up in the universal symbol for *look, no weapons*. "I didn't know there was anyone here."

"Oh," he says, looking disappointed. "I thought maybe you heard about the tour."

"The tour?"

I watch him shuffle in embarrassment with a sudden pang of pity. He is a short, old man with wispy hair, dressed in a woolly cardigan with frayed patches and a fussy air about him. He looks lonely.

Oh, shit. I think I've seen this plot trope before.

Undiscovered paranormal activity is all well and good, but I sort of wish I

hadn't climbed up the hill now. I can still deal with a dwarfish recluse, as long as he is human, but this had better not be a spirit haunting the grounds. That would really fuck up my night.

"I advertised a tour," he says, staring angrily at his feet. I notice he's wearing Crocs and socks, and my pity for him intensifies. "It's on leaflets all over town."

I brace myself. "When did the tour happen?" *And if he says March 1953, this is where I run.*

"It's today," he says gloomily. "*Come see the spooks and ghouls in Blaine's House of Horrors.* I used a scary font, too. But nobody came."

Oh, that makes so much more sense now. No wonder the house looks so desolate, though I have a feeling it isn't entirely deliberate.

I send up a silent prayer to God above. The man's not a ghost, he's just eccentric. Though that's not always a good sign.

And I still need a place to sleep for tonight, which means I have to either trudge back downhill to find an empty bus stop, or I get to find a bush which isn't too damp. Oh, joy.

My shoulders sag. "Okay. I'm sorry nobody showed. I'll get out of your way now."

"It's only five dollars for kids," he says with a kind of desperate hopefulness. "You look like a kid. I could make a reduction either way. Four dollars for a whole horror tour, how does that sound?"

The truth is, I'm sorely tempted. I've never been inside one of these places before. My dad's a strict Christian who doesn't care for spooky spirit stuff, and Mom was always too busy to take me anywhere, so this was always on my bucket list.

And if I could get indoors and out of the cold for a while, that'd be worth something. It's shaping up to be the kind of night where you feel like the air could shatter your bones, and then you'll wake up in pieces.

"Two dollars," I say halfheartedly, knowing that I can't afford it. I only have seven bucks left from panhandling down on the beach at Seahollow, and I don't know if I can even make it back tomorrow. I'm saving up the money for a big sandwich at a gas station if I can find one.

"Done!" says the old man. "I'm Gordon Blaine, by the way. I own this place. Ahem. Welcome to the spookiest House of Horrors you've ever seen!"

He sounds happy now, which is nice. I tramp behind him to the front door.

"Just a moment," he says cheerfully, pulling at the brass doorknocker. A hollow sepulchral note rings through the house, then the door creaks open. There's nobody inside.

"Nice!" I say, impressed. "Levers and a Dixon rope?"

"I don't know who Dixon is." He shrugs. "I just knocked a few things together. I'm the only spook operator here. It's a lonely business sometimes."

No kidding. The vast hall yawned empty, revealing lurking shadows in the dark.

There are real velvet hangings on the high wooden walls, moth-eaten with age. I'm sure the cobwebs aren't fake either, but I can't tell about the crossed swords above the mantelpiece. They look rusty enough to be real and long enough to be totally impractical.

"This is the Great Hall," says Mr. Blaine in low, thrilling tones. "Abandoned for many years, since a young bride threw herself to her death from the rafters."

"Awesome." I nod. "Why was she on the rafters?"

"She crawled out from the upper gallery," says Mr. Blaine, "to spy on her unfaithful husband. Look!" And he points up dramatically.

And sure enough, there she is. A pale face peers down from the rafters. The rest of her is basically a bundle of white linen, but the effect is actually really good. Especially the mad, staring red eyes.

"She still waits for her husband to return to her," intones Mr. Blaine in my ear. "At midnight, she walks through the house, wailing. Just before dawn, she falls to her—excuse me, is that your stomach growling?"

"Oops. Yeah, sorry," I say quickly. "But I'm listening, I promise."

Gordon Blaine gives me a narrow glance. It's as if he's only just noticed that I'm a real person.

"You're very thin," he says disapprovingly. "Are you on a diet of some kind? How long is it since you've last eaten?"

I've actually always been on the pudgy side, but my cheekbones do look leaner lately, so I suppose starvation is good for my self-esteem. The trouble is that I can't possibly tell this nice old man I'm broke and homeless because I know from previous and very bitter experience that he would kick me off his property, like, so fast.

"Oh, I'm fine!" I say brightly. "My tummy just does that sometimes. It's probably because I'm still growing, or at least that's what my mom always says. Tell me more about the dead bride."

"Where *is* your mother?" he asks, tipping his head to one side. "Does she know you came out here alone?"

"Sure." I pin a bright smile to my face. "She doesn't mind."

Gordon Blaine lets his gaze travel from my face to the rest of me. I try not to wince under his searching scrutiny. I know what I look like nowadays, but I don't like seeing it in other people's eyes.

"Hmm," he says. I don't think I've convinced him, somehow. "Do you want something to eat?"

"No," I say just as my stomach growls again. He gives me a funny little scowl.

"Come with me," he says abruptly, turning on his heel. I follow him automatically, trying not to think of all the dumb girls in horror movies who should definitely not have gone anywhere with the weird man.

But Mr. Blaine only leads the way into a small room with a stove at the back of the house. I'm guessing it used to be a butler's pantry at one point, because houses this size tend to come with huge kitchens. There's hot cocoa steaming gently from a saucepan on the stove and an empty plate on the table next to a can of Spam. Dinner for one.

"It's not much," says Mr. Blaine without looking around. "But it's warm, and there's enough food for two people. Sit down."

I take a seat at the rickety wooden table surrounded by four plastic chairs. He's right when he says it's not much, but it looks like a king's castle to me. I haven't eaten indoors in over five months, give or take a few days.

He's busy putting sliced bread in a toaster. He only has cheap margarine, but I devour the contents of my plate without hesitation.

"I'll pay you," I say through a mouthful of food. "I don't have much, but I can pay for the bread."

"Don't be ridiculous," he says brusquely, piling grilled Spam and cheese toast on my plate. "I'll get you some of the hot chocolate."

He doesn't talk while we eat, and I'm glad. I'm in seventh heaven, and I keep worrying that I'll wake up. I dream about food too much as it is.

It's not until I'm sipping on my cocoa that he speaks again.

"Do you have somewhere to stay for the night?"

I keep my eyes on the chipped mug brimming with milk and chocolate foam. "Not really. I thought maybe the bus stop."

"I thought as much." Mr. Blaine stares out the window. "Do you want a job?"

I put the mug down carefully. Best not to spill anything, given how my hands just started shaking.

"I don't have references," I say baldly. "I don't even have any ID. I left everything behind."

He doesn't ask where *behind* is. He just nods.

"I can pay you a hundred dollars a week," he says, becoming brisk all of a sudden. "I know it's not much, but you can live here rent-free, you don't have to pay for food or utilities, and internet is included."

"What's the job?" I croak. *Please don't let him be a creep*, I pray. Or a serial killer or something like that.

"I need help with the house," he says. "I can run the tours by myself, but just keeping things clean in a place this size is getting beyond me. Do you know how to use a vacuum cleaner?"

"I do," I say, nodding frantically. "I can also dust, mop, and mow the lawn, and I can do small repairs as long as it's not electrical."

"Done," he says, stretching out his hand. "Welcome to Blaine's House of Horrors. You can sleep in the torture dungeon tonight."

"I can do *what?!?*"

1

Jeremy

"C all for you, Mr. Steele."

I flash my assistant an irritated glance. Can she not see I'm with a client right now?

Although, to be fair, it's not the client I'm looking at. A beautiful portrait by Isabel Morales has just arrived, and I want to gloat about that fact, if only to myself, without interruptions.

Sunlight filters in through the heavy drapes that protect my gallery from the searing Louisiana sunshine and turns Jessica's untidy red hair into a flaming halo. She hovers like an anxious angel, shooting me a worried glance.

"You'll want to take it," she whispers. "It's Brian Caldwell, Mr. Steele."

Oh. Well, that's different, then.

I give the client a professionally discreet smile and nod. "Do excuse me. I'll leave you to soak in the colors for a while."

Then I'm striding down the length of the broad display space, anxious to get to my office. Jessica clumps after me, diligent and capable in her brown suede shoes, and closes the door to give me privacy.

I take a deep breath before I pick up the phone. This might get ugly.

"Brian?"

"Jeremy! Finally. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"No, not at all," I hasten to reassure the older man. Brian is my best

friend, my oldest partner in crime, so to speak, since we were both young boys in Springfield, Ohio. Every time I speak to him, wherever I am in the world, his country twang pulls me back and reminds me where I come from.

And if he sounds like he's frantic to get away from Springfield lately, well, he's got every excuse for it.

"Any news?" I ask him gently. There is silence from the other end of the line.

I close my eyes. *How long can a man endure fear like Brian has and still stay sane?*

"No," Brian finally admits in a shaky voice. "No, we haven't heard anything. The police think she's probably left the state, if she's still even . . ."

He can't bring himself to say the word, but I know what he means. It's been more than five months since Brian's teenage daughter ran away from home, and they say the first twenty-four hours are the most crucial in a missing persons case.

"How's Talissa doing?" I remember to ask. I don't like the woman, but she is Brian's wife and the mother of the missing girl. Privately, I blame her for not keeping a better watch on the kid while Brian was away at work, but I will never, ever say that aloud.

"Oh, Tally's coping," says Brian, and I know that tone of voice too. His wife is as brittle and cruel as he is softhearted and kind. Most people who know them have no idea how two such different people ended up together. I think I'm one of five people alive who know the whole story and the only one willing to admit there might be faults on both sides.

"She's been active online," Brian says quickly, too quickly. He'll often defend Talissa to other people, and it's a bad sign that he feels the need to do it to me. "On search and rescue volunteer pages and everything. There have been a lot of strangers who have been through the same thing. They're all hanging out on the same Facebook pages. It's comforting for her."

And who's going to comfort you, Brian? Once again, for the hundredth time since all this happened, I wish I didn't have to feel so goddamn guilty about leaving Springfield.

My old friend isn't really a communicative person, being the type of strong man who was raised to believe in silent prayer during tough times. No online groups nor prayer meetings for him. He's probably never even considered therapy in his life.

And now his child has disappeared, and I doubt he has anyone to talk to,

apart from me.

"She might still come back on her own," I say, more optimistically than I have any right to.

There is another stretch of silence from Brian's end of the line. I try to recall when I last saw his kid.

Melissa Caldwell didn't run away from home by accident. She left a note asking her parents to forgive her and not to look for her. I have seen the note, and I had seen the look on her father's face when I went to meet him five months ago.

He looked old. He looked ashamed.

Her mother had put out pictures of the child all over the house. Talissa always liked a kind of upper-crust glamor aesthetic, but without any true feeling. Everything in the Caldwell house has always been beige and gold and polished to within an inch of its life. The newly printed pictures of their missing daughter sat incongruously in a place most people would call a showplace instead of a home.

No wonder Brian was away from home so much. And no wonder his daughter couldn't stick it out either.

I infuse my voice with an entirely false note of enthusiasm. "She could return. Miracles do happen, Brian. You have to have faith."

"I'm trying," he says dispiritedly, "but it's hard. It's so hard. I'm just so tired, Jeremy. I can't sleep at night, you know. I keep lying awake until the early hours, thinking about all the worst things that could have happened to her." There is a short pause. "I keep wondering why she left without talking to me first. I don't know where it all went so wrong."

And there's the nub of it. It's Brian, a strong man and a strict father, and frankly, the last person an unhappy kid would go to for help if she happens to be in any kind of trouble.

Though I still feel a spurt of anger rising sourly in my throat against the kid. *Doesn't she know what she's doing to her dad, or does she just not care?*

Not for the first time, I congratulate myself on having successfully avoided the twin pitfalls of marriage and kids. From what I've seen in my nearly four decades on this earth, none of that is really worth the stress and the pain.

But I'm trying to be a good friend here, even if I can't bring myself to go back to Ohio to be physically close to the Caldwell household. The whole town of Springfield holds bleak and joyless memories for me. Brian could've

gotten out, as well, if he hadn't let a spoiled little rich girl trap him into an early marriage with the threat of terminating her pregnancy.

Talissa Caldwell, who used to be Talissa Edmondson, is the kind of person who has always had everything handed to her on a plate. Her parents spoiled her rotten, gave in to her every whim, and taught her that every other person she ever met in her life was supposed to treat her like a little princess as well.

So when she got pregnant and went crying to her father, one of the wealthiest men in Ohio with who knows how many senators and police commissioners living in his back pocket, Brian was told to make an honest woman out of her. He would have done it anyway, for the child's sake. The man didn't have it in him to lose the baby.

And now, nearly twenty years later, he has had to face the fact that perhaps his sacrifice was for nothing. The child is lost anyway.

My hand clenches on my restored walnut captain's desk. "Is there anything I can do? You'd tell me if there's anything you need, right, Brian?"

This is code for *tell me if you need money*, but I don't know if he understands me. I have offered to get them private investigators before, but Talissa's parents already hired a firm. I don't know how Brian is managing at his job at the steel plant, where he is a senior supervisor, but I know it goes against the grain for him to beg anyone for help.

His own parents died when he was young, just a few years before he and I went into the real estate brokerage business together. The man is used to looking after himself. He'd had to make some tough calls about his career, his whole future, once he found out he was going to be a dad.

And right now, he's helpless. I can't stand to see him this way. He was always the dependable one, older and tougher and more practical than me.

I've never heard him sound so ashamed of himself. I don't know why he thinks his daughter's leaving home must be his fault, but I suspect he thinks it's some kind of punishment from God. His parents were devout Episcopalians, so it was just how he was raised.

Someone told me his daughter stopped going to church when she was twelve. I don't know how that happened either. I know Brian won't tell me anything, but I know him well enough to read between the lines occasionally.

He wasn't there for the kid. He wasn't at home enough. He didn't do enough. That's why she slipped out of the house behind his back. He'll never forgive himself.

The sunshine outside dims, changeable and moody as always in the summer. The cheerful, busy sounds of the New Orleans French Quarter fade into a meaningless buzz. I want to grieve for my friend, but I want to keep his sense of hope alive as well. He's halfway across the country, and his sadness lives in this room with me.

"There's nothing," he says at last. "I just wanted to hear a friendly voice. I'm getting sick of people telling me to pray. It's not helping."

"I know." Such an easy thing for other people to say, so difficult to hear for a self-acknowledged sinner, I would imagine.

"If she were already dead, I would know," he says fiercely. "She's my child, my flesh and blood. I should be able to sense it. I *know* I'd know. If she were already gone, I know I would have felt her passing."

"I understand," I say, helpless fear for him spreading through my body. This is a man teetering on the edge of a breakdown. I have a fairly good idea what it will do to him if the police do find a body.

There are a thousand other things that could happen to an innocent, sheltered young girl alone on the streets as well. Those are among the things he can't ever say. Those are the thousand nightmares that make him afraid to go to sleep.

"I'll be traveling for a couple of weeks or so, next month," I say after another of those hopeless pauses. "But after that, I could drop in at the old place for a while. If you think it might help."

"What good would it do?" replies Brian, his voice heavy with defeat. "If she's alive, she'll come back on her own, Jeremy. She's not a bad kid, you know. She just got lost somewhere along the way."

I sit on the edge of my desk for a long while after I hang up with Brian, thinking about that.

It's been so long since I last saw Brian and his family, so long since I deserted my old hometown and all our familiar haunts, that I can't even remember what the girl looks like anymore on my own. I've seen the pictures they gave the police for her missing persons report, but her social media pages haven't been active for a long time.

Resentment wells up again in a thick tide. What kind of girl is this, really, to put her poor father through all the pain he's enduring?

If you're alive out there, Melissa Caldwell, I think fiercely, you'd better get your ass home as fast as you can.

Because God help you if I find you first. I'm nowhere near as forgiving as

your father, I can promise that much.

End of preview. [Get the complete story here.](#)