

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING TELL ME SERIES

CHARLOTTE BYRD

dark

TEMPTATIONS



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DARK TEMPTATIONS

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PRAISE FOR CHARLOTTE BYRD

“BEST AUTHOR YET! Charlotte has done it again! There is a reason she is an amazing author and she continues to prove it! I was definitely not disappointed in this series!!” ★★★★★

“LOVE!!! I loved this book and the whole series!!! I just wish it didn't have to end. I am definitely a fan for life!!!” ★★★★★

“Extremely captivating, sexy, steamy, intriguing, and intense!” ★★★★★

“Addictive and impossible to put down.” ★★★★★

“What a magnificent story from the 1st book through book 6 it never slowed down always surprising the reader in one way or the other. Nicholas and Olive's paths crossed in a most unorthodox way and that's how their story begins it's exhilarating with that nail biting suspense that keeps you riding on the edge the whole series. You'll love it!” ★★★★★

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★★★★★

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★★★★★

“Wow. Just wow. Charlotte Byrd leaves me speechless and humble... It definitely kept me on the edge of my seat. Once you pick it up, you won't put it down.” - Amazon Review ★★★★★

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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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DARK TEMPTATIONS

I pushed her away to keep my secrets to myself. **What I don't yet know is that her life is already in danger.**

I have so many regrets. If we had never met, she'd be safe now.

Some love stories are a slow burn. **Ours was quick to ignite, scorching and branding our souls before we've even taken that first breath.**

From bestselling author Charlotte Byrd comes an intense romance about debts, lies and secrets and the extent to which people go for love.

Everything around me blurred and all that existed were his lips, his touch...

The chase and the heat between us became addictive.

Our nights together were a distraction; one we craved to the point of letting the world crumble around us.

We should have paid attention; we should have known that it would come to this.

We both knew it couldn't last, but that didn't change what we desired most.

All we wanted was each other...

Dark Temptation is the fourth novel in the Dark Intentions series. It is a dark

romance/romantic suspense about debt, lies, wealth, crime and family bonds.

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JACQUELINE

As soon as Mom calls that morning, Dante and I get into his car and drive all the way home without hitting any traffic. I packed my bags, much to his dismay since I wasn't sure if I was going to come back.

But I'm also not sure what I'm going to find.

The drive down is uneventful. We listen to a little bit of Bruce Springsteen and Elton John, and my mind keeps spiraling around everything I don't know.

What could it mean?

Why would someone send a letter telling me that my brother, who has been dead for months and whose body I saw being lowered into the ground in the cemetery, did not die in an accident?

How could that accident be anything but that?

But, if it isn't, what else could it be?

When Mom opens the door, her eyes are tired and puffy. She has changed out of her robe into what she lovingly refers to as home pajamas; a casual pair of black pants, a loose-fitting sweater perfect for both home and a trip to the bank.

After a brief hello, I introduce her to Dante, and he apologizes for meeting under these circumstances.

"You didn't need to come," she keeps saying, leading us to the dining room.

The table is old and worn, and every indentation is awfully familiar since I was here for all of them.

We sit on the uncomfortable wooden chairs that have needed pillow pads for as long as I can remember. Mom thinks they're tacky so we never had them.

The letter is nothing remarkable.

It came in a plain, thin envelope with no return address, directly to my mother's house. The stamp is of an American flag. It was mailed barely five miles outside of Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The letter itself is typed, but signed in longhand, but, the signature is difficult to read. Probably on purpose. I force myself to stay calm, as Mom carefully opens the letter slowly to keep the creases exactly the same.

SHE HAD PUT it back in the envelope, and opened it by cutting the top open, like she usually does, with her specialty letter opening knife. Mom has always hated the way that I would *savagely attack* the mail, her words not mine, and not have the intact envelope to put the letter back into for later.

"I would've been more careful with it if I'd known what it contained," Mom keeps mumbling over and over again.

I look at the envelope, which is addressed to her, with a stamp in the far right hand corner, no return address of any kind, and a little imprint over the stamp indicating when and where it was collected.

"Do you think we should be wearing gloves?" she asks when I grab the letter. "It's too late for me and you, but yeah. I think so."

She goes to the bathroom, underneath the sink, and pulls out a pair of black gloves that she wears whenever she colors her hair with box dye.

I put them on, and the two of them crowd around me, looking. I feel the

touch of their breath on my shoulder as I pull the letter out and read it.

Dear Mrs. Archer,

I don't know how to put this except to just tell you that your son, Michael Archer, did not die in a car accident.

All I can say is that he was killed, and his murderer is walking around free.

I'm sorry that I cannot tell you anything else about the situation because I'm afraid that that will put my own life in danger.

I have already said too much.

Sincerely,

There's a scribble at the bottom.

We look closer, trying to make out any letters, but the writing is angular, tall, and sweeping. I kind of doubt that it's a name after all. Everything else is typed. Whoever sent this clearly did not want to be identified by their handwriting.

"What do you think this means?" Mom asks, looking at us after I put the letter down.

"I don't know. It could be a joke," I offer.

Mom glares at me, even Dante is taken aback.

"I mean, it's definitely a possibility," I suggest, "right? I mean, they may know that Michael died, and it was an accident."

"What did happen, exactly?" Dante asks.

I look at him as the three of us sit around the dining room table. Usually, my mom would offer me and a guest something to drink. But this situation is completely different. This is nothing that has happened before.

"He was driving at night, and he slid off the road. It was an icy, snowy night. He usually avoided driving at that time, but he was there. His car collided with the center divider, and there was an explosion. The fire department said that, unlike what the movies would have you believe, cars rarely blow up, but there was a big fire. They investigated and confirmed that

it was indeed an accident."

"Were you able to confirm that he had died?" Dante asks.

"You mean, identify the body?"

He nods.

"No, it was too charred."

"Wow, I'm so sorry," he says under his breath.

"They did identify that it was him, if that's what you're thinking," I add.

"I sent his dental records over from the dentist and they confirmed it.

Besides, it happened in his car."

"It had to be an accident," Mom says.

"I know, I want to believe that, too."

"*Want* to believe it?" she snaps. "If it's not an accident, all of this healing and everything has been a lie. If it's not an accident, we have to find out the truth."

"I know," I say, shrinking down in my seat.

"*You* have to find out the truth," she snaps.

She gets up from the table, making a loud clinking sound as the chair pulls away. The chair practically falls onto the floor behind her as she walks out. She looks discontented, upset, no, full-on angry.

I'm pissed off, too, but something feels odd about this. I follow her to the kitchen, where she pours herself a glass of water, holding the glass in her shaking hand as it fills up from the faucet.

"Mom, I know that this is a big deal. Okay? This letter is a big deal. I'm not trying to say that it's not. But it's also a very realistic possibility that this is a fake, a joke."

"Why would someone do that? No," she snaps.

"Look, I've investigated stories about missing persons before, and sometimes the families would get these mystery letters from somewhere else in the world or somewhere far away. They would say this person is alive, and they just saw him at this bar or place."

"Yeah, and then they would want something from them, right?"

"Yes, on occasion," I admit.

"Well, this person doesn't want anything. This person is just telling me their truth."

"You don't know if it's the truth." She turns and glares at me, and I've never seen such anger and disappointment in her eyes.

"I called you about this because I thought that you would understand. I thought that, as an investigator and a journalist, you'd want to get to the bottom of this. But you just want to hide it. You just want to pretend that this never happened."

She holds the envelope in her hand, stretched out in front of me.

"I'm not saying that. I want to get to the truth, but I have my doubts. Am I not allowed to air my doubts?"

"Get out," she snaps, and I'm completely taken aback.

She's never talked to me like this before.

I stare at her, and when she repeats it for the second time, I grab my bag and my coat and start to walk out.

"Mrs. Archer." Dante approaches her to try to make peace. "Jacqueline didn't mean-"

"What do you think she meant? I know exactly what she meant," Mom says. "I want her to know how serious I am about this, and figuring out what really happened."

Dante takes a step away.

"I'm sorry that we met under these circumstances." She approaches him. "I really do appreciate you paying for my treatment, and for saving my life. I hope that we can have dinner sometime, and I can thank you properly. Just not now."

"Yes, I'd like that." Dante nods and follows me out.

JACQUELINE

We drive away from my mom's house and I am incensed. I sit in the passenger seat of Dante's BMW and I wonder what the hell just happened on this fine morning.

"How could she do that? How could she think that I don't care what happened to my brother?" I say out loud.

It's a rhetorical question that doesn't need an answer and luckily Dante doesn't bother.

"She knows how much I loved him. She knows how close we always were. Of course, I want to find out what really happened, if something other than an accident happened, but I also don't want to get my hopes up. Things like this happen all the time. She doesn't know because she doesn't read a lot of newspapers and she doesn't follow true crime, but it's much more common than you would think. People see that someone is missing and they reach out to the family, just to be part of something. Sometimes, they're confused. Sometimes, they actually think that they saw this missing person; they just want to be part of a bigger picture."

"But Michael isn't missing," Dante says.

"Yes, I know that. He's been killed. I saw the accident. I saw the car and how messed up it was. He died in that car."

"I think your mom is just trying to hold on to hope."

"Of course she knows that he's dead. We all know that, we have the confirmation from the medical examiner, but I can't believe that she thinks I don't want to investigate."

"She's just very hurt. She's going through a lot right now. It's her son," Dante says.

I glare at him.

"I'm not trying to take her side," he adds.

"Look, I know perfectly well where she's coming from. She wants to have some explanation for *why* it happened. Right now, it's like he just died for no reason. I mean, it was snowy and icy and the road conditions were terrible, but there're hundreds of thousands of deaths like that in America every winter; it's just bad luck. You run into something. You are in the wrong place at the wrong time. It happens all the time."

"What do you think deep in your heart? What do you think happened?" Dante asks as he pulls up to a red light.

I stare into the light and notice how it gets a little less red in the middle, more of a pinkish color. "I don't know, but I also have no idea whether that letter is something that we can believe."

"You seem so resistant to it though," Dante adds when the light turns green. "I mean, don't you want to find out?"

"Of course I do. I'm just really angry that someone would do this. Someone would just make this up, but I have to know who.

Who would want to hurt us so much?"

He stares at me and then turns his eyes back to the road. I realize, of course, that I sound like someone who knows that it's an accident and someone unwilling to believe anything else about his death.

It's not that I'm not; of course he could have been murdered, but what is the likelihood of that?

Why would someone murder my brother?

He had a normal job, went to work every day, didn't have any major

problems with anyone.

Of course, I don't know everything about him.

He could have had secrets, God knows I've kept enough. From the outside, no one would believe that I am the type of girl who went to a club like The Redemption and no one would think that Dante and I could have met there and actually had a real connection.

Appearances are deceiving, we all know that.

But I'm so certain that I know who my brother was and I have no idea why someone would murder him.

"You know, this could have been an accident," Dante says.

We get to Long Island before I realize that he's driving us back to his house in the Hamptons. We haven't talked about this, but I don't fight it. I don't really want to go back and see my mom today.

"Yeah, I know it could've been an accident, that's what I'm trying to say," I add.

"No, I don't mean it like that. It could have been an accident that he was killed."

I stare at him, not fully comprehending.

"I'm not sure exactly if I'm reading too much into the letter," Dante says, "but what if someone hit him with their car, but it was an accident? What if they left the scene? It doesn't have to be this planned first degree murder charge kind of situation, but it would still be murder. It would still be not just him alone getting into this situation, but there's no way to know unless you find out who wrote the letter."

I swallow hard and nod slightly.

I hadn't considered that.

Of course! What if this person told someone that he ran into someone and killed him?

If someone had told me that, I'd probably feel incredibly guilty. And maybe even be forced to write a letter like this to alleviate some of the guilt.

I don't say any of this out loud, but in my own mind, I continue to spin further and further out of control.

There are so many possibilities now. As much as I don't want the letter to be true, or to even go further into uncovering it, now I feel like I almost have to.

Mom is right, I do have to figure out what happened. I do have to get to the bottom of this.

If someone did hit him and someone did leave him out there to die, or at least didn't report it, or maybe worse, was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, Michael deserves for me to find out the truth.

We pull up next to Marguerite and Lincoln's house in the Hamptons and get out of the car.

"I hope it's okay that I drove back here. I wasn't sure where to go, and we were so entrenched in our conversation ..." Dante starts to say, but I just put my finger over his mouth.

"It's fine. This is great. I want to see Allison again and we have that dinner invitation."

"So you want to go?" His eyes light up. "You want to stay another night here?"

"Yeah, I think I want to." I nod. "I want to process all of this and figure out what happened and what I can do."

He leans over and gives me a warm hug. "It's going to be okay," he whispers into my ear, "I'll help you."

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DANTE

On the drive over, my heart is racing. My palms are sweaty. Darkness envelops me, and yet I have to maintain this facade, this happy outlook as if everything is fine and nothing is bothering me.

But the truth is that the appearance of the letter has put my whole life on hold. I know very well that the contents of it are true.

Jacqueline doesn't.

She thinks that it might be a scammer or someone who's just wasting their time, but I know that her brother was murdered.

It is just one of the many secrets I'm keeping that I have no right to keep but I can't stop.

If I tell her now, if she were to find out, she would never forgive me.

No, I'd lose her for sure, and that's why I have to keep this a secret.

I drive back to Lincoln's house in the Hamptons.

I'm only partially relieved by the fact that she got into an argument with her mother and was basically told to leave. On one hand, I could pursue the lie.

I can convince her that what she believes is true, that there are lots of crappy people out there who will make up a story like that just for fun, for nothing, but another part of me wants her to know the truth.

So, I split the difference.

I suggest something happened that's in this netherworld between the two. I don't know how far she can go to figure out who sent the letter.

If the person has buried their tracks right, she won't be able to find out a thing. But still, I can't help but mention the fact that it might have been an accident or a possible hit-and-run.

I've already said too much, and I have to think about myself in this situation as well.

I had nothing to do with Michael's death directly, and I had nothing to do with sending that letter.

We get to the Hamptons and the sun is high in the sky. The streets are getting crowded with tourists and locals going about the lazy days of summer.

Jacqueline rants almost the whole drive back, and when we finally pull up and I park the car, I try to calm her down a little bit, put her at ease.

I feel like the biggest scumbag for doing this, not telling her immediately what I know, but the problem is that I don't really know much. If she were to know what I know, then she wouldn't want to be with me anymore.

We walk up to the front door, and just as I'm about to ring the doorbell, Marguerite opens it with a large beach bag slung over her shoulder. Lincoln is arguing with her, insisting that he doesn't want to go to the beach and has a lot of work to do, but she's not taking no for an answer.

"You're going to join us, right?" Marguerite asks, pointing in our faces.

Her tan face is hidden by the broad, wide-brimmed hat and her bathing suit is covered by a diaphanous coverup. Despite the pregnancy or perhaps because of it, I've never seen her glow as much as she has the last couple of days. She still has her issues with my mother, but they've been avoiding each other, and this time with Jacqueline has really made a difference.

Marguerite pulls Jacqueline aside to show her a book that she's been reading. Seizing the opportunity, Lincoln drags me into the living room.

I think that it might be about keeping my mouth shut about what happened between him and Allison, but he has something else on his mind entirely.

"Have you given any more thought to what we discussed earlier?" he asks, grabbing a lemonade from the fridge and opening it.

He's dressed in his swimming trunks with a loose-fitting island shirt. His laptop and phone and all of his work stuff are tucked neatly away in his satchel laying on the counter.

"I'm thinking about it," I say, walking over to the fridge and getting another bottle of lemonade, wanting to point out to him that he should have offered to grab me one, but his mind is elsewhere.

"I have a job coming up. You're perfect for it."

"Look, I told you that I'm out of the business."

"Yes, you said that," he says in his smirky kind of way.

A few days out here in the sun have made him a few shades darker, but luckily he didn't burn his delicate skin, which I remember he always suffered with when we were kids. *Easy to burn, easy to tan* used to be his motto.

"You think you're going to come up with \$350,000 some other way in a month?"

I clench my jaw.

I was hoping that Mom would give me some leeway on the loan, I say silently to myself. That way I could pay off the other guys first and maybe pay her later.

"She'll never let it go," Lincoln says, reading my mind. "She gave you a month. That means she expects it in three weeks, and you know it. She's going to go to the cops otherwise."

I swallow hard.

"That would be the worst thing that could happen. Look, I know you're worried about getting caught. Don't be. This is a simple job. I have all the details planned out. No research necessary on your part. You'd be getting this

money for doing practically nothing."

"Except for the thing itself," I point out.

"You've done a lot worse for a lot less."

"I know. And that's why I'm no longer in this line of work."

We're dancing around a subject that I don't need or want to entertain, but I don't think I have a choice.

The thing is that Lincoln does work hard at his hedge fund and he does put in a lot of hours, but he also has a gambling addiction that very few people know about, including Marguerite.

She thinks that all the money comes in from work. What she doesn't know is that in the last year alone, he lost close to a million dollars in the casino over a few hands of cards.

He's had this addiction for a long time, and many people in finance and our line of work suffer from very similar maladies.

Whether it's gambling, or women, or drugs, or all three, there's always something out there to think about. Inevitably, the debts catch up to you.

You owe a few grand here and there.

You owe twenty to someone else, and then when you start making the big bucks at work, you start thinking, maybe I can double that money by putting it all on red at the roulette table.

That kind of thinking affects people who have ten bucks, those who have ten grand, and those with ten million. It doesn't matter; if you think like that, you think like that.

And that's why for many years, we had another more stable job. That's why we did other things to pay the bills, things that aren't entirely legal. Actually, completely illegal, but they always paid a lot more than even our work could.

A year ago, I got out of it. I went cold turkey.

I stopped gambling, and I started traveling.

If I flew to enough places, if I found enough clients, if I stayed busy all

the time, then I wouldn't have time to think about that other world.

Then I wouldn't think about gambling, and then I wouldn't need to do that other job in order to pay all of those debts.

"I told you I was out of the business."

"And I told you that I have this job," Lincoln says, taking a step closer to me.

He's so close that I can smell the early morning vodka orange juice on his breath.

"This is a one-time offer. You have a week. I can send you all the details if you say yes, but afterward, I won't be able to help you."

I inhale slowly and then exhale just as slowly. Our eyes are focused on each other.

"You don't have any other options, Dante. You can borrow the money from Cedar, I guess. How long is it going to take you to pay off \$350,000? That's a lifetime of money unless you do something to supercharge your income. And there's only one thing you're good at."

"I'm good at a lot of things," I say quickly.

"That may be true, but you are very, very good at this, and you don't want to lose it."

I swallow hard.

Marguerite calls his name and he walks away from me.

"I'm serious," he adds, walking to the threshold just as Jacqueline squeezes past. "Think about it."

The pressure starts to feel never-ending. This is what it was like when I was gambling.

I haven't been next to a card game in over a year, and not a day goes by that I don't think about the stale smell of cigarettes, the ugly, unreadable faces, tired eyes, pasty skin, and all of the money in the world that I could win.

Gambling was my way to cope with life since I was a kid. I went to my

first poker game when I was thirteen and I won \$1,000. It was my money. It was all mine. It wasn't borrowed from Mom. I made it off my winnings and my smarts, and I couldn't believe that I made so much.

I continued to gamble throughout college.

I'd win a lot, lose some. I was obsessed with making it work. I knew that I'd have to win, that all professional poker players lost a certain amount of money as a given. It's like a return on investment and I became a company. I paid taxes on everything. After college, I got a job in finance and I thought that if I stayed busy enough, I wouldn't have to play. But you'd be surprised how much the possibility of winning what you make in a month is alluring to someone with my personality.

After a little while, it wasn't even about the money. The money was nothing but a number that represented a win or loss and by how much.

Growing up, I was a pawn in my parents' divorce; my father filed for custody claims and alimony, my mother filed counter claims, the numerous court proceedings, all of that crap. I hated money with every fiber of my being, and yet I wanted more of it in my bank account, and I wanted it all to belong to me.

Lincoln was the more irresponsible of the two of us. His swings of how much he made and how much he lost were notorious. Everyone who was anyone in our circle of friends and acquaintances thought of him as a God.

At one point, he lost half a million dollars, and the thing is that in the illegal poker games in those dark casino spots where the regulars go, losing half a million was almost the same as winning half million.

How do you get back from that?

What do you do?

But we had certain skills, Lincoln and I. We had secrets that we knew how to keep, and gambling was not even one of them.

What Lincoln wants me to do to give me the \$350,000 would put me back into a life that I worked very hard to escape.

Yes, I wouldn't gamble again, but I don't even have enough of a bankroll to get started.

You can expect to win ten to twenty percent if you're good game after game, and so I need a certain amount to try to win \$350,000. But he's not going to front that.

Besides, I have worked so hard to stop, to start my life again, to not do that, and I'm not willing to give it up.

The thing that he's offering, the one-time proposal, if he's willing to pay that much, the job must be huge with a high risk of getting caught.

But if he says that the research has been done and the game pieces are in place, I trust him.

He's not one to lie about something so important.

As I pace around the kitchen, my mother comes downstairs to grab some lunch, and I decide to give it one last shot.

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DANTE

Mom and I haven't talked for a while, not since the last time she threatened to call the police. But I wondered if she would be more amenable to the situation if she knew more about it.

Perhaps it's worth the risk of sharing why I needed the money.

"Can I talk to you?" I ask, sitting down next to her as she opens a small Yoplait yogurt.

She has been eating these for breakfast ever since I can remember, always picking at the metal lid very carefully with her long manicured nails. Today is no exception. She gives me a small knowing smile and a nod.

"I wanted to tell you why I needed the money; it has nothing to do with gambling."

She raises an eyebrow.

She knows about my past and Lincoln's past. Hell, she knows that it was our father who taught us how to lose vast amounts of money very quickly around a card game.

"I was trying to do something good. I haven't gambled in over a year and I'm not going to."

"Okay, I'm listening." She nods.

Dressed in a cashmere pajama set, her hair falls slightly around her face. Her makeup has already been flawlessly applied. I don't remember her ever

leaving a room without a full face and I actually wonder if I'd even recognize her that way now.

"I needed the money to help Jacqueline."

"Jacqueline needed \$200,000?" she asks, crossing her hands in front of her. I owe a total of \$350,000 but I only borrowed two hundred from my trust fund.

"You have to listen, okay?"

"Okay." She nods, taking another small spoonful of yogurt and swirling the fruit steadily.

"She told me that her mother was sick. She didn't ask for anything and this was before she even knew who I really was. She was very ill and she needed an experimental surgery at a clinic in Minnesota. It is really hard to get approved and you have to pay for it up front."

"Okay, I'm listening." Mom licks her lower lip and puts her gaze back squarely on my eyes.

"I didn't want her to know that I was paying for that. I thought she would say no and I wanted her mom to get the surgery if it was the right thing, so I just called them. I knew her last name and I paid in full, completely anonymously.

"Unfortunately, there were complications. She had to be sedated for a while and there were more medical bills. Then Jacqueline found out that it was me. She was angry and upset. She thought that I should have told her and perhaps I should have, but I didn't and what was done was done.

"I decided to pay the rest anyway, whatever the additional costs would be, because there's no way that she could have. I thought that I could put it back before you noticed."

"Put it back how? Were you going to gamble again?"

"No," I snap at her, "I was going to work really hard, put in a lot of hours at work, take a lot of cases. I was waiting for a startup that I invested in to sell. There're only a few more pieces of paperwork but it's getting held up. I

was going to put back every cent, Mom.”

She glares at me.

“I wasn't stealing money from you or from my future and I wasn't gambling. And I know that I'm a difficult person to trust based on all the lies and everything that I put you through. But this was a nice thing I was doing. I was helping her.”

"What happened to her mother?" Mom asks.

There's an actual sound of concern in her voice, which throws me off a little bit. It seems so unnatural and unfitting.

"She recovered. She has to have lab work done and get checked every three months for now, but so far so good. The turnaround has been 180 degrees. This treatment really helped and she probably wouldn't be alive without it."

"Well, then you did a good thing," Mom says, tilting her head.

"I'm just asking for your help, for some lenience. If the startup is bought, then I'll have the money to pay you back. I've invested more than ten percent of my salary into it and it's going to pay off big."

"Yeah, but you don't know when that's going to happen," she says.

"Mom, I'm not trying to threaten you but this is the deal. I don't have any other way to pay you back this money, so if you say that you're going to go to the police at the end of this month, what do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to put it back. I expect you to borrow it from some of your friends or acquaintances or your boss, but I don't expect to be on the hook for this wonderful gift you gave Jacqueline and her mother. I mean, of course it's a nice thing to do..."

“But you’re doing all this philanthropy work. You're always helping people,” I protest.

“Yes, but in this case you took money out of my account and you helped without my consent. And I really don't appreciate it. Not when you've put me through you know what sort of hell in the past, Dante.”

Her lips tense up and form a thin line across her face.

I'm not getting through; she has heard my plea and she doesn't give a shit. I'm not sure what else I can do, but I try again and again.

"Why can't you just give me an extension? I'm not saying I'm not going to pay you back, but you realize that you're pushing me back into gambling."

"This is what your addiction has pushed you into. Besides, it is not my job to make things easier for you. Life is full of obstacles. And if you had taken this money from a complete stranger, you wouldn't expect them to do you any favors, would you?"

"Of course not, but you're not a complete stranger. You're my mother and I'm asking you for help. I did a good thing. I saved this woman's life."

"Listen, you and I both know that you did this to help Jacqueline. If she were a woman on the street, you wouldn't give a fuck."

"So what?" I say, "I still helped her, and not that many people could or did."

"I don't know why you're yelling at me, Dante. I listened to your story, I'm sympathetic to the plight, but I expect that money to be back in my account by the end of the month. I don't do favors for people. If I did, I wouldn't be as rich as I am. The money I give, I give freely and you didn't bother asking me."

I shake my head, not wanting to believe her.

"And you know that that trust fund is for you when you're older. If I hadn't protected and guarded it so carefully all these years, you know what money would be left in there? Your father would have squandered it all and later on, you would have squandered it all. It's decisions like these that protect that money for your future self and someday, your children, and your wife, and your whole family will be very grateful."

I ball up my fists wanting to punch her and force myself to take a few steps away to keep a hold of my anger.

"You have until the end of the month or I'm going to the police."

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JACQUELINE

Richard's party is the last place I want to go, but I don't have any options. I have no interest in going back to Mom's and having a big fight, and Dante, Lincoln, and Marguerite have made it perfectly clear that they will be attending.

I know that Lincoln feels uncomfortable about this, but once Marguerite found out who Richard really is and all of the films that he scored, and all the pop songs that he wrote, she can't be persuaded to stay home.

Maybe it'll be fine, I say to myself, as I get ready upstairs.

Dante's in the bathroom ironing his jacket. I have one other dress that would be somewhat passible for the dinner party, so the decision of what to wear isn't a big one.

It's a simple navy blue dress that's cut right above the knee. It flairs a little bit and has short cap sleeves. It would be quite modest if it didn't have a plunging front and back, but it's a beach party and everyone's letting loose a little.

I washed my hair and blow-dried it, something I haven't done in a long time. I run a straightener through it to make sure that it doesn't frizz, but it sort of does anyway. The humidity is a killer here.

The door opens just a little bit after a slight knock, taking me by surprise, and then closes.

I walk barefoot on the carpet and stick my head out to see who it is.

"Hey, sorry about that," Marguerite says. "I was on my phone and I was headed to the linen closet."

She looks beautiful. Her hair falls slightly around her face. She's tall and statuesque and wearing a chiffon light pink dress that looks stellar in comparison to her tan skin.

"You look great," she says with a smile.

"Thanks. It's the only thing I have. I didn't realize we're going to be going to this party until it was too late."

"No worries. You look beautiful. What about shoes?"

"Definitely heels," I say, pointing to the ones standing in the corner.

"Those are great pumps."

"How about you?" I ask.

"Nope. Heels are a no-no for me. My feet are super swollen, so flip-flops is all I can manage right now."

I ask her how she's feeling and pretend that I can't tell she's exhausted.

When Dante comes out of the bathroom, he looks magnificent in his well-tailored suit, his slim-cut pants and the loose-fitting shirt that's open slightly at the top. The linen grayish color looks like a suit that you wear only in the summer at the beach, and I love the way that it brings out his eyes.

Marguerite knows about the letter, and when I put on my shoes and take one last look at myself in the mirror, she asks me about it.

"I'm not sure what to do," I say. "It came out of the blue, and I have no idea how to pursue it."

"Going to the post office should give you some answers, and maybe to the police."

"Yeah. Those are the two things that I have on my list, hopefully tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Dante asks.

"Yeah. I want to do this as soon as possible."

"Well, you know, the post office isn't going to be open. It's Sunday."

"Okay, Monday then. But I can't wait much longer."

She keeps asking me questions as we head downstairs and toward the car, questions that I have no way to answer. She asks me about my brother and about our relationship and what he was doing before he died.

"We were very close. We spent a lot of time together, and we were best friends. He worked in finance, a normal type of job. Hedge fund, kind of like Lincoln. Nothing about it was unusual. He put in a bunch of hours and got a good salary in return."

"You don't think that this letter has anything to do with his work?"

Marguerite asks.

"I don't think so. The police said that they interviewed a few people, but he didn't have any problems at work."

After a little while, I have to actually ask her to stop talking about him.

I'm trying to put myself in the mindset of going to this party, and I can't do that if I'm dwelling on what happened with Michael or what I should do or shouldn't do going forward.

We take two separate cars over there, and I keep kicking myself for letting things get so heated with my mom. We rarely fight.

Of course, we have disagreements, but we talk about them. But in this case, she just sort of snapped, and though I don't think I should apologize, this feeling of where we go from here and what do I do to make things right keeps weighing on me.

The road is quite busy with a lot of lights and people heading out for Saturday night.

There's a long line of cars right ahead of us, and I cringe at the fact that all of these people are going to turn into Richard's driveway, but they don't.

They keep going.

Apparently, there's a bigger party somewhere down the way.

There're no other cars in the driveway, and we pull in and park around

the fountain. Before I can even press the doorbell, Allison swings the door open and invites us inside.

She's dressed in a vintage-style cocktail dress with curls framing just the outside of her face. In an afternoon, she has somehow turned into a 1950s housewife from *Leave It to Beaver*, only a little bit more glamorous.

"This is nice," I say, touching the hem of her dress.

"Yes, Richard and I went shopping earlier since I didn't have anything to wear. It's Chanel."

"Yeah, of course." I nod and give her a hug.

When I introduce Allison to Marguerite, they shake hands and Allison acts perfectly fine and sweet, and then says hello to Lincoln.

"Oh, you two have met?" Marguerite asks, surprised.

I clench my jaw, thinking that a mistake has been made, but Allison just shrugs and says that Lincoln was here with me and Dante earlier this afternoon when we came looking for her.

Yes, of course, I nod to myself.

I'm not very good at this, but everyone else seems to be completely fine.

Richard is the life of the party.

He pours everyone drinks, makes cocktails, says witty things and shows us the magnificent view of the dark ocean spreading in front of his house.

Two servers with trays of hors d'oeuvres and a few more guests show up. There's another couple from the music industry who are renting what they refer to as a *cottage* just down the street.

Another couple shows up a few minutes later, and when I talk to Leanne, she tells me that she's a writer. This catches my attention.

I like music, but I love to read.

"What kind of books do you write?" I ask as we hold our glasses of rosé and pick up an hors d'oeuvres.

It's a small cracker with olive oil and rosemary, along with a fancy cheese, the name of which I don't know. It's smooth and creamy, but not at all

smelly. It goes perfectly with the rosé.

"I write romantic suspense novels," Leanne says, taking a bite and then making a moaning sound enjoying it. "My husband used to be an attorney, but now he's joined me in the business."

"What business?" I ask.

"Well, we publish my books and run the advertising and marketing campaigns. He analyzes how the ads go. It's a whole business."

"Oh, wow. So you publish them yourself?" I ask.

She nods. "Yes, it's called independent publishing."

I nod, intrigued.

"I usually write long sagas spanning many books, usually five or six following the same couple, their trials and tribulations. I put them through a lot of ups and downs, the more the better."

"Oh, I love that." I nod. "And you write under Leanne?"

"Yes. It's my real name. I've always wanted to be a writer. It's something that I have done for years. Wrote short stories, young adult books, tried to get an agent for ages and well, frankly, now I'm incredibly thankful that that never worked out."

"Why is that?" I ask.

"We're doing really well. My husband was able to quit his demanding job, which he hated, and we're just growing our sales, writing more books, trying to find more readers, and I get to live this dream life. Of course, I don't have a house like this. This is major music studio money, but I make a living doing what I love, and that's all that matters."

I feel like Leanne is something of a kindred spirit. I tell her about my own interest in journalism and the difficulty I've had in finding a job and how much I've always just loved working on stories and writing as well.

"What I would say is if you're interested in writing fiction, people do quite well publishing thrillers, suspense novels, that kind of thing. I can help you get started, point you to some resources. There are quite a lot of courses

and books on the matter. There are easier ways to make a living, so only pursue it if you really love to write, and you can write a lot."

"Huh." I nod my head.

I've never considered that as an option. Of course, I've read plenty of detective stories. I even love writers like Kendra Elliot and Willow Rose, who mainly publish on Amazon. I've devoured their books, so maybe this could be a good option for me, too.

"Could I email you sometime?" I ask, taking out my phone.

She nods. "Yes, of course. Actually, on my website, I have a lot of resources for authors as well for writers and people who want to learn how to write, so I'd encourage you to check them out."

She gives me the name of her website along with her contact info, and afterward, I feel like I've made a friend.

I ask her more about her work and her daily life, and she talks to me.

She tells me about her routine, getting up before the kids wake up to get some quiet time to work.

"You have kids?" I ask.

"Yeah. Three kids, so with my husband and I both working from home, it's kind of a challenge."

"Wow, that's amazing."

"But there are lots of women making it work, and frankly, these stories and worlds, they lift me out of my everyday life."

"What do you mean?" I ask, giving her my phone for her to type in her contact info.

"Don't get me wrong, I love my family," Leanne says. "But there's something about being immersed in another world. I think it's the reason why my readers love to read my books and just love to read in general. You just get to escape, get to be somewhere else. It's the reason we watch Netflix, movies, etc. I'm so thankful and grateful for what I have and for what my readers give back to me, by reading my books, by writing reviews, by

emailing me and telling me how much they enjoyed them and couldn't stop binging."

"So you write page-turners?" I ask.

She nods vigorously. "Of course. I love the slow burn parts as well, but page-turners, they kind of create a lot of drama. I like that. I like to end chapters on sort of what's going to happen next. I like to keep people reading, staying in the world for as long as possible."

I want to talk to Leanne all night, but her husband pulls her away because the babysitter has called and she excuses herself.

"Leanne is amazing." I walk over to Allison. "Have you talked to her? She's a writer, and she actually makes a living writing fiction. Can you believe that?"

Allison stares at me. She has never been much of a reader.

She likes to read a few books here and there whenever she goes on vacation or anything like that, but she's always preferred television and movies and, most of all, magazines.

"Come here," she says, pulling me into the kitchen. Even though it's an open floorplan, we're a little bit to the side of everyone else by the patio.

Allison refills my rosé and then says, "I have to tell you about Richard."

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JACQUELINE

“What about Richard?” I ask, taking my glass and coating a cracker with a generous amount of cheese from the charcuterie board.

“He's amazing,” she says after a long pause. Her eyes light up as she begins to gush. “He's so charming and fun and witty, and he has just the most interesting things to say, and the way that he feels about music, it just takes me away.”

“That's amazing,” I say. “So you had a good day with him?”

“Just the best, and I can't believe that we met just walking around. I mean, who would have thought?”

“So have you, like, done it?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

I love hearing the details. The beginning of relationships are always so exciting and full of intrigue. Every conversation, every little bit is discussed in crazy detail.

What did he say when she said this?

What did he say when she told him that?

“No, we haven't.” She smiles and looks down at the floor.

“Well, I guess you didn't have time. You were getting ready for the party.”

“Yeah, it's more than that.” She nods. “We were, I don't know, just really enjoying ourselves. We had some wine and some coffee and some more

wine. We danced a little."

"You danced?"

"Yeah. He just put on these records from, you know, back in the day and took me into his arms, and we started dancing. I didn't know anyone danced like that anymore."

"What kind of records?"

"I don't know. Just these songs from the 50s and 60s. He just kept going on and on about them; how effervescent the music is, how simple but beautiful in its simplicity. I could listen to him for hours. And then he took me shopping, and then we came back here to set up for the party."

"Oh, wait. What about last night?" I ask, knowing full well that I wasn't at the cottage and wondering if she was.

"We talked," she says. "We talked late into the night."

"Wow." I nod. "I'm actually genuinely surprised."

"Why is that?" She laughs, shifting her weight from one heel to another to let the ball of her feet rest just a little bit.

"Well, you know. You always like to take men for a test drive, so to speak."

"I know, but it's so different with him. We have so much in common."

"You do?" I ask. "You don't even really like music."

Allison shakes her head.

"It's not about that. I mean, yes, I like music, but I don't know anything about it really. But it's more than that. It's like we get each other, you know? I understand where he's coming from, and he understands where I'm coming from, so we talk for hours and hours."

I nod, loving the fact that my friend who I thought would never settle down and never consider having a boyfriend suddenly has leapt over all the stages of a relationship and ended up here in this place that is all too familiar to me.

"I still can't get over the fact that you haven't slept with him yet." I shake

my head. "That must be, what, a first for you?"

"Oh, come on. Don't be like that. And don't slut-shame me. I'm a modern woman who is in touch with her sexuality just like any man."

"I know, I'm sorry," I quickly retract. "All I'm trying to say is that he must've made an impression."

"He did, and he asked me to stay here longer."

She says that in a giddy, high-pitched sort of way that makes me lean closer to her.

"What do you mean?" I whisper.

"Well, he has a beach house. He's going to be here all week, and he wants to spend more time with me. He asked me to stay, take off work."

"Are you going to do that?"

"I want to. I have a bunch of days saved up. What would you think of that?"

"You don't need my permission," I say.

"I know. I'm just wondering, you know? I've never been on vacation with anyone before. Not a guy, anyway."

"Yeah, and I guess we will both have to agree that this trip as a girls' trip has been kind of a bust since I reconnected with an ex-boyfriend and you found a new one, huh?"

Allison laughs. We talk for a little while longer, discussing little details about Richard, things that he probably wouldn't want me to know, and I feel like she and I have really reconnected.

We've been friends for a long time, and sometimes long friendships go through ebbs and flows, and it's hard to feel connected the same way that you once were.

You start having doubts.

You start thinking maybe we're good friends after all, but the truth is that a friendship is a relationship, and you have to be willing to stick it out. For the longest time, I would never continue to be friends with someone that I

had a big fight with. It just seemed like an impossible thing to do.

If I were to fight with a friend, the fight would end the friendship, and that's it.

But you can't have that same standard when it comes to romantic relationships or even familiar ones.

If you have a fight with your sister, as long as it's not earth-shattering, you move on. You say, "I'm sorry. We disagree. I was wrong. She was wrong." You make amends. You start new.

But with friendships, it's hard to think that way. It's easier to just toss it away and say, "We grew apart. We're no longer the people that we used to be."

But I have to remind myself that that's wrong.

I have to remind myself that life is short, and the friendships that go back years are even shorter, and it's worth fighting for people you believe in.

"I'm really glad that we're friends," I say, clinking my glass of rosé with hers. "I'm sorry that I neglected you this weekend. It was stupid and selfish, and I want to make it up to you."

"Yes, of course. Don't worry about it," Allison says, waving her hand in my direction.

"I want to make it up to you. I shouldn't have acted that way, and I'm really sorry," I repeat myself after clearing my throat.

"Don't worry about it," she says again. "But if you do want to make it up to me, I do accept jewelry, flowers, and in some cases chocolate as payment."

"Got it." I laugh, and she laughs along with me.

Leanne comes over, and so does Marguerite and the other woman whose name I find out is Ellen. We all chitchat for a while, catching up on who we are and sharing little bits of ourselves.

Leanne tells us about writing and publishing fiction, and everyone listens, hanging on her every word. She's the first real writer that I've met out in the wild so to speak.

I ask Ellen what she does, and she says that she's a session musician. She can play piano, guitar, and about a dozen other instruments, and she goes to recording studios and plays what people need played for their albums.

She has worked with Lady Gaga, Madonna, and a slew of country stars like Miranda Lambert and even Taylor Swift.

"Have you ever worked with Richard?" I ask.

"I wish." She laughs. "But no, unfortunately not. My husband has. We work together in our company."

"What company is that?" Allison asks.

"The Session Musicians. Basically we're a two person crew, and he does a lot of the bookings, and we're always looking to work with new people."

"That's really exciting. I had no idea that you could even do that for a living," I say. "I mean, I've heard of it, but didn't realize that you can make a good living doing it."

"Yeah. It's great. I mean, you work for yourself, clear six figures easily. As long as you are good at what you do, show up, build your clientele. You can't get a big house like this, but you can make a nice retirement."

"Yeah. I keep hearing that." I laugh, turning to Leanne.

"Well, big house like this requires a lot more popularity. You'd probably be the one hiring the session musicians then." Ellen laughs, and so do the rest of us.

We talk for a little while longer while the boys mingle out on the patio, and everyone gets along.

Dinner arrives, and Richard makes a toast thanking us all for coming out and sharing the special day with him. He also makes another one thanking

Allison for coming into his life and for reminding him just how fun life can be. She blushes and little beads of sweat form on her forehead, but she laughs it off, and so does everyone else.

That night, I feel genuinely happy. I haven't had many friends besides Allison.

It's always hard to compare it to anything, but just the fun and relaxation that I had this evening talking to people about music and books, not complaining about stuff that doesn't matter, it puts me at ease the way that I haven't felt in a long time.

Dante relaxes, too, and I see the way he breathes in and out so easily and effortlessly like I haven't seen him do before. We stay for a while, try to leave a few times, but Richard keeps extending our invitation.

We have a little bit too much to drink, nothing like falling over drunk, but enough to convince me that it's a good idea to go swimming in his pool.

I've felt it calling to me all evening, but it's only after a few glasses of rosé that I can no longer say no.

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JACQUELINE

Richard shows us to the pool house, where he has an assortment of bathing suits, bikinis and full pieces, as well as men's trunks in a whole variety of sizes. It's like a clothing store back there, but he tells us to pick whatever we want and join him in the pool.

When Allison caves and pressures me, I can no longer say no. The water is exhilarating.

There's a large hot tub that can fit about ten people out in the corner with a waterfall going into the pool. I pull my hair up off my neck with a scrunchie that I find in the pool house. But Dante dives in head first from the diving board.

Water rushes over me with each person getting into the pool and then Richard pushes a button and a volleyball net pops up.

He grabs the ball with one hand and spikes it over, splashing Allison right in the face. I can't help but laugh, but she doesn't find it nearly as funny.

Richard is incredibly fit and agile, not just for his age, which sounds like a compliment, but it's not. In real life, I can see the way his shoulders are broad and the olive skin and muscles that stand out and peek out of his stomach; two little rows of three.

I watch Allison watch him, her mouth practically salivating. Dante is, of course, just as easy on the eyes as always. He and Lincoln immediately form

a rivalry, taking opposing teams.

Despite the fact that if you choose Marguerite to be on his team, he will inevitably lose. She's his first pick and she beams from ear to ear.

Allison and Richard stay on one team and Leanne and her husband, Colin, get on the other.

No one is keeping score, we're just trying to keep the ball in the air when they're at one side and then not in anyone's hands on the others. As soon as the game is over, Dante celebrates and Lincoln sulks because apparently, some of us have been secretly keeping score. Richard and Allison are incredibly cute.

AFTER THE PARTY, Dante takes me home and I feel high on life the way that I haven't felt in a really long time.

Perhaps it's the invigoration from jumping into the pool.

Perhaps it's the excitement of actually running off into the ocean right afterward and losing myself there, but whatever it is, I want to capture the night and make it the best one ever.

I kiss Dante before we get to the top of the landing at his house, and he kisses me back, pulling me into the bedroom. His hands are deliberate, strong, making their way up and down my body.

My dress falls off, and so does his shirt.

I've had way too much to drink, and I'm not processing everything as it should be. Instead, I'm living in this netherworld of emotions and desire and a body that seems to belong to me.

His kisses alternate between being sloppy and deliberate. He looks me straight in the eyes.

Our lips collide, but then he moves and he kisses not just my mouth but the side of my cheek. I start to laugh and so does he, and we tumble onto the

bed.

We lose our clothing, whatever's left.

His hands make their way up and down my thighs. I climb on top of him and he squeezes my butt cheek, spreading them lightly and then giving me a little slap. I laugh some more and kiss him harder. Then he's on top of me again.

We fumble around with the birth control, trying to find it in the dark before turning on the light and searching for it wholeheartedly.

He goes down on me for a while. I look up at the ceiling and stare at the crown molding, but I can't let myself go.

The line's blurry between this and the past, and I pull him up and he kisses me and slides into me.

Our movements become one.

We're both clumsy. We keep trying.

Nevertheless, it feels good to have him inside of me. My mind is connected to his body, not so much my own. I feel myself like a bird floating away, here but not here.

Then, a familiar, warm sensation rushes through me. It comes out of nowhere.

It takes me completely by surprise.

He continues to push harder and harder inside of me, pressing my wrists into the bed.

I watch his face as he moans my name and then collapses on top. We're both out of breath, searching for peace after what felt like an earthquake.

Finally, Dante pushes himself off of me and lies flat on his back on top of the sheets.

I pull a sheet over my naked body and notice that I'm still wearing my shoes. I kick them off and bury my feet under the covers.

"That was good," I say through heavy breaths.

"That was more than good," he mumbles.

He forces himself to his feet, goes to the bathroom, comes back, lies down and wraps his arm around my shoulder.

A moment later, I hear him snoring. I struggle to reach for the light. I'm tired, and the weight of half of his body pressing me into the bed makes it feel like an impossible task to turn off the light.

Eventually, I do.

As nice as the cuddle is, it's not great to lie under a practically lifeless body, so I push him over to the side, curl up next to him, and fall into a deep sleep.

The following morning, I wake up with a headache, which I haven't had in a very long time. I'm not a big drinker, and this one pounds through me.

I can barely open my eyelids. They feel like razor blades are cutting into my eyeballs.

I wash my face and add some drops, but it's all to no avail.

Nothing helps.

I grab a glass, fill it up with water, and down two Advil, think about it and then take a third.

Anything to make this stop. My mouth is parched like a desert.

"Are you okay?" Dante asks when I sit down on the edge of the bed, holding my shoulders, trying to make the shivers go away.

"Yeah. I'm just really hungover," I say very slowly.

The words feel terrible in my mouth.

I want to make them go away, or maybe I can just go back to sleep and forget that I ever woke up this morning.

"How are you feeling?" I manage to ask.

"Not too bad." He shrugs.

He looks practically perky in comparison to me, excited, on his feet. He even took a shower.

His eyes don't seem to be bothering him, and when he kisses me, his lips are soft and the skin is stretchy and vibrant. I have to lie back down and

mumble, feeling sick to my stomach.

I've never been very good at vomiting.

I don't know if that's something that you can be good at, but it's always grossed me out, and even when I had food poisoning or it would have been a good idea to do something like that, I never could.

Dante tells me that he'll be back sometime later, and when he returns, he comes back with some toast and hot tea, black, served in a big mug.

I'm glad that it's not one of those small, porcelain dainty cups, because I don't think I'd be able to hold onto something so small at this point.

I sit up, lean against the headboard, and try to eat a bite. I can't taste a thing.

I chew a little bit, then give up, washing it down with black, Earl Grey tea. There's a wedge of lemon on the plate, and I squeeze it in and watch it bounce in the mug.

The tea does make me feel better.

After I finish it, Dante pushes me to take a shower.

I refuse, but he keeps nagging, and eventually give in, mainly because I can't keep talking about it.

I hate to admit it, but I emerge a new woman.

I'm not saying that the hangover is gone. Far from it, but I feel refreshed and awake, more energized. Still not back to full operating capacity, but at least there's a glimmer of hope.

"Thanks for everything," I mumble, wrapping myself in the towel he hands me, linen jogger pants and a loose-fitting long sleeve sweatshirt to go with them.

"Where is this from?"

"Got it downstairs in the guest room."

"It's your mom's?" I ask, remaining skeptical that I'd be able to fit into anything she wears.

"No, not at all. She just keeps clothes here in case there are visitors and

they need something. It's a common thing."

I think back to the way Richard had all sorts of bathing suits and different sizes arranged in his pool house.

What is it? A rich person thing to keep clothes for their visitors?

I've never heard of anything like that, but I appreciate the sentiment.

The sweatshirt and the pants are incredibly soft and comfortable and fit just right, and that's exactly what I need at the moment.

I don't want to head downstairs, but again, Dante pushes me, insisting that I need to have some lunch.

We're way past breakfast at this point.

"Everyone else is at the beach," he says, "and Mom is having a meeting at the club with some of her old friends, so we have the house to ourselves."

He makes me a sandwich and a fresh spring salad. By the time I'm done with the plate, I start to resemble a normal human being.

"Well, it's a good thing I had a good time last night," I say, giving him a smile, clearing my plate.

"Why? What do you mean?" he asks.

"Well, I felt this morning that if I didn't have a good time, I'd probably be kicking myself."

"Yeah, Richard is a nice guy. And his friends? I can see us spending some time with them if you want."

"Wow, couple friends," and I raise an eyebrow. "It doesn't help that Lincoln has slept with Richard's girlfriend and his wife doesn't know, but I guess that's how it is. Things are complicated among the rich and famous."

Dante looks at me, and I think I've crossed the line, but then he begins to laugh a thick, loud, easygoing laugh that begins in the pit of his stomach.

I join him, and all of my worries go away.

JACQUELINE

The following morning, I take a walk out by the water by myself. The air is cool and the world is slightly overcast the way that mornings by the water usually are.

Thick, gray clouds cover the sky but I know that in just a few hours, they will be burned off by the summer sun. In the meantime, the air feels cool on my cheeks, comfortable, and warm enough to not cause me to sweat.

I walk fast, putting one foot quickly in front of the other.

I don't break out into a full run, not quite yet, because I know that I can maintain the speed, and it seems to somewhat match the tempo of my thoughts.

The weekend has been a whirlwind, to say the least.

I had no plans to meet Dante's family, but I ended up meeting everyone who's important to him; his brother, sister-in-law, and, of course, his mother.

My thoughts on her are still somewhat mixed. Adele was kind to me, approachable, which was surprising. But I've also seen how she has treated Marguerite, and it's the kind of treatment that she clearly doesn't deserve.

But I have my own relationship to forge and I don't want to burn any bridges; she is Dante's mother after all.

A seagull flies into my field of vision and hops on the ground, looking at me sideways. I smile and wave, and I see what appears to be a little bit of a

smile from the bird.

But that can't be true, right? I continue to walk.

The sand is lumpy and wet, heavy from an early tide.

My sneakers get caked with sand all around my feet. I kneel down at one point to feel the water, careful to keep my shoes from getting soaked.

I feel like my life is starting a new chapter.

Turmoil is on the horizon but it's not here yet. There are still so many unknowns.

Will I get the job in Seattle?

And if I go there, what will I find?

And who sent the letter about my brother?

And what is there to know about his death?

A few joggers crowd around on the beach, filling it up with their steady footsteps and their nods in my direction as they run past.

I pick up my pace, but I still limit myself to a brisk walk. I start to run out of breath, but I keep going.

I walk for a long time this morning, going far into the distance. My watch beeps when I get two miles and I force myself to turn around, knowing that I have a two-mile walk back.

All this time alone brings my thoughts back to Michael, my one friend and confidant all of the years when I was growing up.

He was sweet and kind and even though we sometimes fought like cats and dogs, he was always there for me. When someone made fun of me at school or tried to bully me, he stood up for me.

Anyone who's ever been in school knows the politics that riding the bus involves. It's all about where you sit, and the location determines your social status.

I could never sit anywhere closer than five rows from the back as the back of the bus was reserved for the coolest kids at school. It doesn't matter where their stop was, not even if they were the last ones to get on.

If you dared to sit back there, you'd be put in your place pretty quickly. Well, I did.

One day, I just decided to sit second row from the back. I was quickly told to leave and go sit up front where I belonged. Of course, this request was laced with a lot of curse words.

Michael wasn't there but when he found out about it the next day, he stood up for me. He threatened to beat up Corey Buford, the guy who'd kicked me out. When Corey refused to apologize, Michael put his fist through Corey's face and got suspended for five days.

Mom was pissed off, angry that she had to take time off work to come in to talk to the principal. I was so thankful to my brother for putting Corey in his place, but I also felt guilty for getting him suspended.

WHEN I GET BACK to the house from the walk on the beach, I change out of my sweaty leggings and hoodie into something a little bit more appropriate.

Dante drives me over to the police station. It's a long drive because we can't go to the one out here in the Hamptons. They don't have jurisdiction.

We first stop by my mom's house to get the letter. She's still not talking to me, not in any real way, but she's glad that I'm taking the initiative and decides to come along with me. The police station's only three blocks away from her home, but it's sticky and hot already so we get into Dante's car.

The drive over is excruciating, filled with a lot of silence. It's Sunday and I won't be able to go to the post office until the next day, but at least we can do this.

Sergeant Mallory meets us in his office. He's the one who worked on my brother's case.

"You know you're lucky you caught me. I'm taking a week off starting tomorrow, so I had to come in to catch up on some work," he says, brushing

his hands through his thick ginger hair.

His skin is freckled and his cheeks get red when he laughs, but he has a very casual and easygoing demeanor that has always put me at ease.

When he told me about my brother's death, he was gentle and polite and I appreciated the kindness.

"It's good to see that you're doing better," Sergeant Mallory says, addressing me directly.

I know what he's referring to. I ran into him in a donut shop a few months after the funeral and I hadn't showered for days, if not a week.

My clothes were stained and full of holes, and I was eating a box of donuts all by myself in the parking lot at four o'clock in the morning after not sleeping for seventy-two hours.

"I am doing better. I'm finishing school and Dante and I are actually dating," I say.

"Good, good." He nods, smiling with approval.

He's about fifteen years older than I am and has four kids of his own, all teenagers. I look at their pictures in the picture frames, them smiling brightly at Disney World and at Six Flags, having the kind of exhausting, overwhelming, sugar-induced fun that only large families tend to have.

"Well, let's see this letter," he says, and my mom pulls it out of her purse.

JACQUELINE

I look around Sergeant Mallory's office.

Besides the pictures on the walls, the shelves are pretty empty. There are a few folders here and there but that's pretty much it. The table is broad and wide with just a computer on the side and a keyboard; everything else is pretty clean.

I sit between Mom and Dante, with Dante's chair pushed a little bit behind mine. Mom hands Sergeant Mallory the letter and he opens it carefully wearing gloves.

We had put it into a Ziploc bag under my direction to make sure that no additional prints were added to it.

He looks it over, reads the contents, and then shrugs his shoulders a little bit with a knowing expression on his face but knowing what, I wonder.

"This looks to be a pretty standard letter," he says, sitting back in his chair and it makes a loud creaking sound.

"What are you talking about?" I ask. "What's standard about it?"

"I can't be sure, and of course, we're going to run it through all the proper channels, crime scene investigation, fingerprints, we're even going to try and figure out who the signature belongs to, but I just want to warn you, sometimes letters like this appear."

"From whom?" Mom says, clutching her purse.

It's a small rigid leather purse that I got her from TJ Maxx a few Christmases ago and it has both small handles at the top as well as a long strap for the crossbody look.

"Sometimes people receive letters like these. I would love to say that they're not particularly common, but they are. We'll have to wait and see. This may be a letter that's just an introduction and in another week or so, you may get a phone call or a follow-up letter asking for money related to revealing this information. I'm not sure what's going to happen in this case."

I search his face and I get the feeling that he's not being evasive or deceptive. Instead, he's just being honest.

This is the suspicion that I had myself, working as a journalist and reading numerous stories about people who have gone missing.

I tell him about the missing persons letters and he nods along.

"So, you know what I'm talking about," he says.

"Yeah, but I don't understand the angle here. I mean, it's a little bit different, isn't it?" I press.

He hesitates, but then nods again.

"It's not exactly the same thing," I continue, looking at my mom's confused face and knowing that she's not quite following. "Why would someone write something like this? I mean, it's a different situation because this person isn't asking for anything, he's just stating that it may not have been an accident. I mean, shouldn't he be asking for something in order for it to be a scam?"

"Yes, I would say so," Sergeant Mallory nods, "but it's also possible that he's lying or just setting the scene so to speak."

"How so?" Mom pipes in, clearing her throat and nervously adjusting her grip on her purse.

"Well, he lays out this information. He pulls you in and might offer more information in the future in exchange for money."

We all sigh practically simultaneously.

"Look, I want to get to the bottom of this. If there was indeed a murder, we have to know, but I just want to warn you of the possibilities," Sergeant Mallory says, reaching over and taking my hand. "I just want you to be mentally prepared for...anything."

I nod and swallow hard.

We don't stay to talk to him much longer than that. He ushers us out and I'm just happy to leave.

Mom hesitates in the hallway and wonders out loud if maybe she should talk to someone else, but Sergeant Mallory convinces her that they're going to run all of the appropriate tests on the letter and get the results as soon as possible.

"How long will that be? The results, I mean," I ask him as we walk out.

Sergeant Mallory walks us out, holding the door open and is just about to close it. "Unfortunately, we're very backlogged," he says. "It'll probably be a month to two months."

"A month or two months?" Mom gasps.

"Maybe three."

I swallow hard.

A lump forms in the back of my throat and I swallow again and again but it doesn't go away, instead, I just cough.

"I know that it's a disappointment, but this is not an open investigation right now."

"So open it," Dante says.

"It's not that easy, we need proof."

"The proof is in this letter," I push.

"That may be the case but we have hundreds of other cases that need to be solved right now. Rape victims, attacks, actual murders."

"So you *don't* think it's murder?" I ask, crossing my arms in a defining manner.

"I did not say that. I'm just trying to not push your expectations, okay?"

This is a difficult time, but the DNA results are going to take as long as they take. This isn't television. Crimes are not solved in an hour."

"You don't have to tell me that," I say, practically shaking my finger in his face. "You think I'm an idiot? A moron? I think that everything's just solved forty-eight hours later?"

"I did not insinuate that."

"Please run the tests."

I feel my anger getting the best of me, but I can't let him win. Not because I don't want to upset him but because I want the DNA results to be run as quickly as possible.

And I don't want them to get lost anywhere or anything to happen to them by accident. That sometimes occurs in cases where the cops and the victim's families don't agree.

"I will do my best." He nods and we leave it at that.

When Sergeant Mallory disappears into the building and we walk out to our car across the parking lot, none of us feel confident enough to speak first.

"What just happened in there?" I finally ask, breaking the silence.

"He seemed surprised at first," Mom says, "but then the more he talked, the less convinced I became that he was telling me the truth."

I glance at Dante, and he shrugs. "I don't know."

I shake my head. "He's right in that this could be a scam. Someone could reach out to you and ask for money for details but that doesn't mean that it's not true. Just because someone asks for money doesn't mean that the information that they have isn't accurate."

"Doesn't it sort of mean that?" Dante asks.

I shake my head. "A lot of people need money," I say after a long pause. "They need money for rent, if they lost their jobs they need money to feed their kids, to buy groceries; it's a very real thing. And so, if you have some information about something that you know someone will pay for, I can see a lot of people going ahead and making that threat or making that demand."

"But it's not like you guys have any money," Dante says.

The words just spring out of him and Mom and I both exchange looks.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that."

"No, I know what you mean." I nod. "We don't have *a lot* of money, but we have a lot more money than some. Mom lives in a nice house and Michael was making a comfortable six figures. That's a lot of money for a lot of people."

Dante nods and I can tell that a part of him is trying to wrap his head around this concept, living on six figures. It's not that he spends a lot of money all the time and is very flashy or anything like that. It's actually the opposite, but still, having a substantial trust fund and a job that pays, God, I don't even know how much, half a million, a quarter of a million, whatever it is, it's enough given his family's other income and all the properties that he has access to.

Money's not a concern for him the way it is for a lot of people. I try to recognize my own privilege in the situation, which is substantial, even though I didn't exactly come from a lot. But I also know that whoever knows this, whoever is reaching out like this must have some knowledge about what Michael had and what he did for a living. And that means that he would probably think that the family's a lot more loaded than we actually are.

Dante drives my mom home and she invites us in for some coffee. I don't exactly know where to go from here. The letter's gone to the police department, but I do have a copy, a number of very clear photographs of both the letter, the envelope and even the back just in case.

I don't know if it's the right thing to turn it over to the police, but I didn't want to take it to a private investigator in case that made it invalid to be used in court.

Mom and I don't talk about our fight besides a brief *I'm sorry* and a hug. There's nothing to say. We both know that we loved Michael very much and that we each feel the grief in our own way.

She knows that I have a lot of suspicions. I am also more of a realist.

"I guess I'm going to have to prepare myself for another follow-up letter asking for a lot of money, huh?" Mom asks, pouring coffee into three mismatched mugs.

She grabs a tin of Girl Scout cookies from the pantry and I bite into one letting it melt on the tip of my tongue.

"I haven't had breakfast yet," I point out, "but this is delicious."

She smiles.

"Girl Scout cookies aren't the best way to start the day," she says and Dante laughs.

"I think you're wrong about that, Mrs. Archer. I think they're probably right up there with one of the best ways to start the day."

It's this moment of relief that puts me at ease and I realize just how tense I have been. As I laugh, my whole body relaxes in places where I didn't even know I was holding tension, the back of my neck, my jaw, my temples, and even the joints of my fingers and toes.

"You know, you don't have to call me Mrs. Archer, though I appreciate the sentiment. Elizabeth is just fine."

"Okay, Elizabeth. I wanted to let you know that I love your daughter very much and I've asked her to be my girlfriend exclusively."

"Oh, wow. Congratulations," Mom says, surprised. "I didn't realize my daughter was capable of being pinned down, but I wish you all the luck in that endeavor."

"I know, but she said yes for now, so I guess we'll take it from there."

The three of us laugh again and I appreciate Dante saying something like that to her.

We're not much into formalities in this family, but it's appreciated, nevertheless.

"So, since we're sharing," Mom says, putting her coffee down and reaching over to take Dante's hand in hers, "I just wanted to thank you

personally for saving my life. It was just such an unexpected gesture and I'll never be able to pay you back for it but I wanted you to know that it means the world to me to be here; to continue living my life, to spend more time with my daughter, what a gift!"

"You're welcome," Dante says.

He opens his mouth to add something else like a brief *don't worry about it* or something casual but then he looks directly into her eyes and says, "I'm just glad that I was able to help. I'm happy that you're still with us and doing so well."

This moment of tenderness brings a tear to my eye that comes very unexpectedly.

I force myself to take another gulp of coffee just to make it go away and I blink my eyes to make the tearing up stop.

"Since we're sharing news," I say, clearing my throat, "I actually have some that is not that great. I mean, you may not think it's that great."

"Okay," Mom says, furrowing her brow.

"I've applied for a position in Seattle."

Dante's eyes suddenly get big for a quick moment before he relaxes them and tries to pretend that nothing has happened. I feel him press his foot on top of mine under the table but I continue on.

"I just wanted to let you know that I applied for a job there at this company. No news yet, so I didn't want to get you excited, but I wanted to warn you."

"So Seattle, huh? Why so far?"

"Well, frankly, I haven't had the best luck here. I'm expanding my search, but it's a contract position, so it wouldn't be for more than six to nine months if I do get it."

"Okay, that's not too bad. Besides, now that I'm feeling better, I think I'd like to come visit you."

Her words take me by surprise.

I sit back in the chair and look up, uncertain whether I actually heard what I thought I heard.

"You're really not upset?"

"Of course not. You're living your life. You're graduating, you're looking for work. You have a wonderful, caring boyfriend; what more could I want for you?"

"I thought you'd be seriously annoyed with the fact that I might be going to the other coast."

"Nope, not at all. I want you to spread your wings. I want you to live your best life and I want you to make sure to FaceTime me at least once a day, no matter where you are in the world."

I laugh.

Yes, that's right.

That's the mom that I love and know well.

She wraps her arms tightly around me and I start to feel tears fall down her cheeks as she shakes. I can't help but stop the tears now, it's too late.

"It's going to be okay," I say over and over and over again.

"I'm not crying because I'm sad," she says, "I'm crying because I'm really happy for you."

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JACQUELINE

Mom invites us to stay for dinner and Dante wants to see the town where I grew up. Neither of us wants to drive all the way back to the Hamptons, so I show him the new medical center that used to be the Blockbuster where I would rent all of my movies every Friday night and a Wendy's where I would get their soft serve ice cream and eat just that for meals at a time.

Dante seems to like this walk down memory lane and thankfully, I like showing it to him. After an evening of stuffing our faces with pizza, we make our way back to my childhood bedroom with a twin bed mattress.

It's a tight fit to say the least, and we laugh and try to make the best of it. Unfortunately, my mom's bedroom is right next door and the walls are barely there, thin as paper.

When Dante reaches for me and moves his body just once, my old wrought iron bed and spring mattress make a loud creaking sound that scares us to death. I never want to hear it again, so I turn off the lights and force him to put his hands back on his side of the bed.

We arrive at the post office the following morning just as it opens with the letter, or rather a picture of the letter, in hand. Surprisingly, there are two people ahead of us and as soon as it's my turn, I walk right up to the window and ask if the clerk remembers seeing it.

The woman on the other side of the plexiglass divider stares at me with an inquisitive expression.

"Do you realize how many letters I see during the day?" she asks.

"It was on this date." I point to the other picture on the envelope.

"Do you know what time the letter was mailed?" she asks.

I look at the envelope. "9:05 a.m., around that time."

"Yeah, that's the time I usually work, but I can't tell you anything."

"What do you mean?"

She adjusts the fit of her shirt, breathing heavily. Her workday has just begun but she's already exasperated.

"Look, I have no idea who dropped this off. Or if even it was dropped off. They could have dropped it in the box outside. Do you know if it was a man or a woman?"

"I don't know."

"I can't help you. I barely remember packages with elaborate paper, let alone nondescript letters like this."

Somebody comes out of the back, a slim, older gentleman wearing the same matching shirt.

I ask him the same question.

He gives me the courtesy of taking a closer look, thinking about it, but in the end comes out with the same answer.

"Is there any way that we could see the footage of who was here on this day?"

The woman turns to the man who's clearly her boss, and he shakes his head no. "We can't just let anyone do that without a court order."

"But isn't this your establishment?" Dante asks.

"Yes, but we're a US Post Office and there's privacy involved for people who are mailing things."

"But it was mailed to my mother."

"Still. If you get a court order or a warrant, I'm more than happy to show

it to you. It'd be better if the police requested the footage."

"How long is the footage kept before you write over it?" Dante asks.

"Three weeks or so. Plus, we don't record sound, only images."

"Three weeks from the day it was recorded?" Dante double checks. "That would give us about two and a half weeks."

The man nods.

"Would you mind if I got your names?" I ask, pulling out my phone, ready to record it. "And a way to reach you? I'm going to go to the police right now and ask them to request the footage but I want them to know who we talked to."

They look at each other, exchanging a few glances, eventually giving in. Melanie Forbrowski and Dale Hubert tell me how to spell their names and give me their contact information. They look suspicious and they ask a few questions.

I consider keeping the contents of the letter to myself, but I worry what will happen if I don't share it with them. When we leave the post office, Dante gives me a slight hug.

I realize that it's Monday and he should probably be at work, but I appreciate him rearranging his schedule whatever way possible to be here for me.

We head back to the police station and tell Sergeant Malone everything that we know. He's not very familiar with the case, but he takes notes and says that he'll look into getting the recordings.

We stress the urgency of the situation, but the more that I press, the more annoyed he seems to get.

"Look, I understand. I'll do my best," he repeats himself, getting more agitated.

I ask where Sergeant Mallory is and he repeats himself by telling me that he's on vacation just like he'd told me earlier. And I know that the longer that we're here, the less of a good impression that we're making.

"It's probably time to go." Dante tugs on my shirt, and I leave despite not wanting to.

"What if he doesn't follow up?" I ask Dante in the parking lot. "What if he wastes these two weeks?"

"Sergeant Mallory should be back in seven days, so we're going to keep on the ball, call him every two days. Be visible, but not annoying. Remind him of his duty, but don't press him too much. Don't force him to give you a reason to say no."

I nod, pacing from one side of the parking lot to another. I know what he means.

"Would you like to get some lunch?" I ask.

"Let me get back in the car."

It's weird being back here. I feel a little rudderless even though my mom's house is less than five miles away, I feel like I'm waiting for something to happen, to uncover something rather than being the agent of change.

"Did you take today off?" I ask Dante.

He nods. "Last night I postponed my flight. I knew that you needed my help going to the post office and maybe the station again."

I nod, reaching over and giving him a squeeze on the hand. "Thank you for being here for me," I say, "let's get some lunch, my treat."

He smiles.

"I mean it. I'm not going to let you pay for me forever."

"Oh, come on. It's not that big of a deal, is it?"

I take him to an Italian bistro famous for their fresh ingredients and fresh food.

We come in at an odd time, around eleven o'clock, so it's still relatively empty, but we're hungry after skipping breakfast.

In the middle of lunch, my phone vibrates. It's in my pocket and I feel the call. Pulling it out, I expect to send it directly to voice mail but it's a number out of Seattle and Dante urges me to take it.

"Hey there, how are you?" a friendly female voice asks on the other end. She introduces herself as Tamara Hillsborough and asks me a little bit about my experience working at a startup.

Dante told me that it's an administrative assistant job, but I was in charge of a lot of planning and organizing of the day-to-day activities. I have a vague idea of what this means. I play up my strengths and experience that I had mentioned in my resume and cover letter, which were meant to match the job announcement.

Tamara listens carefully, asking me pertinent questions about the specifics of what I did and I can't answer any of these questions with Dante looking directly at me.

I excuse myself, walk away from the table, and talk in a dark corner of the restaurant leading up to the bathroom.

I answer all her questions professionally and as straightforwardly as possible. And afterward, she asks me if I'm willing to fly out for an interview tomorrow morning.

"What time is the flight?" I ask.

"Eight o'clock. It'll get you here by the afternoon and you'll be able to do the interview at three."

"Wow. Okay," I say.

"This is the only time that Mr. Vasko has available until next week, so if you're interested, I wouldn't waste it. I have about five other people lined up for interviews the following Friday."

"So many?" I ask.

"Yes, you are the most qualified and after talking to you, I really get the sense that your personality and Mr. Vasko's personality will go well together. But of course, I can never be sure. There's more of an art to this than a science, but I'd still like to give you a chance tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay," I nod, "I can do it. I'll be there."

"I'll send you all the details and the flight confirmation. The name you

listed on the application is accurately spelled, correct?"

"Yes, it is." I nod.

"Good, good. I'll be in touch. It was nice to speak with you, Jacqueline Archer."

I hang up the phone and stare at the screen.

I'm going to be on a flight out there at eight the following morning.

What time do I have to get up?

What do I even wear?

What do I say?

I don't know the answer to any of these questions and about a hundred others enter my mind as quickly as I put these aside.

Not knowing what else to do, I walk slowly back to the table, sit down, and pick up my glass of water, drinking half of it before lifting my eyes to meet Dante's.

"What happened? They don't want to pursue it?" he asks, probably judging from the grave expression on my face.

I shake my head no.

"What did she say? That was a recruiter, right?"

I nod slowly, looking at him but also through him. "She wants me there for an interview tomorrow afternoon. My flight out is at eight."

"Oh my God." He smiles, excited.

"There are other people interviewing, but Vasko won't have another opening for a week or so. She has a really good opinion of my application and she liked talking to me so much that she's pushing me ahead."

"That's great news, right? Why do you seem so unhappy about it?"

"No, it is. It's amazing news. I guess I'm just in shock. I just feel really nervous all of a sudden."

Dante gets up from his chair and moves to my side of the booth. He wraps his arm around my shoulder.

"You have nothing to worry about. You can do this job. You have already

done it. Just elaborate on your experience, that's all."

"Yeah, I know." I nod, shaking my head. But suddenly I feel queasy, sick to my stomach. "I've never done anything like this before, you know?"

"Look, I totally understand if you don't want to, but I want you to give this a chance. Just go, do the interview, answer his questions."

"But he's going to ask me about my experience."

"Yes, and we can practice tonight, but it's all stuff that you've done before. Make appointments, organize his agenda. Nothing out of the ordinary."

I nod, taking a lot of deep breaths.

The waitress comes over and asks us if everything is okay or if we'd like to order a second round of drinks.

I say no, but Dante orders me some more iced tea, no sugar.

When our entrees arrive, I eat my Mediterranean salad full of olives and feta cheese and I can barely taste the thing.

It's not that it's bland. It's that my taste buds seem to have been thrown into a state of shock, rendered useless.

"It's going to be okay," Dante promises, and I force myself to believe him.

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JACQUELINE

Since my flight the following morning is so early, Dante drives me to the airport the night before and we rent a suite at the Marriott.

"I don't want to stay. I don't want to spend another night on your childhood twin bed," he says and I laugh.

"It creaks when you breathe, let alone when you try to do anything else." I laugh again.

My bag is packed and sitting in his trunk, and I've already said goodbye to my mom who wished me luck. She doesn't know the extent of what I'm going to do.

And for now, that's okay.

The drive doesn't take long, but we sit in a bit of traffic in a heavy downpour with just brake lights, blinking all around us.

"I can't wait to get into that dry room and order some room service, maybe a bottle of champagne. How about that?"

I nod.

"I like the sound of that. Maybe even some hot tea," I offer.

"Hot tea? Not sure if that's exactly the romantic gesture that I'm going for."

"Well, I got soaked getting everything in here," I say, pointing to my shirt and jacket, which are drenched from multiple trips back to the house.

He laughs, shaking his head.

"You have one little carry-on and it's not my fault you kept forgetting things back home. It's almost as if you haven't flown anywhere ever."

"Well, come to think of it," I say, nodding my head. "That trip to Minnesota was the only one I had in years."

"Really?" He gasps. "I think I'm going to have a heart attack if I don't fly anywhere for more than two weeks."

"I don't know. I went on a trip to Nantucket. So, we flew to Boston to visit some friends of family there and do a little trip. But that's pretty much it."

"What about Florida? What about Europe?"

"Nope." I shake my head.

"I would love to travel but especially to Europe or anywhere like that, but the opportunity had just never come up. It costs a lot of money to travel. I don't know if you are familiar with this concept."

He tilts his head slightly in my direction, making fun of me, but also giving me a sympathetic pitying look that makes me feel bad.

"We're going to have to remedy that situation as soon as possible."

"Well, tomorrow morning I am flying to Seattle and I've never been to the West coast."

"You're breaking my heart, Jacqueline. I hope you know that."

"Look, I know that you have been all around the world everywhere, but that hasn't been my situation. I was in college and then during breaks, when everyone went skiing in Colorado or to the Swiss Alps and in the summer had their internships in Paris, I had to work. I had to have a real job. A real job that paid really bad and didn't get me anywhere, but it sustained a roof over my head. So that was my reality for a long time."

"I know, I'm sorry. I was being a jerk," Dante says. "I don't mean to make fun of you. I shouldn't have said that."

"No, I appreciate you wanting to expand my horizons. And in fact, I'm

kind of into that."

I smile over at him sitting in the passenger seat of his car. He's a fast driver, but there's too much traffic ahead of us and too many red lights to really let him fly.

The rain starts to fall almost sideways and I wonder if they postpone flights over rainstorms. When I ask Dante about it, he says only if there's a thunderstorm and lightning.

So far we haven't had either.

Besides, the weather will probably shift by tomorrow or in a few hours, so who knows what's going to happen in the morning.

We drive for a while without saying a word and I imagine what it'd be like to travel with Dante.

Where would I even want to go? Paris is right up there on the list.

Perhaps it's cliché, but given the fact that I've never been there and it is the most romantic city on earth. It's definitely a priority.

I can just imagine it, Paris in the summertime sitting by the Seine River, eating croissants at a cafe.

"You know, they actually sit with their bodies facing out," Dante says when I share my dream.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I don't know if you've ever noticed it, in movies and that kind of thing. But when you're there in real life, it's very disarming. All the cafes, the chairs, instead of facing inward toward the establishment, people face out. They sit on the side, they sit with their backs to the restaurant or to the coffee shop and everyone watches people walking down the street. They smoke and they drink black coffee and talk about the pedestrians, or at least it feels that way. In reality, they're probably just discussing philosophy and politics in that abstract sense the way that French people do."

I laugh and toss my wet hair, which has started to dry in sad little clumps around my shoulders.

"What about London?" I say. "I'd love to go there. See the Tower, the Palace, just walk along the Thames, all that stuff. It's so romantic. And the British Museum! I'd love to see all of the archeological artifacts."

"You mean the ones that they took illegally from all the countries they colonized?" Dante asks, raising an eyebrow.

He jokes and I laugh, but we both know that he's saying the truth.

"I would also recommend only visiting in the summertime since it gets kind of rainy. I don't know if you've heard of that."

He's being sarcastic, of course.

"Oh, yes, but that's part of the charm, right? Rainy, foggy day in London, maybe stop into the Charles Dickens museum. Get a copy of Sherlock Holmes."

"Charles Dickens didn't actually write Sherlock Holmes."

"I know. I'm just naming things that are British."

He laughs and I laugh along with him.

I like having this banter and the ease of it.

We've had a lot of pressure in our relationship so far and suddenly it feels so easy.

Is this what it would be like to be with Dante in real life, to live with him?

To go out to dinner? To travel?

Yeah, I guess so. I mean, that's what it was like when we were in the Hamptons together.

"You know, that was probably our first weekend away, officially," I point out.

"Sorry, I kind of sprung my whole family on you."

"No, not at all. I loved meeting them. They're a part of you."

WHEN WE GET to the room and drop our bags, I wash my face at the sink and

he brushes his teeth. It's all very domestic and comfortable at the same time. I feel like we've been a couple for a long time, but it's romantic and kind of sexy.

After taking off my clothes, I change into the robe hanging on the back of the door. When I come out of the bathroom, Dante pulls me close to him.

Grabbing my belt, he kisses me, and I run my fingers up and down his chest. Every muscle is exaggerated and yet in perfect proportion.

He is already taking off his shirt. I know this is going to be our last day together, so that's what makes tonight even more sexy.

Dante has lit a few candles and the house lights are dimmed. He kisses me softly, at first, but then passionately. He finds my mouth and buries his fingers in my hair. He runs his tongue up my neck softly and then his hand slides down to my breasts, cupping one.

I feel my nipples getting hard. Suddenly, I take a breath and my chest tightens with anticipation.

He slides his hand in between my thighs and I open my legs, just a little. He kneels down and kisses me, opening my robe more, exposing my breasts.

"You look beautiful," Dante says, pulling me by the hand and sitting on the bench at the bottom of the bed.

"Take off your robe," he whispers in my ear, and then sits back. Suddenly, I feel very self-conscious.

"No, I can't." I shake my head.

"Please."

"Why?"

"Because I love you, because you're the most beautiful woman in the world, and I want to look at you."

"I'm not a piece of art."

"Yes, you are."

He waits. I hesitate and then something comes over me.

I pull the robe away and let it drop to the floor. I straighten my back and

pull in my stomach, but then I feel a little bit nauseous.

I'm keenly aware of just how imperfect my body is. And yet, the expression on his face, I can tell that he's not aware of any of these things. He seems to want me for me, and that makes my whole body ache for him.

"Okay, enough." I reach down to grab my robe, but Dante stops me.

He pulls me closer, intertwining his fingers with mine. He tugs a little and I fall on top of him. I feel the hardness of his body underneath mine, our legs and arms intertwine, along with our tongues. Our mouths search for each other's.

Even though we're already kissing, everything becomes messy. At some point, I pull off his boxer briefs and a bit later, he flips me over onto my stomach.

He kisses my back, and then the nape of my neck, going down my spinal column.

I arch my butt and he grabs on to both cheeks, squeezing tightly. His fingers spread my legs out and push my butt up in the air. He finds his way inside of me, massaging both clitoris and deep within. I'm on display in the most exposed way, and yet it's both sexy and incredibly arousing.

Then he surprises me by sliding his finger inside my ass.

"Is this okay?"

"Yes," I mumble into the pillows.

"Open your legs wider," he instructs. And I do as he says.

I grab on to the pillow with both hands. He slides something hard inside of me.

When I look back, I realize that it's not his cock. It's something else, a vibrator that he had shown me jokingly earlier.

I like it in there. It fills me up. When he turns it on, my whole body vibrates. He continues to tease my clit. And his finger in my ass makes me feel like he's piercing me wide open.

Every part of me is plugged, except for my mouth that suddenly feels

very vacant.

"I want you to orgasm," he says and before he can finish that request, I do.

I've already been close and he pushes me over the edge. The vibrator continues to buzz as waves of pleasure rush through my body, and I mold and muffle myself with the pillow.

Afterward, I can barely feel my legs and I tell him to climb on top of me and I don't have to ask twice.

My body reaches peak relaxation as he pushes himself in and out of me, and I grab on.

And just as he orgasms, I feel the second wave come over me, but it doesn't quite reach.

"That was sexy," he says, pulling out of me. I only briefly remember the condom, but luckily he didn't forget.

"That was more than sexy," I say, lying in the glow.

I close my eyes and grab onto his hand, intertwining our fingers.

"I love you," I whisper.

"I love you, too."

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DANTE

Lying together afterward, I look into her eyes and I wonder how I got so lucky. It's not just that she's so good in bed. It's more than that. It's the way that our bodies connect and our minds seem to just get each other.

Yet, there's this nagging feeling that remains. I can't stop myself from thinking of all the things that could have been or probably should happen.

I have no right to be here with her.

I have no right to lie to her about my past, about the reason why we ran into each other in the first place.

And yet, here it is.

I know that were she to ever find out, she'd probably never want to talk to me again. That would be it, the end of our relationship. For that reason and that reason only, I can't bring myself to push her away.

I never knew that we would have this kind of connection. In fact, I've never had this kind of connection with anyone in my life.

My brother has always been my brother; someone there, mildly annoying, who understood where I came from and what drove me and what caused problems in my life, mainly our parents.

He had similar struggles and that's what connected us to each other. We both hated our dad but strived for his acceptance, and didn't want to admit

that. And when it came to our mother, things were even more complicated.

Lincoln found Marguerite early in life and at first, I thought that relationship would never last. There's no way that anyone would put up with my brother for that long. But as time passed, I realized that I was wrong and that it was me who was the fool. It was me who kept going on these dates and finding these women that I had nothing in common with. And the sex wasn't even very good.

With Jacqueline, the world is opening up.

She hasn't been many places and I want to show her the world, but I want to also experience all of that again with someone, through brand new eyes. I never thought this would be possible.

Yet here she is, lying in these sheets before me, her eyes closed, her arms tucked under her pillow, her hair tossed over the pillow. She breathes steadily.

One breath in, one breath out.

When I move my body just a little bit, she shifts as well. She's a very light sleeper. I have learned that.

I, on the other hand, will fall asleep and it will take the loudest alarm clock to get me up.

I tell myself to be quiet. I tell myself to give her a chance to rest. She has an early flight in a couple of hours to a new city, and she hasn't been on a plane in a long time. I worry about her now.

When I proposed that she apply for this position, I was only looking at what I needed. Now, suddenly the possibility is becoming very real.

What if this isn't the best thing for her?

What if something goes wrong?

What if they were to uncover who she really is?

Would that put her life in danger?

I don't know the answers to any of these questions and I worry, staring out at the blank wall in front of me, thinking of all the possible answers.

I have to get a few hours of sleep, but I can't relax. Instead, I grab my clothes and sneak out. I bring my laptop, phone, earphones, as well as shoes and workout gear. It's a lot to take moving around like a ninja in a dark room, hoping not to wake her.

Luckily, it's a suite and once I'm outside the room, I flip on the light in the corner, knowing that it won't bother her.

There are floor-to-ceiling windows and I look out into the distance at the world that is still asleep and won't be fully awake for some time now.

The lights are on in only a few windows at the hotel I can see from here. There's no one walking the street below but there are a few cars, probably taking people to early morning flights.

I open my laptop to do a little work, the work that I've neglected over this long weekend, but my mind doesn't focus. I need to get some exercise. I decide to go downstairs to the hotel gym. All nice Marriotts have them and they typically only get busy around five in the morning and in the evenings. It's only three.

I take my iPad, lace my shoes, and bring the room key. The gym is expectedly empty. There are treadmills in the corner, weights at the other end, and a row of elliptical trainers. I get on the treadmill.

I walk first on a steep incline, a ten percent grade, setting the speed to 1.5, then 2.5, then 3. I try to do some work, go through my emails, but my mind doesn't focus so I put on an audiobook and turn up the speed to run.

I haven't run in a while and I feel it in my bones and muscles. My hamstrings ache, but I push on. I grabbed a little cup of water when I came in and I force it to my lips to hydrate. It's nowhere near enough, but it feels good running down the back of my throat. I run for a long time this morning. I lose myself in the story and vary the speed, taking small breaks here and there, but I keep running.

My body starts to feel engaged, energized. I know that in five or six hours I'm due for a crash, but I couldn't sleep anyway. Why not take advantage?

I have suffered with insomnia for many years. I've taken medications, a variety of pills, and about two years ago, I weaned myself off. Slowly but surely, the pills are sinister. You take them to get rest. It's not as perfect as a real night's sleep, so you wake up a little groggy every day. But after a while, you can't not take them.

It becomes an addiction. I relied on them for a while and then quit cold turkey. Not being able to hold on and go back, I tried different brands but they all had the same effect.

Eventually, I managed to quit. Since I continued to gamble, my insomnia wasn't that much of a concern. In fact, being able to stay up late without stimulants is a big positive in casino life. You can imagine everybody else who was downing their 5-hour Energy drinks and their tenth cup of espresso. I would just be able to stay up naturally, powered by my own inability to sleep and rest.

I probably aged a decade during that time. I tried to drink a lot of water, to stay in shape, to keep myself hydrated. I didn't smoke cigarettes like everyone else, but the insomnia was threatening me. I just couldn't deal with it anymore. Depression set in, and after losing a lot of money, I had a hard time moving forward.

I told Jacqueline about this last night. She listened carefully, nodding her head, reaching over and intertwining her fingers with mine.

I didn't need her sympathy. I just needed her to understand where I was coming from. We need to know our history in order to make sure that we don't repeat it.

This morning's run makes me so weak I want to lie down on the floor and never get up.

But after ten minutes of catching my breath, I realize that it's exactly what I needed. I am spent and exhausted to the point of actually being able to sleep. I don't bother with the shower, but head straight upstairs and climb into bed as quietly as possible. Jacqueline tosses around a few times, but then she

turns away from me and I close my eyes and drift off.

A few hours later, a loud alarm clock blares on her side of the room and it takes me a good few beeps to actually force my eyes open.

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DANTE

The sweat from the run had dried leaving my skin covered in a thin layer of residue. My head throbs and I wish I could sleep for hours longer. Jacqueline rubs her eyes and raises her arms over her head. When the sheet falls down exposing her breasts, she quickly pulls it back up, slightly embarrassed. I reach over and pull it back down and pull her back toward me.

Then I kiss her.

"What's that for?" she asks.

"Just a good morning kiss," I mumble and press my lips toward her again. She kisses me back.

Her mouth is parched, and I'm sure that mine is, as well.

"Oh my God. I'm sorry, but I have to brush my teeth." She pushes me aside.

Pulling the sheet around her, she heads to the enormous marble bathroom with a huge Jack and Jill sink with two big mirrors in the middle.

I stare at the deep soaking tub in the corner and I regret that we didn't take advantage of it last night.

I look at the time, and there's no way that we can manage anything but a quick shower. I give her another quick peck on the back of her neck as she brushes her teeth vigorously, her mouth full of toothpaste.

Jumping into the shower, I make it as quick as possible. The cold water feels good against my skin, waking me up. I put a little bit of shampoo, followed by conditioner, through my hair, let it run over my body, and quickly get out in less than three minutes.

"How about I join you in there?" Jacqueline says, looking disappointed, but still with the sheet wrapped tightly around her.

"I just wanted to give you as much time as possible. We don't have that much time."

"Oh, yeah." She makes a sad, pouty face.

I also arranged for my flight last night. I'm headed to Salt Lake City, leaving her to go to Seattle by herself.

We haven't fully made our plans, and I may fly up to see her in Seattle afterward, depending on how my meeting and her interview go.

I brush my teeth, facing out from the sink, staring at the water washing down her beautiful body. She prefers water about ten degrees warmer than I do and steam quickly starts to billow out from the top.

"You're going to fry in there," I say, starting to laugh.

"I'm good. I like it nice and hot."

When she emerges, her cheeks are bright red and her skin is activated, but she looks happy.

"I'm surprised it doesn't put you to sleep," I add. "I force cold showers on myself just to get me moving in the mornings."

"Yeah, well, you're used to waking up at this ungodly hour," she says with a smile. "I need every comfort that I can muster just to get me through the day."

Jacqueline grabs the bathrobe from the back of the door, but then changes her mind, adjusting the position of her towel instead. Her makeup bag is out in the living room, and I follow her out, unwilling to put up with the heat for much longer. It's only a matter of time before my pristine white dress shirt gets sweaty yellow pit stains.

"You know, I thought that we had so much in common, but now I realize that we do things very differently," I say, picking up the phone to order our breakfast.

Half an hour should be plenty of time to get downstairs to the van that will take me to the terminal.

Jacqueline sits on the edge of the bed with her leg tucked under her butt, applying makeup while peering into her compact.

"You know, you could use the mirrors back there, except that you fogged them up," I say.

"Ha, ha, very funny." She rolls her eyes in my direction. "No, the light isn't that great in there."

She points her face at the sun. I watch as she makes an expert line over her eyelid and then fills it in with shadow. Her cheeks are still red, but as the minutes tick by, they return to their natural pale color, enough so that she actually adds some rouge right at the top.

She remains in nothing but a towel the whole time, and it takes everything within me to not rush over there and pull it off of her.

I tell her this in not so many words, and she warns me back, "We don't have time."

You always think that right before a long separation you're going to have these moments of togetherness where you really connect, or at least that's what happens in the movies, right?

But in reality?

In reality, your girlfriend sits on the edge of the bed, applying foundation, and you scroll through ESPN on your phone, not wanting to open your work laptop until absolutely necessary.

With all the time that I have spent traveling, I've become kind of an expert at last-minute work. Now it's finally going to come in handy.

Before, I would do work around the clock; in the hotel room, at dinner, lunch, whenever I could. I billed the hours, and that was it.

But now with Jacqueline in my life, I've found another way to maneuver around it; sitting at the gate, on the airplane, while she takes a nap, when I have even ten or fifteen minutes when I excuse myself to use the bathroom. I take a dump for about five, and the rest, I reply to emails and do everything else that's absolutely necessary to keep me from getting fired.

Cedar and I are staying in touch. He's actually happy with my work. The last time we spoke, he told me so. That makes me smile because I'm doing approximately a third less than I normally would, but as long as he's happy, who am I to complain, right?

"How do I look?" Jacqueline asks, coming out of the bathroom after drying her hair and then curling it.

"Wouldn't it curl if you were to just air dry it?" I ask, clearly showing my ignorance on the subject.

"Yes, somewhat, but all the curls would be in all different directions, and the bottom parts over here would be especially tight, and the top would be somewhat frizzy."

"You look beautiful," I say, looking her up and down in her pencil skirt and her matching blazer and her white dress shirt that I had ironed while she was getting ready.

"I hope it doesn't get too wrinkled on the plane but I'm just not sure if I'll have the time to stop by the hotel first."

I can tell that she's nervous. It's the way that the tension settles in her face when she clenches her jaw at irregular intervals.

I pull her closer to me, tucking her hair behind her ear on one side.

"It's going to be okay," I say, putting my finger under her chin and lifting her head up to mine. "Everything's going to be fine."

She nods again, not fully convinced.

I press my lips to hers, kind of trying to make her believe what I believe.

"If this doesn't work out, I'll think of something else. Okay? I don't want you to feel any pressure."

She nods.

"It'd be nice to have a job though, right?"

She raises an eyebrow, and I laugh. Another joke that lands perfectly.

The complimentary hotel van gets us to the airport half an hour later.

Jacqueline's flight leaves a bit after mine, but she insists on coming with me, probably not wanting to be alone.

Our flights leave from the same terminal so we go through security at the same time. She walks me to my gate.

I'm going to have at least three hours of uninterrupted work on the flight itself, and that's more than plenty. I work fast, and I don't waste time, and I don't get distracted.

I hold Jacqueline's hand while we sit by the window and watch the planes pull away and drive down the runway. We talk about the weather and the world at large, a little bit of news, pop culture, nothing too serious.

"Do you think you're prepared?" I ask.

We have gone over some possible questions last night at the hotel. After a while, me quizzing her just made her more nervous.

I told her that it was going to be okay. She should just feel the conversation out and provide the answer that it requires. I told her to believe in herself because I have faith in her.

"You know, I really appreciate you being so supportive about everything," she says quietly, just as they start to call my gate for boarding.

"Of course. Now, I don't want you to feel any pressure about any of this. I meant what I said. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't work out."

"I just really want this to work, you know? You did this wonderful thing by helping my mother and I want to return the favor."

"It's not like that." I shake my head. "This has nothing to do with your mother. That was a gift to her. I was in a position to help, and I did."

Of course, I don't mention the fact that I now owe that money to my mom and a few other unsavory individuals. Or the fact that my mom expects me to

pay her by the end of the month. But that's the kind of thing I don't want Jacqueline to worry about.

"I love you," I say quietly into her ear as we get in line. "I love you very much. Please don't put any undue pressure on yourself with this. Just do your best, and that's enough for me."

She kisses me right there in front of everyone. When she pulls away, I half expect the sleepy crowd to explode into uproarious applause, but everyone just remains with their heads buried in their phones.

"Text me when you get there," she says.

"You, too," I say, knowing that my flight will be there before hers, and she'll be in the air unable to receive my messages.

But that doesn't matter; what matters is the sentiment.

"Everything's going to be okay, right?" Jacqueline asks one last time.

I nod with as much confidence as I can muster.

"It's going to be fine," I say, scanning the ticket on my phone and not really believing my own words.

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JACQUELINE

After I say goodbye to him at the gate, I walk around the airport trying to get the mist out of my eyes.

I miss him already and don't want to spend an hour away from him, let alone a couple of days. I've never felt this way before. There's this great sense of loss, and I have no idea where it's coming from.

I feel like a fool. It's ridiculous, actually.

I'm going to see him in just a few days. Or even if it's a week, why would that matter?

There's even a possibility that he may fly up from Salt Lake City to Seattle and show me some of the sights.

But even if that doesn't work out, who cares? And yet, that feeling, that nagging need to just be in Dante's company persists.

Finally, it's my turn to board the plane, and as soon as I find my seat, I open my laptop and try to focus on something other than this all important interview that I have in front of me.

I have already gone over the answers to all the possible questions I might be asked a million times. Dante has quizzed me, trying for the best type of wording, and even made a recording on my phone that I could listen to on the flight if I forget what to say.

It's not about the details of the job. It's nothing like that. It's more about

how I present myself, the words with which I tell the story. It's the entire performance, and that's what it's going to be.

When the flight attendant comes around to ask me what I would like to drink, she catches me by surprise.

I've never sat in first class before, but I follow along with the person next to me and request a hot tea with a lemon wedge. A few minutes later, she shows me how to pull out the little table on the side and places a porcelain cup along with a saucer, a teabag, and even a personal-sized bit of milk and sugar on the tray.

I feel like I'm the queen. Usually, flying on a plane involves sticking myself in the last row because the flight was booked late or too cheaply. The seats can't even recline.

The last time I flew anywhere, I had a terrible backache for nearly two days that no amount of Advil would cure. But flying first class? Well, this is an entirely different experience.

Dante had bought the ticket last minute and told me not to worry about it. I guess Vasko's people assumed that I'd be able to afford something like this, even if it weren't first class.

But it's just one of those other situations that would prevent anyone else from getting this position, at least anyone who didn't have independent means or family to support them if necessary. I could just imagine borrowing the money from my mom, or even from Allison, and then not getting the job, paying for a coach ticket of at least \$300, followed by a night at the hotel. Let's say it's even \$150. You're in for at least half a grand before you even have a chance to make a case for this position. Sometimes I feel like the deck is completely stacked against regular working people.

The flight goes a lot smoother and faster than I think it will, though occasionally my thoughts return to Dante. Usually, I'm able to push them aside and instead focus on something else to distract my attention.

I grab my iPad and open a book that I was in the middle of reading. This

is a family saga about a woman who has to come back home to Montauk and sell her grandmother's cottage. Her sisters arrive at the tip of Long Island as well, and they all have to come to terms with their past, their present, and whether or not they have space for one another in the future.

I used to hate family sagas when I was younger. You know, multi-generational stories, usually centered on women going through changes in their lives. But now I feel drawn to them. There's a romance centered on the main character, a rich guy from the Hamptons who sweeps her off her feet and she fights the whole time against it, not knowing exactly how rich he is or how dysfunctional his relationship is with his own family.

I love reading this story because it puts me back at Marguerite and Lincoln's home and the weeping willows and the misunderstood experiences and life choices.

I've had some space from Dante now to think about his family, and I realize just how complicated everything has been for him. He puts on a brave face, but he has a lot of issues. It's probably the main reason why he works so hard and puts in so many hours.

He's trying to simultaneously make up for the mistakes of the past and to forge a new identity in which he proves to the world that he's worthy of all the wealth that he stands to inherit. Even though Dante and I have gotten significantly closer over this period of time, I know that there's a darkness to him that I can't quite put my finger on.

I feel like he's keeping a secret, or maybe secrets. He has shared a lot, and with each revelation, like his gambling addiction, I feel like there are other things that he's not telling me.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that I don't trust him. I do.

I saw the way he hesitated and how uncomfortable he was with lying to Marguerite about Lincoln hooking up with Allison the night before, and I know that it's not something that he wants to do to me.

But still, I can't help but wonder, what is this secret that he's keeping from

me, and why?

When we land in Seattle, we penetrate a thick cover of clouds that doesn't disappear until we land and roll down the runway. I can barely see more than ten feet in front of my face, not even the tip of the wing, except for the light that blinks red.

I know that it gets rainy in Seattle and the fog can last six, eight months, but it's summertime and I thought that I'd have a beautiful view of the water and the city as we approached.

The pilot gets on the radio and says that it is sixty degrees and overcast, but we should expect the clouds to burn off in an hour or so. We also arrive forty minutes ahead of schedule.

I check the time when I finally leave the airport and see that I have a good two hours before the interview. It's long enough to get bored, but too long to wait in their lobby.

Luckily, the clouds have all but disappeared so I get a taxi to the hotel, do a quick wardrobe change into a sweatshirt and yoga pants, and go for a walk along the waterfront.

I texted Dante as soon as we arrived, but I still haven't heard back from him. I meander for almost two miles trying not to think about the interview before heading back. I get dressed back in my already worn dress clothes, which feel a lot more comfortable than they did this morning, reapply a bit of makeup, and arrive ten minutes ahead of schedule.

The receptionist up front checks my ID, calls upstairs, and then points to the double elevators behind her. On the ride up, I straighten my pencil skirt and stare at my expressionless face in the mirror behind me. My hair has a little bit more volume and my cheeks have a little bit more rouge in them, making me look more vibrant.

The doors make a dinging sound before they open, and I take one last breath in preparation and then plaster a wide smile on my face.

"You want to look friendly but not too eager, and definitely not

desperate." I hear Dante's voice in my head.

When my heart rate starts to speed up, I force myself to take a few yoga breaths, breathing in through my nose and breathing out through my mouth.

Everything's going to be fine, I say silently to myself. You are going to be fine.

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JACQUELINE

I make my hand into a fist, pressing my fingernails tightly into my palm but I put it behind my back slightly just so it is out of sight. As I walk through the entryway leading to Vasko's office, there's another receptionist up front and she asks me to sit in the chairs to wait, but as soon as she makes the phone call, a man appears wearing a T-shirt, slim cut suit pants, and covered in sweat.

He has a nicely toned body and he looks like he's just been working out. He introduces himself as Dillard Vasko. We shake hands and he invites me inside to a huge glass office. There's a couch at one end and a desk at the other. In the corner, there's a treadmill, explaining the sweatiness.

"Come in, come in." He waves me over. "Sorry about this."

Vasko pulls on his pale turquoise shirt and I watch the way the muscles in his body flex as he moves.

Why hadn't Dante mentioned how good looking he is?

Vasko's hair is cut short, he has a nice tan, and when he moves, picking up my resume off his minimalist desk that's shaped like an airplane wing, I can see how the muscles in his arms bulge and flex in a very attractive manner.

He motions to the plush fabric chair across from him as he sits down.

"Do you want anything to drink or eat?" he asks, pointing to the bar with

not just alcohol but a bowl full of apples, pears, and apricots in the corner.

I want to say no to everything, but my mouth is getting dry and I ask him for water just in case I start to cough.

"Of course." Vasko walks over, grabs a bottle and hands it to me, pouring himself some coffee into his stainless steel mug. "So tell me about your experience, Jacqueline. You had a glowing recommendation from your boss."

"Yes, I really enjoyed working there," I say, launching into my fake job position and rattling off all the facts about the startup that Dante had me memorize.

We talk a little bit about that before he asks me about my theory of organization. I don't exactly know what he means, but I turn the conversation to my approach to organization, sprinkling in some words from the job application to fill in the gaps. Through it all, I try to be as personable and attentive as possible.

"My main goal is to be the best assistant I can be," I say confidently, broadening my shoulders. "That's the only thing I want to do. I know that you have to spend all of your time making big decisions. I want to take as much off your plate as possible."

"Yes. Well, when you put it that way, how could I say no?" Vasko smiles. "Of course, I do have other people to interview."

I nod, avoiding biting my lower lip. I ask Vasko more about his business and he tells me about expanding his line of work from microprocessors to other computer components.

I don't lie about the fact that I don't know much about this, but that doesn't seem to concern him because my job is mainly focused on answering calls, getting him scheduled for meetings, and other types of work that aren't focused on hardware or software.

"So what do you like to do in your spare time, Jacqueline Archer?" he asks, leaning back in his chair.

My name sounds odd on his lips along with the fact that he says my last

name in addition to my first, but I let it go.

"Well, I like to write and read," I say carefully, treading around my background in journalism.

In fact, Dante thought it would be best if I didn't mention my master's in journalism at all and just my undergraduate work as an English literature major.

"You know, you'd probably find it hard to believe, but I was an English major, too," he says with a little bit of a smile. "I went to University of Washington. I guess I wasn't sure what I wanted to do afterward, but I was really into all of this exciting stuff going on with startups and computer science, so I pursued a master's degree in that."

"Computer science?" I ask. "Don't you need to have a whole bunch of math and computer science undergraduate courses for that?"

"Oh, no, just the business aspect of it. I got an MBA but with a focus on online entrepreneurship."

"Oh, got it," I say, suddenly realizing that I probably shouldn't have pressed him that hard for information. We have just met and some people wouldn't like that.

When he asks me about my family, I mention my mother and my life back in New York and he asks me why I decided to look for work all the way here.

"Well, frankly, because there are jobs available." I nod. "I've always wanted to start somewhere fresh and I read that Seattle was a wonderful city. I saw this job being advertised, so I thought, 'Why not?' You know? You only live once. You're only young once."

"Yeah, I like that." He nods.

The interview goes on for quite a while.

It gets a little bit more personal than I thought it would, but I figured that's probably a good thing. He's just trying to get to know me since I will be his assistant and would be working very close to him. Eventually, I get

enough courage to ask him about the treadmill.

"Oh, this thing is amazing." Vasko smiles. "You just get on, you can take your meetings on there, you can Zoom, answer emails, go on relay runs for five minutes then slow it back down. It keeps me active. In fact, we have a whole office downstairs where I'll be putting in a bunch of them for anyone who wants to use one. It's going to really help people be more productive."

"That sounds great," I say, nodding my head. "I've never actually heard of that, you know, but I can imagine it being healthier than just sitting in an office eight hours a day."

"Try more like ten or eleven, but you're right. As a society, we do spend a lot of time sitting and it's not for the best."

When the interview is finally over, we shake hands and he promises to be in touch and I believe him. Either way, I think we've made a connection and at least he should be able to let me know that he's going to go another direction.

I walk out with my head held high but as soon as I get into the elevator, I collapse against the wall, letting out a big sigh of relief.

It's over. It's finally over, I say silently to myself.

I haven't even started the job, but the anxiety of being this undercover person is already costing a toll.

I finish the rest of my water and throw the bottle into the recycling bin on my way out. Walking straight out of the office building and toward the marina, I lean over the edge and let the cool salty air toss my hair from side to side while I enjoy the sun filtering through the clouds.

"I did it," I say out loud, filling myself with pride. "I actually did it."

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JACQUELINE

After the interview, I feel emotionally spent. A sense of release overwhelms me. I know that I have done my best, whatever the outcome, but it's still hard to wrap my mind around it.

Suddenly, every muscle in my body relaxes and I can barely move. I walk back to the hotel room, immediately change out of my constricting clothes, put on the most comfortable pair of socks and the sweats, and I lie down on the bed, letting the soft comforter consume me like a warm and diaphanous cloud.

The anxiety that I had felt the whole day leading up to this moment starts to vanish, but something else replaces it. I grab a pack of M&M's out of the minibar, tearing into it and swallowing handfuls at once even though I'm not particularly hungry.

I'm greedy for whatever relief I can get.

I follow it up with a bag of pretzels and potato chips followed by the apple. I can't even imagine how expensive this bill is going to be, but I don't really care.

Climbing under the covers, I grab my phone and watch YouTube to pass the time, nothing in particular, just something to keep me company.

I have always reacted this way to stress.

I feel this energy building up until the moment. And even though it goes

generally well, afterward I feel like I can't get up or do anything for a day, except for maybe eat a whole bunch of junk food.

My flight home isn't until tomorrow afternoon, giving me some time to sightsee. I know that I should take advantage of it but I can't drag myself out of bed for another two hours.

When twilight starts to set, I give myself an ultimatum. You either go now or never.

Without bothering to change out of my sweats, I meander for a while along the marina. Dante and I have texted a bit, but he's having a busy day in Salt Lake City and we haven't had a chance to talk.

After talking to Mom, I call Allison. No one knows my real purpose of being here except for Dante. That's the whole point of being undercover, but I still need to talk to someone to make this low level of anxiety go away.

Allison answers on the second ring.

Her voice is upbeat and happy-go-lucky. That is until she hears me and I remind her of the fact that I'm in Seattle.

"You forgot?" I laugh. "How could you forget that I'm over here?"

"I don't know. I have my own life. So, the interview was today?"

"Yeah." I nod even though she can't see me.

"How did it go?"

"Actually pretty well, but then again, I'm not really sure if I'm a great judge of what makes for a good interview," I say, purposely being vague about the details. I do mention that it's a company that makes microprocessors and the job is for an administrative assistant.

"Why are you applying for this job again? I thought you wanted to be a journalist," she says after a long pause.

"Well, they're hiring and the pay is good," I lie.

We talk a little bit longer and I notice that Allison is in a particularly good mood. I fill her in on some aspects of the job and what it entails and she harps on the fact that if I get it, I won't live in New York and we won't be able to

hang out as much.

I promise her that there's a very slim chance of me actually getting it, but we will always be in touch no matter what.

"So how's everything with work? What have you been up to?" I ask.

I can feel her shrugging and I also have known her long enough to know that something's up.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I'm still in the Hamptons," Allison says.

"What are you talking about? How?"

"Richard and I have been kind of hanging out."

"What about your job?" I ask, shaking my head.

"Well, I took some time off. I had a bunch of days saved up and I don't know, I just want to see where this goes."

"Wow, you never take time off." I laugh. "You're just this Energizer bunny who works and works and works."

"I know, but I thought that it'd be good if I change some aspect of my personality."

"You mean for Richard?" I regret this as soon as I say it, but it's too late.

"No, I didn't say that," she snaps.

"How has it been?" I ask. "Do you like him?"

"Girl, I think I love him."

There's a long pause as I try to process that information.

Love.

My friend Allison has always been so easy-going and casual. Unable to commit, perhaps would be a better way of putting it, and here she is actually talking about love.

"Richard is just so fun, you know? And he's so easy to be with."

"Having a lot of money helps."

"No, that's not true. I've been with other guys, and maybe they weren't as rich, but they were more than comfortable and they were just so stressed out,

everything worried them. And with Richard, he's just so at ease with what he does, with who he is. It really just makes life much more easy-going, you know?"

"You're not going to quit your job, are you?" I ask. I hate how unkind and unsupportive I'm being but I can't help but be skeptical.

"No, not at all. Who do you think I am? I worked really hard to get where I am and I love what I do. I don't love everyone I work with, of course, but you know how that goes."

"So how much more time off are you taking?"

"I'm not so sure." She says. "I had a week. I'm almost at that, I have some more sick days, but I've got to go back to work. It's fine, I mean, I don't mind. It has just been so fun. I didn't realize this was a vacation that I needed until I actually took it."

We talk for a little while until she says she has to go and I ask her to stay in touch. We usually text once or twice a day, but now I have so much more that I have to know.

I wonder where all of this is going to go for her and Richard and I hope to God that he's real and he's not just here to hurt her feelings.

I see a Starbucks on the corner and the glow of the warm, almost candlelight atmosphere draws me in. Inside, planning to get some tea, I stand leaning over the display tray and marvel at all the different choices of desserts and baked goods that they have.

"Jacqueline?" someone asks.

I turn around, certain that they're making a mistake. I don't know anyone here. Well, except for the receptionist and Vasko. This voice belongs to someone else.

"Jacqueline Archer?"

He's standing a few feet away from me, separated by three other people but suddenly, I'm transported back in time to high school and to the one guy who made it bearable.

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JACQUELINE

"Noah?" I ask, saying his name to make sure that I have it right.
This can't be him! He's not the one who's standing before me.

It's my turn to order and I don't want to hold people up, so I place it with a sense of fluster and disorientation.

Everyone seems patient, but I kick myself for forgetting the muffin that I had wanted to get.

"What...what are you doing here?" I ask.

Noah is tall and broad shouldered with the kind of hairstyle that Brad Pitt had in the movie *Fury*; short on the sides and kind of long at the front.

He's fit and well put together and his skin is a little bit tanned despite the fact that this is the Pacific Northwest and under almost permanent cloud cover.

When he hugs me and pulls me close, I remember what he smelled like when we danced at prom. I don't know what the cologne is called but it's this undeniable Noah smell.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, looking him up and down. He's dressed in a loose pair of jeans and a hoodie with a satchel draped across his body.

"You mean in this coffee shop? Getting coffee." He flashes a smile and I melt a little.

"In Seattle," I clarify.

"I moved here about seven years ago." He looks straight at me with his piercing green eyes.

When Noah moves, I notice that he's not wearing a wedding ring. That could mean he's not married or just that he's not one to wear a ring. Wedding rings aren't really a requirement anymore, for men or women.

After ordering a black coffee and asking if I have a few minutes to chat, I nod and we grab a seat by the window.

Noah Robacheck and I have been friends since the ninth grade when his parents divorced and he and his mom moved to my school district. We were on the newspaper together and he helped me with math problems.

He was always good at that kind of thing. English was not his strong suit and I remember rewriting his papers in their entirety on a couple of occasions. It was easier to do that than to edit them to something good.

"So, how are you doing? How do you like living out here?" I ask.

"I like it a lot. It's not so formal like it is back home. No suits and ties required to have a proper job, so that's always appreciated."

"And what do you do for a living?" I ask.

"I do a lot of contract work, for Microsoft and a few other companies. I'm actually working on my own startup in my spare time, putting in a lot of hours."

"Cool," I nod, "that sounds interesting. What kind of startup?"

"Oh, it's a gaming app. I'll have to show it to you, it's kind of like Animal Crossing. I'll have to show it to you some time; it's pretty fun."

"I'd like that," I say, looking down at the floor.

"And you? Can't imagine you working in computers." He moves a little closer. My heart skips a beat.

"Hey, I love the internet as much as anyone else," I joke.

"Let me reiterate my statement. I can't imagine you *working* in computers."

I laugh. I tell him about finishing my master's degree and applying for a position here. "That's why I'm actually out here, flew out for a job interview."

"When do you hear back?"

"I don't know. So far, very few people have gotten back to me. So, I'm thinking... never?"

"Any of them would be lucky to have you," Noah says, focusing his eyes on mine.

From the way he says it, I can sense that there's something more going on or perhaps something more that he wants to be going on between us.

We talk a little bit about the past, glossing over the big thing that led to our falling out, for now anyway. Everything is very friendly, above board, on the up-and-up, just the way that it should be.

But my memories of that time have not diminished with the years.

I remember exactly what it was like and how I felt when he did what he did. But I try to keep things positive. I would be lying to say that it wasn't nice to see him.

We talk for a little while. Noah tells me that he lives right around the corner in a condo not too far away. I tell him how much I enjoyed seeing what little I saw of Seattle and he offers to show me around tomorrow morning before my flight.

I'm tempted to say no. That would be the easy answer but something stops me. Something about the past requires an answer and I need to know and perhaps letting him show me around will help.

"What are you doing tonight?" Noah asks out of the blue. "Let's grab some dinner."

"What about your work?"

"That can wait. I work so many hours, it would be nice to have a reason to take a break. There's a great seafood restaurant around here. Another that's vegetarian and Indian, whatever you want. Come on, I want to catch up for real."

WE MEET UP AN HOUR LATER, after I have a chance to change out of my sweats and into a pair of jeans and a nice top.

It's nothing flashy. It's nothing that says that I'm actually trying to impress anyone.

Despite all of the years that we haven't seen each other, I don't feel the need to try to impress Noah. I don't feel intimidated. I'm not trying to be this better version of myself that doesn't really exist.

He gave me the location of a place in the Queen Anne district and I give the driver the address. On the ride over, I look Noah up on social media. I check Facebook, Instagram, even TikTok. But I don't find any information.

That's why I was never able to find out what he was up to before.

That's why none of the friends that I had from high school knew either.

He just sort of vanished. We heard stories about him, of course.

Apparently, he was traveling the world, living out of a backpack, hiking and climbing mountains.

Usually, when you do those things, you post pictures and videos and share your experiences with family and friends back home, not Noah.

He never shared. He always kept things private.

Suddenly, I realize just how special it is that we found each other again.

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DANTE

I land in Salt Lake City and there's not a single cloud. The air is clear and easier to breathe, and out in the distance, the mountains scrape the sky. The sun beams down warm, but not at all oppressive. There's no humidity and my hair immediately starts to feel cleaner and nicer to the touch. My skin on the other hand feels a little dry and my mouth is practically parched.

I've never been to Salt Lake City and I'm here to meet with a startup company that makes a photo and video app for social media. I've received their initial proposal, gone through it, but I'm here to meet them and make sure that they're worthy of our investment.

The woman who meets me is personable and nice. She reminds me a lot of Marguerite, and I like her straightforward nature. I get to know her a little bit personally.

She tells me that she's the mother of three kids, and her husband works in the startup as well, but it's her idea and she's the CEO. She doesn't put on airs like a lot of people do, or try to impress me with their office.

In fact, what I find particularly curious is the fact that it's a pretty small space that doesn't seem to cost that much in rent. It's this kind of money saving approach, especially in a computer startup where every cent counts, that will go a long way in making them successful.

I am ready to recommend her for investment, even before our conversation is over. She knows all the numbers. She knows exactly how much they make, how much it costs to acquire a customer, their profit loss statements. The assessments for growth in the future are measured and based on reality and previous investments into advertising and marketing.

After the meeting, I take a stroll around the city, around the downtown area, and go to a restaurant that she had recommended.

After all of my years alone I've gotten used to eating in restaurants by myself, and in fact, I cherish it. It gives me a little bit of quiet time and I don't particularly enjoy talking while eating anyway.

I text with Jacqueline a little bit, going back and forth. Her interview seemed to have gone well. I plan on calling her when I'm done but for now I just want some time to think.

I have a decision to make. My brother's not making it easy and the end of the month is approaching quite quickly. I know that my mother will not let up, so I don't have much of a choice.

I have done these kinds of jobs with my brother many times before. They're always dangerous, and more than a little bit immoral, but it was a way to keep my gambling from getting out of control.

But what about now? Now I'd be doing it to pay off a debt that I took on for a very good reason.

I know that talking to my mother is useless. She won't take an explanation or anything as an option and I can't very well tell her what I'm going to do to get the money, because that's just not something that we can talk about.

After dinner I decide to go on a drive. I have a rental car and I feel like I need to get out of this place. I've always found it easy to relax behind the wheel. Put on some music, or maybe nothing at all, and just unwind.

I let my mind wander. I drive for a long time, twenty miles in one direction and twenty in another. I'm going nowhere in particular, but headed initially toward the mountains.

It's easy to lose your train of thought when you're driving and so I talk out loud to myself. I try to make sense of my choices.

I try to make sense of this thing I have inherited from my father.

Everyone thinks that he's a charming, fascinating man, the life of the party, a great writer, but besides the gambling, which is his not-so-secret secret, there's the actual secret that he keeps.

Lincoln and I are the only ones who know the truth.

When he told us what it is that he actually does for a living, I didn't believe it at first.

I didn't want to.

But he put us through a training program. It wasn't so much telling, but showing, and by the time we were done, it was too late.

We were in too deep.

Besides, we were stupid teenagers and we thought that something like that would be fun.

I PULL out the burner phone from my pocket. I got it before I came here. I paid for it in cash and its sole purpose is to give me directions to the site and then be disposed of after without a trace.

I drive down into a convoluted suburb of Salt Lake City, following various leafy streets toward the cul-de-sac, one of many, but one particular one. It's the middle of the day and the last place and time when something like this could or would happen. That is exactly the point.

I'm wearing a baseball hat and jogging attire. I park two streets over and I find the weapon underneath the front passenger seat, tucked tightly below, just where I expect it to be. This is a rental car, but this part has been arranged. Lincoln has always been good at the planning. It's when the execution of the plan gets involved that he tends to make mistakes.

That's my strong suit.

I tuck the gun into the back of my waistband. I'm wearing tight cycling shorts underneath my loose-fitting running shorts, all because weapons tend to fall out of loose waistbands.

I pull my loose-fitting T-shirt over it along with a hoodie to cover my face. The whole point is to come in and get out of the situation without anyone noticing, to be invisible.

The house is the gray one on the left side of the cul-de-sac. They're all very similar, except this one's got white trim around the windows. I double-check the address. Everything is a go.

This is the right location.

The next stop is to go to the back and make sure that the window is open.

If it's not, then I can still call this off. I could tell him that he had not done his job in planning the job. I'm half-hoping that's the case.

I need a way out.

I walk around the house, carefully looking over my shoulder to make sure no one is around. On the back porch, I see that the screen has already been removed.

It's not something that the homeowner would ever notice unless they were specifically looking for it. But who's looking for a down screen in a 3,000-square-foot house with more than fifteen windows?

I try the window next, again hoping that it's locked. It's not.

Lincoln really wants this to happen. I wish I had a way out, but I don't.

I am backed up into a corner and there are few options left.

I climb into the house, closing the window only slightly behind me.

I listen for the sound of the alarm, but it was deactivated a long time ago without the owners' knowledge.

I tiptoe quietly, making sure that I don't step on any creaking floorboards. My shoes have thin soles specifically made for gripping the road, but also ideal for breaking and entering.

As I head upstairs, I see the pictures of the family lining the wall. There are three kids, all various ages of teenage-hood, and a wife in a Chanel suit with a Tiffany's necklace, and the mark himself. He is tall, broad-shouldered, heavysset with the casual, relaxed smile of a person who has committed millions of dollars' worth of fraud.

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DANTE

I think about all of the pensions and the retirement savings that this guy stole as I walk up the stairs to try to convince myself that what I'm doing is actually fine. The truth is it's not.

I want him to go to prison. I want him to be tried and convicted and every last penny of his fraud repaid.

The problem is that he already closed up that company and opened up another one with a different name and a different shell and a different offshore account.

He's going to get away with it. I know this because I have been through the paperwork. I have seen the extent of his fraud.

Donald Delinsky is a liar and a thief and everything in this house is bought with money that didn't belong to him. The family has gone visiting the wife's sister at their lake house about two hours away. I made sure of this myself as well. There's no way that I would ever be here if anyone innocent would suffer. I don't know the extent of what his wife knows or doesn't know, but I know that the children deserve to have at least one parent around.

When I head upstairs, I find Delinsky in his office working with his headphones on. He has three monitors in front of him with a stock market ticker as if he ever tried to invest a dime the legitimate way. The problem is that he's much better at raising money for fraudulent schemes than he is at

making it through investing in stocks, options, or even futures.

The job is almost too easy.

He's sitting facing away from me riding his DeskCycle. He had purchased it a month ago. I saw it in the bank statements and he has been riding it religiously every day.

Just to be safe, I slip on the ski mask because I can't have the blood splatter getting on me. I approach him quietly from behind and put the gun to his head.

This is where I make the mistake.

I hesitate, briefly, but it's enough. He turns around, grabbing a weapon from underneath the table and shooting it in my general direction. I barely move out of the way. The bullet hits somewhere behind me, an inch or maybe less from where I used to be.

I discharge my weapon just in time to put him down. With my heart pounding out of my chest, I take a quick look around. My gun has a silencer on it, so the bullet would have been hard to hear.

But his didn't.

The discharge reverberates in my head like a loud firework. Suddenly, I become very concerned over the fact that his neighbors or anyone right outside his house could have heard us.

I hadn't expected him to have a gun or to be so quick in his response and that's Lincoln's fault. He should have known something as important as this.

But I've made a mistake, too. I shouldn't have hesitated.

I should have shot him in the back of the head while he was just sitting there instead of approaching closer and giving him a chance.

Whatever mistakes I made, I made because it has been two years since the last time I did this.

With my palms sweaty from anxiety and my chest starting to contract from the fear of getting caught, I know that I have to get out of here.

If his neighbors heard anything and made the call, the police will be here

soon. If I don't want to get caught, I have to get out of the house as quickly as possible.

I look at the gun laying on the floor where the dead Delinsky has dropped it and I wonder if I should take it with me. I hadn't touched it, but if I were to move it, then this would look like a hit, exactly what it was.

Perhaps the presence of this weapon could be to my advantage. Perhaps if I leave it here, then the authorities will think that someone has come here, maybe just to rob him, and there was a gunfight as a result. It wouldn't point in the direction of a contract killer in particular. That's all I need, just a little bit of a diversion.

Deciding to leave the gun, I run downstairs, my face still covered with the ski mask and my hands in gloves. I climb out of the window through which I came in, put the screen back on, and make it look like there was no breaking and entering at all.

That's what the cops always want to know: was there forced entry, or was this person invited in? This will make it seem like the person who did it was at least an acquaintance.

There's a trail in the wooded area running behind the house. As I head toward it, I pull off my ski mask and the gloves and tuck them into the front pocket of my sweatshirt, breaking into a casual jog, just like the kind someone would have who was just out here to exercise.

I run for a long time until I get out of the development, following the directions on my burner phone, covering almost three miles in order to get back to the car that's parked just a few blocks away.

I see no one, but I can't be sure who saw me.

My consolation is that at least no one stops me. And the cops? They never even show up.

JACQUELINE

It begins to pour as I take the cab to Queen Anne, an old historic neighborhood in Seattle that has lots of restored buildings by wealthy people who like doing that sort of thing. We're supposed to meet at an intimate French restaurant, and as I walk toward it, holding my umbrella tightly against my head, I remember Noah and I talking about going to Paris and Rome and eating in restaurants just like these tucked into little alleys and little cobblestone streets.

I wonder if this is why he picked this place in particular, and I wouldn't be surprised either way. Rain falls in sheets, and my whole back is soaked. When I come in, my feet are puddles. The host that's upfront takes my jacket to a cloak room, and I wish that I had worn something a little bit more elegant than this sweater. But it would probably feel too much like a date if I did.

Noah sits in the corner of the room, lit up only by a small candle on the clothed table.

"You look beautiful," he says, standing up as I approach.

I nod, feeling a little shy.

I don't want to be here. This feels just too intimate and private and not something I'm ready for, given the fact that I haven't told him that I'm with someone.

I've always had this problem of elevating men's expectations. Isn't it

ironic that it's easier to tell a potential date that you have a boyfriend than the fact that you're simply not interested and that somehow if another man claims you as property, you have a better reason to say that you're not interested than if you're simply, well, not interested?

A waiter comes around and asks for our wine choices and I secretly admit to Noah under my breath that I don't know much about wine. He orders a Cabernet for both of us and the waiter smiles and I realize that it's probably quite an expensive choice.

"So, how have you been? It's so nice to catch up," Noah says, leaning forward, closer to me.

The candle lights up his eyes and his hair falls slightly in his face in that sexy brooding way. Suddenly, the years that we have not seen each other hardly matter.

Still, I feel like something is gnawing at me.

"Are you seeing anyone?" I ask.

"No," he answers quickly, but not with any tinge of desperation.

Nothing about Noah's ever been desperate and that's what made him so exciting.

I wait for him to ask me back. This is my lead-in to talking about Dante, but he doesn't.

He just leaves me hanging.

"Tell me about your life," he says, even though we've already caught up somewhat earlier, I go into greater detail, this time touching on my mother's illness and my brother's death, but not yet bringing up the fact that I got the letter.

I don't know how to bring that up, and I don't want it to dominate the conversation.

"How about you? What have you been up to?" I ask.

He starts telling me about his travels. He had dropped out of Cornell his second year because he got bored and wanted to travel around the world.

"I've always been fascinated by the hobos who, you know, used to ride trains, live life out there on nothing but their wits and so, I wanted to do that. Maybe I read too much Jack Kerouac."

"Yeah, I'd say so." I laugh, secretly in awe. "So, did you ever end up riding any rails?"

"Yes. From Fargo, North Dakota, to Spokane. I have to tell you it wasn't as exciting as I thought it would be. And there was a lot of hiding from security, so not exactly like the '30s. But it was fun; hopping on, feeling the romance in the air."

"Are there a lot of cute girls to meet on the railroad tracks?" I joke and he smiles.

We've always had good banter.

"I hiked from the very Southern tip of California, right by the Mexican border all the way to Canada."

"Following the Pacific Crest Trail?" I ask.

"Yeah, kind of, but it wasn't really a planned thing. I veered off course quite a lot and it took more than five months, but had some great fun, met some awesome people."

"And what about work?" I ask.

"Well, I was a climbing guide, a hiking guide, surfing guide. I did a lot of guiding and then hitchhiked all the way to Alaska."

"You did?" I ask. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not as dangerous as you'd think. You're going mainly through Canada, and hitchhiking is pretty common there. It's true what they say about Canadians. They're a really friendly bunch. The lack of guns helps also."

I laugh.

Noah tells me about taking a cargo ship out to Hawaii and then backpacking through Europe for a summer.

Suddenly, I feel like I haven't lived that much at all. I've been so busy with my everyday life, going to school, trying to make a living.

I wonder if maybe I should've given myself more of a chance to have a little fun. We talk all through the salad course and then the entrees and we finish a bottle of wine before we start to reminisce about the past.

It's a delicate subject and it scares me a little thinking about it because despite all the fun that we had and all the ways that I thought that Noah understood me and cared about me, he'd also hurt me in a way that only your first true love who breaks your heart is capable of hurting you.

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DANTE

When I get back to the car, I call Lincoln immediately. I put the phone on a hands-free setting to make sure that no police officer has any cause to pull me over for any reason.

"It's done," I say. "Do you want me to send photographs?"

"No, I believe you. Besides, the clients will want the official confirmation from the police department and the news."

"Fine," I say, not at all surprised.

Photos can be easily faked, so can news reports and police statements, but those are harder to do.

"How are you doing?" Lincoln asks when I'm about to hang up.

I'm still using a burner phone and I'm going to get rid of it right after this phone call, so if I want to talk about this, this is really my only chance. The thing is this is the last thing I want to talk about.

"How are you feeling?" Lincoln asks.

I can feel the mild level of anxiety on the other end.

"Pissed off," I say. "I told you I was never going to do this again and yet, here we are."

"Listen, I didn't put you in this position. I wasn't the one that borrowed all that money from the trust fund."

"Yeah, but you have money and you could lend me some and I could pay

you back in some other way that isn't this."

"I don't know what to say except that I'm sorry, but I needed this done. Delinsky defrauded a few guys of \$20 million and it wasn't just some big fund. There were a bunch of people who invested all of their retirements with him. They lost everything. The thing is that he has it all in these offshore accounts, completely inaccessible. So there was no way to take them to court or do anything like that. You know that I'm telling you the truth, right?"

"Yeah," I say, "I do. I'm still not interested in doing any more of your dirty work."

I wait for him to say something else for a few moments but instead, he turns on FaceTime and I see him face-to-face.

His eyes are practically sparkling with excitement. I know that he likes to do this kind of shit. I know that he gets off on it.

This is the kind of stuff that he lives for.

"You're going to be a father," I say, disgusted with myself more than I ever thought would be possible.

"Exactly. Don't you just get sick of life sometimes? The same mundane sort of crap that just piles on and on, boring work, even more boring people. Don't you just get sick of it, don't you just want- ..."

"No."

"... some excitement? Something that makes you feel alive?"

"I have that. I have my life. I have my girlfriend, who I love. No, I don't feel like it's exciting to shoot some stranger. Yeah, maybe he's a bad guy, but I'm not the one who should be his judge and executioner. If anything, one of the guys that he defrauded should be the one to put a bullet in his head. That would probably make *them* feel a lot better. What I'm left with is a whole bunch of shit; all of this guilt, all of this disappointment."

"You think too much, Dante," Lincoln says. "This is what our dad taught us, okay? This is our family legacy."

"To be hitmen? Great, thanks," I say, my voice drenched in sarcasm but

he doesn't seem to get it.

"I'm good at planning and all the research. I mean, don't you just love the fact that you rented this car and bam, there was an unregistered, unmarked nine millimeter with a silencer right underneath the passenger seat? I mean, when we do this correctly, when we work together, it's like, we're making music, baby. It's like a dance. Don't you think?"

"You're a sociopath, Lincoln. I've told you that many times. You fucking terrify me."

"I terrify *you*?" he asks with a scoff, tossing his hair and shaking his head. "You have no idea what you're talking about. I've never picked up a gun. I've never actually shot anyone. You, you are the one doing all the killing. You are the one who will kill anyone for the right price."

"Fuck you," I say.

Just as I'm about to press the button to hang up on him, Lincoln opens his eyes, glaring into mine and he says, "Father wants to see us."

My world turns to black.

I HAVE a lot of problems with our father. The biggest issue I have besides the cheating and the womanizing and never being around for us as children is this terrible thing that he has passed down to my brother and me as a way to make a living.

It's this legacy of being hitmen that I found to be so alluring and dangerous and fun when I was younger and that's what I'm horrified and disgusted by now, especially since it's something that I'm unable to escape.

I've never talked about this before. I've thought about it plenty, but I've never really come right out and discussed it, not even with Lincoln.

I don't know how many hits I have to my name.

They were all genuinely bad men, mostly responsible for lots of murders,

mayhem, and destruction, but what does that make me, a good hit man?

Is there such a thing?

I've been toying with this idea for a long time.

It plagues me and it's something that I'm ashamed of, even though there are people like Lincoln who think that these deaths are justified.

What I hate most, however, is that it was our father who turned us on to it. He came back into our life and brought us over to the dark side.

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DANTE

"When will the money be paid?" I ask, changing the topic. "I don't want to talk about him."

Lincoln narrows his eyes. "Once there's confirmation, the money that you're owed will be wired to your account. Just like before."

"Good," I say. "Then I'm out."

"You always say that."

"This time I'm serious."

I feel my lower lip quivering. It's not that I'm not serious. I am. It's just that this line of work has a way of bringing me into darkness.

"You know, I've always been very good at research," Lincoln says, ignoring me. "Didn't you like the fact that I got his family out?"

"I wouldn't be there if they were there," I say.

"Yeah, but it was still kind of a great thing to do, wasn't it? Did you know that I tracked them and had a last-minute invitation to the lake house? A surprise birthday party? Of course, they'll find out that it was not a surprise at all when they find the body but hey, it worked, right?"

"You won't be tracked, will you?" I ask, knowing the answer.

Lincoln has a way of doing things online and keeping things secret that I can only dream of. He was always good with computers. He hacked into our elementary school system when he was seven and changed everyone's grades

with Gs just because he thought it would be funny. There are no G grades, of course, they only go down to F. The administration wasn't amused, but we were.

If he didn't have his issues with gambling, he'd be a multi-multimillionaire now. But the thing is that he lives life on the edge. He likes it that way. He likes to skirt the law or, in this case, break it completely.

"Did this really have to be done?" I ask. "I mean, this man, yes, he defrauded people but did he have to die?"

"For you to get paid? Yes," Lincoln says, furrowing his brows.

He takes a sip of something in a big mug. It's that cup of coffee that he nurses all day.

"I wasn't going to tell you this, but since you're having all of these second thoughts and issues with what you have to do, let me share a little bit more about Mr. Delinsky. He was in the witness protection program. That place he was living, the name he was using, everything was fake. In addition to defrauding people, he also killed a lot of bad people. That's what he used to do before he graduated to white-collar crimes. He was very, very good."

"That explains the weapon," I say out loud, even though I meant to say to it to myself.

"What weapon?"

"There was a little bit of a hiccup when I got there. I didn't shoot right away."

"You didn't? I told you that you had to. You had to get him before he turned around, before he knew you were even coming."

"Yes, but you didn't explain to me that he was an expert marksman. The bullet almost grazed me but luckily, it didn't collide."

"No blood was shed?" Lincoln asks, not so much worried about me, but more about possible DNA evidence that I might have left behind.

"No, I shot him after that. Left his gun on the floor, made it look like somebody got in the house that he knew, someone invited, and then things

didn't go well."

"Good, good. You almost gave me a heart attack there," Lincoln says.

There's a long pause, a lull in the conversation.

I tell him that I have to go.

"Aren't you going to ask me about it?" he asks.

"What?"

"About our father."

"I'm not interested in having anything to do with him," I say categorically and without any explanation.

"He wants to see us."

Lincoln leans over, bringing his face closer to the phone. It's frustrating how good looking he is. He probably missed out on an opportunity to be a movie star. He is very good at playing pretend, after all.

"He needs our help."

"I'm not interested," I say.

"It's not an option."

Lincoln pauses. I stare at him.

"What are you talking about?"

"I won't wire you the money unless you help Dad. He's in a lot of trouble and he needs us. I'll be in touch."

Lincoln hangs up the phone and I stare at the blank screen, taking a deep breath. I have no interest in helping our dad.

He's a liar and a jerk and a killer and an asshole. I hate him with every fiber of my being.

But I'm scared that Lincoln won't pay me the money that he owes me unless I do this. He has never made a threat like that before, and whatever kind of trouble our dad is in must be serious.

I head to a Walmart about twenty minutes from my hotel, driving on the back roads to throw away the burner phone after first taking out the SIM card. I toss each in different dumpsters after erasing all the data and wiping

off my fingerprints.

I feel like a fool, an idiot.

But what if this were an opportunity for something? Like getting back at my father and Lincoln at the same time?

It's a dangerous game to play but then again, it's a dangerous world.

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JACQUELINE

It would be a lie to say that Noah and I are not having a good time tonight. He tells me all about traveling around Europe and Central America.

He tells me about working on a yacht and transporting it with a crew from the Caribbean to the Mediterranean, as well as sailing around Thailand.

I ask him if he's ever been anywhere cold and he mentions the winter that he had spent living in the Yukon, just like Jack London trying to write short stories and the novel and giving up but drinking a lot at the local bars and dance halls instead.

"I've never stopped thinking about you," Noah says after ordering dessert. He leans over and moves the candle in between us, reaches over and takes my hand in his. "I've never stopped thinking about you and I was sorry that we couldn't go to all those places together."

I narrow my eyes.

I remember how much we'd talked about all of this travel that he did on his own and how we would do all of that together.

Even the fucking Yukon, going up there and living the life of Jack London was *my* idea, not his. It's like he stole everything from me and then lived my life instead.

I hate him, or rather I want to hate him. But when he leans closer to me

and intertwines his fingers with mine, I remember what it was like to kiss him. Suddenly, I miss being seventeen and in love with a crazy, dangerous maniac who made it seem like anything in the world was possible.

The cake arrives and I pull away from him, clenching my jaw.

"Before you take a bite of that," Noah says, leaning closer again, "I want to apologize."

I sit back in my chair and put my fork back down on the table.

"I shouldn't have done that."

I wait longer. I need him to actually apologize and say the words.

"I don't know what happened, and I could blame it on the booze and the beer," Noah adds.

"You could, but it wouldn't be wise," I say, being as serious as possible. When it comes to this, I demand an actual apology.

"I had such a good time with you at prom. Do you remember how much we danced and laughed?"

"Yes, I do. And then when we went to Macayla's house to keep the party going, I thought that maybe we would..."

My words trail off.

We had only made love once before that. It was rushed and not at all good. So after prom, in Macayla's large house with more than five bedrooms, I thought that we could have some privacy and some fun.

But then I saw Noah kissing Delia Evernacky in the hallway by the downstairs bathroom.

Their mouths were all over each other and even their legs were intertwined. They were both drunk, of course, but not so much that they didn't know what was going on.

"I want to tell you that I'm sorry about that night," he says quietly, looking away from me.

WHEN NOAH BRINGS IT UP, I don't want to talk about it. I can still feel the anger and the pain that I felt that night, the embarrassment.

I don't know how many people saw the two of them making out like that, but it was a lot more than just a casual kiss. I'm pretty certain that if I hadn't walked in on him, they would have taken to the bedroom and he would have forgotten all about me.

I want to enjoy this time with him and remember all the good days that we had, but he won't let up. He takes my hand in his and he insists on telling me what happened.

"We never talked about it," he says. "You left right after and you never returned any of my calls."

"Yes, I know." I nod. "What did you want to do, have a fight?"

"No, but I wanted a chance to explain."

"You didn't deserve a chance. It was our prom night. It was supposed to be this magical time for us. I wanted to spend it with you, and I don't want to hear about you having too many beers and just getting it on with some other girl. We're not together anymore, and you don't owe me anything."

"You're right about one thing. We're not together anymore, but I still owe you something; an apology. It was so stupid and dumb and impulsive. We were in the hallway, laughing, and then somehow we kissed. I could blame it on the alcohol, but that would just be an excuse. I'm sorry that I cheated on you, and I've thought about that night with a lot of regret for years. If that hadn't happened, we probably would still be together."

I shake my head and clench my jaw. I hate to admit it, but I have considered that to be a possibility as well.

"I made a mistake, and I know that it's been years, but I never stopped thinking about you."

I pull away from him.

Being here with him feels less like catching up and more like a date, and it can't be that. The waiter comes with the check, and he grabs it before I can

reach for it.

"Please let me do this," he says, and out of the corner of my eye, I see that he gives the waiter a 50% tip.

Noah has always been more than just a little bit generous.

"I shouldn't have taken you for granted," he says, leaning over the table again. "What we had was so special, and I never realized exactly how special it was. I was stupid. Everything was so easy between us. Don't you think?"

I nod a little, unwilling to show him exactly how much I agree with him.

"Remember everyone else around us would always get into these fights, and we never did? We got along so well. We had so much fun, and I don't know, I guess I was stupid, but I thought that the fun we had wasn't just about us. I thought that that's just what teenagers are like, and I took it for granted. I shouldn't have."

"Yeah, I remember the good times, too," I admit. "We laughed a lot."

Noah smiles. The candlelight plays in his eyes, and I swallow hard trying to push away the tears that are creeping up to my eyes.

Why did that have to happen?

Why did he have to kiss her?

We could have been *the* couple, the one that met in high school and stayed together ever since.

"I was angry with you," he says, sitting back in his chair.

I furrow my brow, uncertain as to what he's referring to. He doesn't explain. He picks up a fork, the clean one, and plays with one of the prongs.

"Why were you angry with me?" I take the bait.

"I didn't get into Dartmouth. I couldn't go there with you."

"Yeah, I know." I nod.

"And you got into Cornell and you didn't want to go there with me."

I nod, biting my lower lip.

"You remember how you told me right before prom that you'd made your final decision?"

"I visited Dartmouth, and I liked it more."

"I know you did, but what about *me*? Didn't I matter? Didn't you care about our relationship?"

"I couldn't just go to school where you wanted me to go to school."

"But we had a pact. We agreed that we would go to the same school because long distance relationships across schools, they don't work. We knew that going into it."

"But I really thought that you were going to get in." I nod.

"I did, too, but things happen. So I was really angry. It's not an excuse for anything, but I thought that you didn't care about our relationship as much as I did. You had a choice to go to my school and you chose not to, and so I thought that we were going to break up anyway. At least, I thought maybe that you wanted that."

I inhale suddenly and then exhale slowly.

"I don't know what you want me to say." I shrug. "It was fucked up. I know that. I just wanted to go to Dartmouth and I didn't really like Cornell, and I wanted to be with you, and I thought that they were close enough together that we could make it work."

"But you didn't say that to me," he says quietly. "You just kind of announced it. You announced that you were going to go there, and that was it. Your mind was made up. Do you know what it was like for me? How that made me feel? I thought that our relationship was over right there. I thought what's the point? Only one of us is really in this, and that wasn't you."

I feel the tension between us, and I tap my foot on the floor in a nervous fashion to try to make it go away, but it doesn't. It just escalates.

The walls start to feel like they're closing in, and I have to get out of here.

I stand up, grab my jacket and my purse, and walk out. He follows quickly, and catches up to me right outside the door.

"I'm sorry, okay?" I say. "I'm sorry that I did that, but you have to be sorry, too."

"I am. You have no idea." Noah takes a step closer to me. "I shouldn't have kissed her. I shouldn't have cheated on you. It was a fucked up thing to do, and it doesn't matter what you did or what you said to me beforehand. I know that was the nail in the coffin."

I gasp for air.

"I'm just trying to explain where I was coming from," Noah continues. "I was trying to tell you just how angry and upset I was, but I shouldn't have acted out. Instead, I should have just come forward and told you the truth about how I felt."

The rain is still falling in sheets, and I huddle next to him underneath an awning just out of direct hit. This is the last place I need to be, but being next to Noah brings up all of these memories I used to have of this person that I used to be, and just how much we loved each other and how much we thought that we would conquer the world together.

"No one I've ever been with has made me feel the way that you made me feel," Noah says, taking another step forward.

He's so close to me, I can practically feel his breath on my skin.

"I loved you so much, and I always will," he whispers.

Noah leans a little bit closer and looks down at my lips. I need to move, but my feet won't cooperate.

Everything in my body screams for me to get away, but I can't move.

This is Noah.

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JACQUELINE

I stand under the tarp shivering and he takes another step closer to me. Our eyes meet. It would be a lie to say that I didn't want him to kiss me. Noah looks at me in that way that he did all of those years ago and all we knew was each other.

I miss him and I want him but I take a step away. He takes one closer, lifts up my chin to his but I pull away again.

"No," I say.

"Why not?" Noah whispers.

The disappointment in his eyes is difficult to hide.

"I'm with someone. I have a boyfriend." I take another step away and now I'm outside the tarp, rain falling straight down, soaking me and chilling my bones.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," Noah says, swallowing hard.

He reaches for my hand and pulls me back underneath the tarp. "Come here. It's better underneath. You won't get so soaked."

"Too late," I say.

I pick up my phone and call an Uber. I need to get out of here as soon as possible. I can't deal with being here with him much longer.

I'm angry and disappointed and at the same time, I also know that he's right.

I'm angry at myself.

I should have explained.

I should have told him why I wanted to go to Dartmouth instead of just announcing it that way.

I'm not saying that he's not responsible for what he did. He is 100%.

It's just that life is full of these misunderstandings and miscommunications that lead to so many different eventualities.

Suddenly, I hate the fact that I didn't spend all of these years with him because of that one day.

"Let me help you get back to your hotel room. It's the least I can do," Noah offers.

"No," I say, wanting to leave him here now.

When the car arrives, I don't push him out.

"Look, I'm sorry about everything. I shouldn't have tried to do that," Noah says, turning toward me. "I just wanted to spend some time with you, get to know you again but I understand you're with someone. Nothing can happen."

"Yeah, that's right," I say straightening out my soaked jacket.

One part of me wants to get back to the hotel as soon as possible, but another one doesn't want this moment to go away.

We ride in the car in silence and he walks me to the inside lobby.

I keep turning around to bid him farewell but he's trying to buy some time to turn whatever has become of our relationship into something else.

"Look, I'm going to go up now and you can't come with me."

"Of course not." Noah shakes his head. "I'm just sorry that this evening turned out the way that it did."

"Sure, whatever," I mumble with a shrug.

"Look, I'm sorry if I pushed you, I did not mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I just wanted you to know that I've missed you and I never stopped thinking about you. And that night? I made the biggest mistake of my life."

Our eyes meet and I can tell that he's telling me the truth. I inhale slowly and exhale even slower.

I don't know what to say.

"I'm sorry that I didn't want to talk about it afterward," I say. "We probably should have talked about it, but you have no idea how much it hurt when I saw you kissing her that night. You...crushed me."

Sitting down on the plush chair in the corner by the bar, I shiver and rub my arms to try to stay warm.

There's still so much to say to Noah and there's so much more to talk about, but my teeth are starting to chatter and this conversation has to come to an end.

When my phone vibrates, I grab it out of my purse to turn it off, but the call isn't from Dante.

"Sergeant Mallory?" I ask.

"Jacqueline, sorry about the late call."

"What did you find out?"

"Well, we got the videos from the post office and we talked to the two postal workers, Melanie Forbrowski and Dale Hubert."

"And?"

"It wasn't a good lead," he says, clearing his throat.

"What do you mean? Don't you know who dropped off the letter?"

"We checked all the footage and went through it carefully with a forensics team. It is not clear who sent that letter. A few people are possible suspects, but there's no visual. We can't make out the face. We can't even make out the age range. It's possibly a man or a very frumpy and tall woman. As I just said, there is no evidence that we can go on."

Sergeant Mallory continues to try to explain, saying nothing of significance and I tune out. It doesn't make any sense.

Tears start to flow down my cheeks and my whole body begins to tremble. A few minutes later, I hang up, burying my face in my knees. Noah

drapes his arm over my shoulders.

"What's wrong? What happened?" He keeps asking.

I mumble something to explain, blabbering through the tears, explaining about the letter and my brother's death.

"It's going to be okay," Noah promises and it makes me feel a little better even though it's total bullshit.

With his arm over me, I feel a little warmer.

None of this makes any sense and the pain is unbearable.

When I lift up my head and wipe away some of the tears, Noah asks me to repeat the story again. I do in a little bit calmer manner, but when I get to what Sergeant Mallory just said, the tears begin to flow.

Noah pulls me close, holding me tightly and kissing the top of my head.

"It's going to be okay," he whispers in my ear over and over again.

The more he says it, the more I start to believe.

Maybe he's right.

Maybe it will be okay.

But what if it's not?

The thought makes me gasp for air and hyperventilate, but he pulls me closer and presses me against his body until my breathing returns to normal.

"Thank you," I mumble and pull away when I feel a little better.

Our eyes meet and suddenly the fact that he believes me, just believes that something bad happened to my brother, is enough.

"Thank you," I whisper and kiss his cheek, one cheek and then another.

And then...our lips graze one another's ever so slightly.

"Jacqueline," a deep voice behind me reverberates.

I turn to see who it is, my worst fears becoming confirmed.

It is Dante.

JACQUELINE

It takes me a moment to realize that it's actually Dante standing here looking at us.

How much has he seen?

How much has he witnessed? I have no idea.

The look on his face tells me that he had seen enough.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, knowing that I should go on the offensive so quickly.

"Why? Would you have gone upstairs with him if I didn't show up?"

I take a step away. The guilt overwhelms me, but I don't know how to make it better. It's like nothing makes sense.

"Nothing happened," I say.

"Yeah, nothing happened because I called you on it, because I showed up a couple hours too early. Hi, I'm Dante Langston, Jacqueline's boyfriend." Dante extends his hand in Noah's direction.

Noah takes a step forward and shakes it. "I'm Noah Robacheck. I'm a friend of Jacqueline's."

"An old friend?"

"An old boyfriend," Noah says, sticking a dagger in my heart.

I glare at him.

"Look, man, nothing happened." Noah takes another step toward Dante.

"Don't tell me that. I was here."

"You were spying on me?" I ask.

"I was watching you."

I force myself to take a deep breath.

"She just got some bad news from Sergeant Mallory about her brother."
Noah tries to explain.

"I was out there in the entrance for a while thinking that you're just friends, you're just comforting her but I can tell that it's much more than that, wasn't it, Jacqueline?"

"It's nothing like you think," I say, taking a step closer to him.

Dante is dressed in a suit, holding a carry-on bag. This is the work attire that he flew into Salt Lake City in not that long ago, but suddenly, it feels like a century has passed.

I need to make this better. I need to make up for what happened.

The problem is that I have no idea how.

"I'm going to go," Noah says, waving at me.

I give him a brief wave goodbye and wipe the rest of my tears off my cheeks. I'm still wet and cold and all I want to do is go upstairs and change out of these clothes but I don't know if Dante is going to follow me up there. I want to make this right.

"Look, I don't know what to say," I whisper. "I ran into him. He's an ex-boyfriend from high school and we were just reminiscing. Nothing happened. Then I got this call and he was comforting me. I told him about Michael and Sergeant Mallory, they couldn't find anything on the video tapes. They don't even know if it's a woman or man who delivered that letter. So, he just called and I was so upset and that's what you saw. All you saw was Noah comforting me."

"Don't tell me what I saw," he snaps.

I clench my jaw.

"I saw you kiss his cheek," he continues. "I saw the way your eyes

lingered on his. I saw you graze his lips. I saw all that, Jacqueline. All the intimacy, so don't tell me that it was nothing.”

I can't argue with this.

“You're drenched. He's holding you. You had every obstacle in your way against that kiss. Half an hour later, you would have been in bed with him.”

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. That's the thing about ex-boyfriends; they bring up all of those sweet, wonderful memories of your past."

I hate the way Dante's eyes narrow when he says that. He's trying to hurt me and it's working.

"You're right. All of those great memories of when he cheated on me. Yeah, I just can't wait to get back to that," I say sarcastically.

"He cheated on you?" Dante tilts his head almost in a robotic kind of fashion.

His neck extends forward toward me and I don't recognize the expression on his face. I don't even recognize him as a human being.

"That guy cheated on you and here you are twenty minutes later throwing away every wonderful thing that we have together. For what?"

"Nothing. I wasn't throwing away anything. He was just comforting me over Michael.”

“Don't you remember when we talked about trust? And how important it is that we trust each other. How important it is that we don't lie to one another given... how we met."

"I don't know what you want me to say." I gasp for air.

I hate every part of this.

I hate being here.

I hate standing before him, apologizing.

"We didn't even really kiss, Noah and I. Our lips touched a little, but that's it. He was helping me through a hard time."

"You know that you're lying, right?" Dante asks, taking a step away.

"You know that you're just justifying things that can't be justified. How would you feel if you were in my position, in my shoes? I show up here to surprise you, to show you Seattle, to thank you for going on the interview and this is how you repay me?"

"Fuck you," I say, throwing my finger in his face. "How about that? How about you just go fuck yourself?"

Something snaps, I grab my purse and I walk away from him, past the front desk and toward the elevators.

He tries to follow me, but the attendant asks for his ID card and room number and he doesn't have that.

"Jacqueline, wait!" Dante yells after me just as the doors close, but I don't open them again.

I'm pissed. I want him to go to hell.

When I get back to my room, I peel off my wet clothes and jump in the shower, crying for over half an hour. The hot water brings up my core temperature, but the tears feel hot against my skin as I get out.

I'm so angry with myself. I'm so angry with Dante first for coming here and surprising me, for invading my life, but also for catching me doing something so terrible.

What would I have done if he hadn't shown up?

How far would it have gone?

I want to believe that I would've pulled away, but it was hard enough to pull away from Noah before our lips touched.

Now, after that, if our mouths were on each other's? I don't know what would have happened.

I hate myself for even thinking about it. I hate myself for cheating because that's what it is.

There are all these fake definitions of cheating; oral sex doesn't count, only actual intercourse does.

But my definition is a lot simpler. Noah and I were being intimate, we

were flirting, we were only having fun in that romantic way.

It was so much more than reminiscing. I can deny it all I want, but I know the truth.

I know exactly what I was doing just like Dante does and that's why he was so angry and that's why he's so hurt because I shouldn't have done that. Our relationship is worth more and he's right.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and I bury my head in my knees.

Dante is right.

If he hadn't shown up, if he hadn't interrupted us, who knows how far it would have actually gone?

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DANTE

I show up in Seattle to surprise her. I get on the plane without making plans, but I know what hotel she's staying in.

I need to get out of Salt Lake City. I need to put this horrible thing that I've done behind me and get some clarity. I need to remember why I was doing any of this in the first place.

I arrive in Seattle in the evening, and I take a cab straight to her hotel. It's pouring, and I can't wait to take Jacqueline into my arms, kiss her, and love her, and maybe even ask her to marry me.

I've never felt this close to anyone before. I've never had such a connection. I know that what Jacqueline and I share is special.

It's worth holding onto these secrets. It's worth protecting all of this darkness.

I know that by being with her, the darkness will disappear, and finally, I'll be able to breathe.

I just have to give it some time. There's so much that I have not told her, and so much that she can never know, but I say to myself that it's all for the greater good. It's all to make our relationship work.

I walk through the double doors of the five-star hotel just across the way from Vasko's building. We haven't talked about how her interview went, but she did text saying that she had a good feeling about it.

I can't wait to take her into my arms and kiss her, and then climb into the shower and wash all of this darkness and death off of my hands, as if it were possible.

I head through the lobby, and then in the corner of the room, right across from the bar, I *see* them.

At first, the couple, and it takes me a little bit to recognize that it's actually Jacqueline and some guy.

Who is he? Why is he rubbing her back like that?

I stand by a column in the shadows just out of eyesight. I want to see what is really going on. This is so unexpected and out of the blue that I'm in a state of shock.

Jacqueline pulls up her head and the guy wraps his arms around her. He looks to be about her age, attractive, well off, judging from the clothes. His look is a bit more casual than what you see on guys in finance, so he must work in tech.

He holds her in that familiar way, and I know immediately that they're not strangers. He has held her before.

She buries her face in his shoulders, and he pats the back of her head. When she pulls away, he kisses the top of her head lightly, as a friend would.

I let out a little sigh of relief. Maybe that's all it is.

But then when their eyes meet, something changes, something clicks, and everything is different.

They're not just friends.

There's a lot more to it, and it breaks my heart.

I WATCH THEM. Their intimacy is hard to deny.

Who is this guy? And why is she with him?

Anger rushes through me. I take a few steps closer and then she pulls

away. I say something. She sees me.

My eyes narrow and hers widen. She bites her lower lip and she looks terrified.

She recoils from this man next to her who still has his arm around her shoulder. She walks up to me and she tries to make it seem like I didn't see what I saw but we both know the truth.

She tries to explain but the more she talks, the more I realize just how involved she is with him.

He doesn't walk away giving us time to speak so I turn away from her. She rushes after me, trying to make it right but all I want to know are the details.

Who is he?

Why is he here?

Why is everything suddenly so wrong?

Eventually Noah leaves and it's just the two of us in the lobby. We fight. She leaves and they stop me from following. I wait downstairs for a long time before she finally answers my calls, reluctantly inviting me upstairs.

I don't want to fight but I also don't want to leave mad.

I follow her up to her room and we sit on the edge of the bed, opposing one another with our backs to each other.

She had tried to make things right, still is trying but something is shifting within me. Something is changing and it's almost as if whatever forgiveness I was capable of earlier is getting further and further away.

"Maybe it's better this way," I say to myself in the silence, "maybe it's better if this is where we leave things."

I haven't been looking for a way out.

In fact, I came here wanting to ask her to marry me, but the truth is that I have my own secrets to keep and perhaps the only way that I can keep them is to just push her away.

"You don't understand," Jacqueline says, turning to face me.

Her voice is smooth as silk, calm. The tears are gone.

"Noah and I were in love and things went awry. He cheated on me and we never talked about it and we sort of let our relationship fall apart."

"So is that what you were doing? Making up?" I ask, immediately regretting that line. I shouldn't have let it slip, but I did.

"No, it's not that. I realize that I don't want him, I want *you*. He was just comforting me over the news that I got about Michael, but nothing was going to happen."

"Something already did," I say, turning to face her.

I straighten up my back and I unbutton one button on my jacket to let it fall apart in front of me.

She swallows hard and I see her lower lip trembling.

"I saw how intimate the two of you were. I saw how gentle he was and I saw that kiss."

"It wasn't a kiss," she cuts me off.

"It was a kiss. His lips grazed yours, yours slightly touched his, whatever you want to call. It was delicate and light but it was a kiss. And if I hadn't come in, it would have become something else."

"So, you're going to punish me for what *could* have happened that *didn't*?"

"No, I'm going to punish myself for walking in and breaking you two up," I say quietly.

I stare out in the distance.

She moves over closer, her body is right next to mine.

I can feel the heat emanating from her.

"You're just going to let me go?" she asks, looking both crushed and angry at the same time. "You're just going to push me away over what? Nothing. It was a tiny indiscretion, if you can even call it that and you're going to hold that against me. For taking solace in a friend and having him comfort me in my time of need?"

"You're telling me that you and Noah don't have feelings for each other?"

"I just ran into him. I haven't seen him or thought about him in years. Of course, I don't have feelings for him."

"You're telling me you didn't want to kiss him?"

"What does that matter?" Jacqueline says after a long pause. "You're holding something against me that I didn't even do and it's not fair."

She's right of course, more right than she can ever know.

The truth is that I hate this person that I've become. I did something good for her. I paid for her mother's treatment and in doing that, I was brought into a world that I'd done my best to get away from.

Darkness enveloped me and I had to do the unthinkable, something robotic. I had to take a man's life, something that I had promised myself I would never do again.

So yeah, maybe I am pushing her away.

Maybe I don't want her in my life because I don't want her to see this other part of me.

I need to protect her. I need her to believe that I'm still this wonderful person that I wanted her to know and not this dark force responsible for more death and destruction than she could ever know.

This is my way out.

I know this now.

I'm going to take it because I'd rather have her think that I'm a good person than to know the truth. I'd rather have her miss me for who she thinks I am than to have her be disappointed by the darkness that I've become.

Tears flow down her face and I know that she feels like something's wrong. I'm pushing her away and she knows it but she doesn't know why.

I walk away, out of the door and disappear down the street.

It's easier to cry when the weather outside matches what you're feeling on the inside. It's easier to cry when the rain collides with every fiber of your being. This way it's also easier to pretend that you didn't just lose the one

thing in your life that made any sense.

I walk for a while.

I walk until my feet start to feel soggy and tired and then I walk some more. I need space. I need this time to myself.

I came to Seattle to ask her to marry me, but I'm leaving the broken person that I have always been.

I don't deserve her.

Jacqueline deserves nothing but happiness and love and light and I know now, especially after what happened in Salt Lake City, that I'll never be able to provide that for her.

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JACQUELINE

The following morning, I wake up and I don't want to. My face is puffy, I'm exhausted. I haven't slept much, waking up practically every hour and thinking about everything that I did wrong.

Did this really happen? Did we really break up? I have so many regrets, and yet I have no idea what I can do about any of them.

The day is dreary, black almost. I want to get out of here as soon as possible but my flight is not until later tonight.

I have a few missed calls from Noah, but none from Dante. I am sure he is still mad and I need him to talk to me.

I begin to cry when I think about him wanting me gone.

He was so angry. I can tell that he was holding it all in, that his anger was bubbling somewhere inside him.

What does this mean? Does this mean that we're actually over?

I force myself to take a shower, but I can't bring myself to dry my hair. Instead, I just sit down on the edge of the bed and bury myself in my grief. I cry for a long time that morning. And when I stop, the darkness continues to envelop me. I have to make this right somehow.

But how? Was Dante right about everything? What would have happened with Noah if he hadn't walked in?

I don't know, but a part of me is also angry at Dante. He had no right to

just break up with me. There's so much more that we haven't discussed that we haven't talked about.

I thought that he would owe me that much, but I guess not. Tears start to well up in my eyes again, but this time I manage to hold them back.

I take a few deep breaths and pull out my makeup bag, trying to make it go away. When my phone goes off, I watch it ring a few times before I answer.

It's not Noah and it's not Dante and it's not my mother or Allison. The number is coming from Seattle. I don't want to answer but then I do. It turns out to be the receptionist from Vasko's office.

"Please hold for Mr. Vasko," she says in a somewhat robotic voice, and before I can even tell her to stop, he gets on.

"I would like to offer you the position. You were one of the best candidates we've ever had apply. And I wanted to give you the call myself, what do you think?"

"Oh, wow," I say, stunned. "Yes, of course. That would be wonderful."

"Great. I'll send over the employment package with all the details about the salary, benefits, that kind of thing. And if you have any questions whatsoever, just let me know."

The conversation is quick and straight to the point. It puts me a little bit off guard.

As soon as he hangs up, I have a pang of regret. Should I still take this position? What am I even doing here if Dante and I aren't together?

I have to call him. I have to talk to him. I dial his number and my hand shakes.

He doesn't respond. He lets it go to voice mail.

"Dante, it's me," I say, clearing my throat right after saying his name and immediately regretting it. "I just wanted to call you to tell you that I got the job with Vasko. I'm going to take it, okay? I still want to help. I still want to get to the bottom of what's going on regardless of what happened between us,

but I need to talk to you. I want to apologize.”

I wait for him to answer, but he doesn't.

“I love you,” I add, and then hang up.

This whole situation makes me feel like such a fool. There was nothing going on between Noah and me, except for a few bittersweet memories. Yet I can't help but sympathize with Dante.

I know what he saw or at least what he thinks he saw. That wasn't right. It wasn't right of me to do that. It was a mistake, a mistake that I wish more than anything that I could take back, but I'm not sure that I can.

I spend the day walking around Seattle. I visit the first Starbucks. I walk along the marina. I look out at the dark waters, the day's full of drizzle and rain, even though it's summertime. I realize that this is probably what it's like here all winter.

I keep waiting for Dante to call me back. But he doesn't.

I guess there's still so much that I don't know about him. That's the thing that scares me the most.

THE PERSON who does call is Noah. But I don't call him back. I also don't reply to his messages.

I listen to his voice mail while I grab lunch at the airport that afternoon.

“I'm really sorry about everything that happened,” Noah says in his voice mail. “I didn't mean to push you. I'm sorry that your boyfriend saw that. I hope that everything works out and I'll never contact you again...if that's what you want.”

I stare at the phone and I wonder what it is that I do want. It seemed so clear before I got here; I wanted to be with Dante. I still do.

But what happens if he doesn't want me?

The truth is that we don't really know each other that well. We've met

each other's families and talked about some previous relationships.

I can tell that there are secrets that he's keeping, or maybe just stuff that he isn't sharing. I wonder what all of those secrets are and how long he's been keeping them.

But for now, I just want to make amends.

I want him back in my life and maybe staying here and working in Seattle will go a long way to helping me make things right.

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DANTE

I don't want to be here. I don't know how I found myself in this space, in this bar in Midtown Manhattan waiting for the arrival of my brother and my long-lost father, but here we are.

I order a scotch to ease my worries. It's not so much worries as agitation and disappointment and anger all mixed up into one thing.

It's a fancy enough place, tall ceilings, nice wooden bar top, clients dressed in suits and ties, white tablecloths in the dining area. The bartender is a friendly woman with a no-nonsense attitude in her late thirties. Her hair is pulled up and her shirt is buttoned up, and you can tell that the owners encourage a more professional look to get tips from the wealthy patrons. A drink here costs over \$18, and that's for a simple cocktail. If you want something more fancy like an aged scotch, it's going to run you a hefty amount.

It's funny about rich people, but money doesn't seem to be a bother unless it is. The three of us are all here because to some degree, we are strapped for cash. Lincoln needs to make up for the money in the trust fund. I need him to pay me what's owed to me for doing him a favor. And Dad, well, Dad always needs money. He didn't come from wealth, he married well, but money has always been an issue.

The thing is, that when wealthy people need money, they need an amount

that you can't exactly get by saving and skimping on \$18 cocktails or even thousand-dollar suits. It has to be a big grand gesture. And I guess that's why we're here.

I arrive early, but then head to the restroom to give myself a little bit of a pep talk. I haven't seen my father in years, and I've been angry at him for much longer. I thought Lincoln felt the same way, but now I wonder if he has been maintaining a relationship with him all along and just keeping it a secret. My family has a lot of secrets, and that's putting it lightly. We all appear to be so close on the surface, but I wonder how much of that is actually true.

When I come out, I see Lincoln and our father sitting at a table in front of a big glass window. There are no dark brooding corners in this bar. This is the kind of place where you have a three martini lunch when you try to close a client. This is the kind of place in the open, no matter how dark and devious they may be, so I have to be cautious.

As soon as I finished my drink, it occurred to me that this might be a set-up. And by set-up, I mean the one where the cops or the FBI get involved and record you talking about something that you shouldn't be. If anyone brings up anything that happened in Salt Lake City, I'm just going to pretend that I have no idea what they're talking about. This one thing, I'm certain of. As far as anything else goes, I'm not sure what this whole meeting is about.

I straighten my jacket before I turn the corner and take a deep breath, putting a light, casual smile on my face and pushing away all thoughts of Jacqueline and everything that has happened between us. I want to say that Salt Lake City is a blur, but it's anything but that. In fact, it's all I can think about. Seeing Lincoln again and then seeing our father, the man who introduced me to that life, to this other way of being in the world where it makes it okay to take someone's life just because someone hired you to do that, well, that's difficult to deal with.

My father sits across from Lincoln on one side of the window dressed in

an immaculate pinstriped suit that gives him an almost whimsical kind of air of arrogance and charm. His hair has grown out a little bit over the years and has a nice salt and pepper-gray tone to it, bringing out the blueness of his eyes and the tan of his skin. From afar, I can tell you why everyone likes him. Not only is he easy on the eyes and generous with his money, he also has this ability to put you at ease, no matter where you are or why you're here.

"Hello there," I say, walking up to them.

I SIT across from him and the memories of everything that he's ever done and all the hatred that I feel for him come flooding back. On the outside, I'm calm and steady, friendly even.

We embrace. I give him a warm hug and I smile at him, the same distant but pleasant smile that I have seen my whole life. He's the kind of person you enjoy being with when you don't know anything about him. He's the kind of person who is good to have dinner with, maybe go out on the town with. He's great at a dinner party, fast with a joke, even faster with a putdown. But as far as father material, he's not the best.

I glance over at Lincoln, and even though he's trying to relax, I can sense the tension in his body. He needs this to go well. I still don't know the terms and the rules that are involved. I don't know why we're meeting with him, and I don't know the point of any of this. My brother has kept it a secret.

"It's nice to see you," Dad says, adjusting his collar just a little bit.

It hardly matters whether he wears a suit, black tie, tails, or anything else because he always looks comfortable and completely at ease in every single thing.

I take a seat across from him and order a scotch on the rocks. Dad nods approvingly.

"How have you been?" he asks. "You look great."

"Thank you. You do, too."

The gray hair, the little bit of crow's feet around his eyes, it's all just adding to his charm. He looks like he just walked out of *Men's Vogue*, like someone without a worry in the world.

But I know the truth. Not so much about how much he worries, but about everything else. I don't know why we meet here. This is the last place that we can talk about the truth. I tell him a little bit about my life, about my job, and he asks me what it's like to evaluate companies for investment.

"Well, Dad, it's pretty much like evaluating people. You have to look at their financials. You have to see if they're telling you the truth. Everyone elaborates, but it's about how they elaborate, what lies they tell, because not all lies are the same, right?" I tilt my head.

We're dancing around this topic that we shouldn't talk about, and that's okay. Actually, I kind of prefer the dance, especially since it's making Lincoln squirm.

Dad asks about Marguerite and the baby and acts excited to be a grandfather. I wonder how much, if anything, is true. After all of this time, I find it hard to believe anything that he's saying.

We have a couple of drinks, but when the waiter comes around with a menu, Lincoln suggests that we order some room service instead. We all know that we can't talk about what we really came here to talk about here. It's not that there may be too many people listening.

It's that there's no way to control the situation. In a room, you can check for bugs. If you go on a walk, you can keep moving, and that makes it hard for a microphone to pick up what you're saying, unless someone is wearing a wire.

"I rented a suite not far from here, just right across the street," Lincoln says. "I've had it swept for any listening devices, but you're both welcome to check again."

He says the last bit under his breath. Dad and I exchange looks. This is an

unusual family that I find myself in. It's not everyone that gets together and first does a sweep for anyone else that could be listening.

Lincoln wasn't lying when he said that the hotel was close. It's right around the corner, and none of us bother with getting our cars.

We don't say much on the walk over or even the elevator ride, and as soon as we get to the hotel room, or rather, the one-bedroom suite overlooking Central Park, we immediately get to work.

Dad and I initiate the check for any listening devices, but Lincoln participates. I check the lamps and the beds and the couch. He checks the soft furniture and the walls.

We're thorough. We even go through the bathroom. Parabolic microphones nowadays can pick up sound from very far away, and when we're satisfied that we haven't found any active listening devices in the room, we turn to face one another, probably wondering who is going to be the first one to tell the others to take off their shirts. This is the last piece in the process. This is where we check that no one is wired and no one is talking to the feds, or the police, or anyone else.

"Let's just get this over with," Dad says, and starts to unbutton his shirt.

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JACQUELINE

I arrive in Seattle on a perfectly sunny day and I'm certain that the decision that I have made to take this position is a good one. After going back home, I met with Allison and debated over and over again as to whether or not this is something that I should do.

I haven't heard back from Dante, and I doubted that I would, but I needed a job and I wanted to show him how sorry I was. And none of this had anything to do with Noah. I made a promise to myself that even though I'll be single and living back in the city, I won't meet up with him again. What happened at that hotel wasn't right and I shouldn't have kissed him or even approximated anything like kissing.

I have a little bit of money saved up and Allison gives me a small loan to get a studio apartment not too far from work. It doesn't require two months security, but as soon as I move in, I know why. The walls are peeling and haven't been painted in years. The heater is a little iffy and it's stifling hot on a day that barely breaks eighty-five outside.

It doesn't matter, I say to myself. I'm going to force myself to live here and I'm going to put up with all of it to try to find out what happened and find out more about Vasko and his enterprise.

My first day at work is uneventful. Everyone seems nice enough and I don't, in fact, even see Vasko because he's out of town. They set me up in a

cubicle right above a vent that spews out cold air and a woman in an oversized sweater and fake curls shows me how to answer calls and the computer system. She's quite a bit older than I am, but we get along. I like her vibe. She has a teenage son and a husband who works in the biology department at the University of Washington.

For lunch, I bring in a tuna sandwich and she grabs a large salad out of the fridge with her name prominently displayed on top. I ask her what she thinks about working here and she tells me that it's a good job and not overly demanding. She's worked at other places where they kept you late without paying you anything extra, and she didn't appreciate that much.

The rest of the week proceeds pretty much the same way, with Vasko finally showing up on Friday. He goes straight to his office and calls a meeting to update everybody on a new sales angle that we're all going to be pitching to possible investors. Given the fact that the company sells microprocessors, I find it a little bit unusual that there's such a push to bring in new investors.

Shouldn't we primarily get work from the sales department? But, of course, I keep all of these thoughts to myself.

Friday afternoon, just as I get into my post-lunch slump with few calls coming in and little to do at my desk, Vasko sees me in the hallway and calls me into his office.

"How are you adjusting? How's your first week going?"

"It's great," I say, following him in.

He closes the door behind me and shows me to the leather couch facing the big floor-to-ceiling window and the beautiful skyline outside.

"Everyone has been really friendly and nice and I think I'm really going to enjoy my work here."

"You know, I did a little bit of checking up on you," he says with a smile. I swallow hard. "You hadn't mentioned the fact that you finished your master's degree in journalism on your resume."

The lump in the back of my throat gets bigger. I'm not sure what to say. I bite my lower lip and then stare at him.

The last thing that I expected us to do is for him to catch me in a lie.

I feel lost and discontent. I have to play a game now, a game that I must win.

I sit across from him on the couch. Our eyes meet. I straighten and broaden my shoulders.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," I say quietly. "I had applied for a number of other positions and it seemed to be more of a negative than a positive, especially if the company wasn't necessarily in the news business. So I thought that I would just keep it to myself."

My eyes meet his, and he licks his lips, waiting for me to explain further.

I'm glad that my hair is pulled out of my face in a tight bun. I feel more in control... this way. My clothes are tight, as well, professional. Not at all hip-hugging, but not loose and casual, the way that I usually like them. Normally, I live in my sweats, that's if I can help it, and change into them as soon as I get home from work. It's almost as if I can't relax until I'm swimming in my clothes.

Vasko sits back. He's dressed in a casual suit, loose-fitting pants, and a shirt with a loosened tie. He looks like a weary salesperson who has made way too many calls, not his usual, perfectly-tailored and put-together type self.

I look a little closer and notice something else. He's tired now, something else I haven't seen.

He sits back on the couch, spreading his legs and his arms out in different directions. "So tell me something else about yourself, something true this time." He narrows his eyes and I hold my breath.

"As I said, this wasn't a journalism job, so the master's degree could only be something that could hurt me. I mean, who wants a secretary with a graduate degree, right?"

"You said that already." He takes a sip of his coffee. "Now, unless you want to get fired, I want you to tell me something *true*. Why are you here?"

My heart skips a beat, and my breath gets lodged in the back of my throat.

"Would you like me to leave?"

"No, I want you to tell me the truth."

"I'm not sure what else I can say, besides what I already told you. That's why I kept that out of my resume. Everything else is true."

"So your dream is to be... an administrative assistant? For this company?"

"It's not just an administrative assistant position, right? I mean, I'd be working directly under you."

"Yes. So what?"

"Well, that's something that I'm interested in learning about."

"What, exactly?"

I hesitate, trying to think of just the right thing to say.

"I want to start a company of my own one day. Not microprocessing, but something new that I will need to get investors for. I thought that taking this job would help me figure out how to get an angel investor."

"How do you know that I'm working with angel investors?"

"I looked it up online. I saw your profile under Minerva & Fields, the company that other startups have to apply to in order to be featured for angel investing. I know that you want to grow this company into something special, something big, and I want to help you. I want to learn the ins and outs of everything. That's why I'm here. That's why I applied."

"What about your journalism degree?"

"That's when I realized that I want to start a company myself, focusing on news, journalism, think pieces, investigative kind of stuff. But, nowadays, you need startup investors for just about anything, and so I thought that it could be a good project for Silicon Valley."

"I see."

He takes another sip of his coffee, looking up at the ceiling, with its

intricate modernist design.

There are ninety-degree angles everywhere. Not one thing in his office makes me feel comfortable or at ease, but on the surface, I know that I belong.

"Okay, I appreciate you telling the truth," Vasko says. After the quick inhale, he stands up. "I'll be in touch."

I nod.

"I'm working late tonight. I expect you to stay, as well."

I nod, suddenly feeling a little bit uneasy. I guess he sensed that.

"You did say that you want to learn about how I run this company. Well, I'm going to have a phone call with our investors later on this afternoon, after happy hour. If you want to find out more, and you want to help me with anything, be there. If you don't, you're free to leave. No hard feelings."

"I'll be there." I nod and walk out, thankful for the fact that I'm wearing a jacket, because otherwise, all of my sweat would be completely visible.

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JACQUELINE

The following week proceeds just like the one before. I talk to my mom. She's recovering and making new friends and as chipper as ever. Work keeps me busy. The hours that Vasko puts in are long and treacherous. Most of the time, I have lunch by myself in the library across the street, just to be somewhere quiet, alone with my thoughts and my food.

I've never liked having lunch with others. I always found it a little bit distracting and difficult to focus on.

On this particular lunch break, the following Thursday afternoon, I get a call from Allison. She's still in a full-fledged love affair with her Hamptons boyfriend, Richard. She couldn't be happier. She has started slacking off from work, but when he asked her to move in with him, she has practically given it up altogether.

"So do you still work there or not?" I ask.

"Well, I think I'm just going to find another place to work."

"What are you talking about?" I ask while we FaceTime.

I have to leave my nook in the library and head outside, because the librarian has hushed me more than a few times already this week. Luckily, it's not raining, and the weather is only slightly overcast, but still relatively warm.

"You worked so hard to get that job. You're just going to give it all up, for some guy?"

"No, I didn't say that," she says, chomping down on a hamburger right in front of me.

I have only brought a salad, and I'm going to try my hardest to not eat anything for three hours after lunch.

Ever since Dante and I broke up, I have avoided the scale, and then stepped on it last week and discovered that I had managed to gain twelve pounds.

I'm horrified, terrified is more like it. I had about twenty pounds to lose to be at a comfortable weight before, but now I'm well over that. I hate the way I feel, and I know that I should love my body, no matter what, and I do, because I'm healthy and everything works just as it should. But I just hate myself for all the snacking that I can't bring myself to stop doing.

"You look nice today," Allison says, taking another bite.

"Look, you know I've had trouble at work for a while. My boss is insufferable. I'm way underpaid for the amount of work that I do, and Richard, well, he's a multi-multi-multimillionaire. And so he doesn't really understand why I should do a job that I don't want to do. If he could just write me a check for everything that I make in a year and call it a day."

"I know that's tempting, but you have to realize that that way, you're going to be at his beck and call."

"But I want to be there. I love him."

"I know, but what's going to happen in another year? What happens if you break up? You're just going to be dependent on him for money."

"I know. That's why I'm going to look for a job. I put in my two weeks notice and I'm going to resign and try to find something better in marketing."

"In town?" I ask skeptically, raising one eyebrow. "That's very unlikely. You know that as much as I do. That's one of the best places to work. And the reason why you have to work all this out is because it's such a prestigious

position. After that, you can do anything. Hell, the person before you worked on the team for one of the Super Bowl ads."

"Yeah, I know." She bites the inside of her cheek. "But the thing is that advertising is not... all I thought it would be. I guess I watched too many movies from the eighties and nineties and... you remember how everyone used to work in advertising?"

"I do. And all the journalists somehow could afford all of those spacious two-bedroom apartments in New York. That's just movies. It's not reality. And I know that you have this fabulous love affair, but he doesn't exactly have the best track record."

"I'm in the longest relationship he's ever been in," she says.

I shake my head.

"It's not good, Allison. I know you feel for him and you love him, but I want you to watch out for yourself. Women get fucked over with this all the time. You need to... get another job. Needs to be something career focused. You can't just be in the Hamptons and put everything in your life on hold for him. What if it doesn't work out?"

She crinkles her eyebrows and I realize that I've gone too far.

"What about you? You're a secretary in Seattle, for a microprocessing firm. What the hell are you doing there? You have a master's degree in journalism."

Allison's words hit me like a punch to the gut. She's right, of course.

"This isn't what it seems," I say, and I immediately regret it. I have to keep this a secret, but at the same time, I have to talk to someone. "I'm doing this for Dante," I add quietly.

"You're doing it for Dante?" She leans closer to the screen. "What are you talking about?"

"We broke up. He arranged for me to get this position. I needed a job."

"You don't need a paying job. I mean, is it paying you over six figures or something?"

"No." I shake my head.

"Okay. If I tell you this, you have to promise not to say a word."

She nods enthusiastically. Putting the phone down for a second, face up, she places a rubber band into her mouth, collects her hair on top of her head, and ties it into a high ponytail.

"Okay, so Dante worked for this company where he represents a lot of investors," I begin. "He represents angel investors and meets with companies to see if they're worth investing in. When he did the interview with the guy I'm working with now, Vasko, and looked at their financials, Dante didn't want to invest a penny. But his boss practically insisted on it. He had no choice. So he got this idea that he could try to get me a job with the company working directly under the CEO, as the administrative assistant, to try to find some dirt on what they're really up to."

"So, you applied? Got the job?"

"Yeah, I did. That's why I'm here."

"Why did you take it after you broke up?"

"Because... I don't know. It just seemed like a nice thing to do. Besides, it's not like I had any other positions out there. The pay is pretty good. I have a cheap apartment that's crappy and smells, but I'm saving a lot of money. So, for the first time ever, I actually have savings, and I'm doing this undercover journalistic thing and I'm able to find out what he's really up to then write an article, submit it to all the big newspapers, news magazines out there. This is my chance."

"You'll get a story, and a way to get back Dante, of course." Her statement catches me by surprise. And I look away knowing that she's telling me the truth. "See? You're just like me."

"But Dante and I aren't together, okay? This is just going to make sense for me. I can apply for other work... In half a year. If this turns out to be nothing, or when I'm done with this. What about you? You just give up your position and you don't try to find something else right away. They're going to

have questions for you."

"Who?" she asks.

"Human Resources. They're going to want to know what you did for half a year, or a year. Hanging out in your boyfriend's beach house is not going to be a good answer."

"Okay, okay. I'll think about it," Allison caves.

"Please do." I nod.

My phone rings. When I look at the screen, I see that it's Sergeant Mallory. "I have to go. I have to take this call," I say and click Accept.

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DANTE

After checking thoroughly for bugs, any listening devices whatsoever, we get undressed in front of each other to show that we are completely clean. This is the only way to do it. Anyone else in our situation would probably shy away from this step, but you either do this or you forever have doubts and you keep everything to yourself.

Lincoln has a six pack that makes me a little bit jealous because I've been playing into a few too many potato chips recently, but it is really my father's body that takes me by surprise. I haven't seen him shirtless for years, not since I was a child, but his body looks like it belongs to a man who is twenty years younger.

There's something else that catches my eye: the scars around his lower stomach are so fresh. It's almost as if he had recently been stabbed.

After we get re-dressed, Dad immediately goes to the minibar to pour us all three glasses of scotch, without bothering to ask if we want anything else.

I remember there was a similar situation all those years ago when I was fourteen, when he took us boating and fishing out in Chesapeake Bay. He talked about life a lot on that trip and many years later when I found out what it was that he really did for a living, I thought back to that boat trip.

He took us on that boat trip because he didn't think he would make it through the weekend and that's probably why we're here now as well.

"Well, you boys look good," Dad says, raising his scotch on the rocks and taking a big generous gulp.

He poured my first drink on that boat. Same similar size tumbler, similar lavish amount of scotch, way too much for a teenager. But I guess if you're a father and you think this is going to be the last time you ever have a drink, you want to be able to have it with your sons, doesn't matter how old they are.

There's a couch across from the huge television and two swivel chairs on either side framing the coffee table. Dad takes the couch, Lincoln and I position ourselves across from each other and the chairs. When I sit on mine, I practically melt into it. It's so soft and rubbery, not at all as exclusive and fabulous as it seems on the outside.

Dad flips on the Discovery Channel and a nature show about bugs is on. This is a rarity since that has become something of a reality freak show. My dad has always liked the natural world, observing it from afar, not having pets in real life. No, that would be too personal and that would make him too involved with someone other than himself.

We drink in silence, and our eyes meet and then separate in that casual kind of way.

"I need your help, boys," Dad says, putting the tumbler down on a coaster and spreading his arms out wide on the back of the couch.

"With what?" Lincoln prompts him. I keep my mouth shut. I have no interest in this.

"I've already done my bid, I've already killed a lot more people than I've ever thought that I would. I'm not taking any more lives," I say just as he opens his mouth.

Dad's eyes meet mine.

"But you're so good at it."

"I'm tired of being a hitman. There's more to my life than that. Constantly hiding, pretending to live this other life, no, I'm done. I did the last job and

Lincoln owes me the money that he promised me. I don't even know what the fuck I'm doing here," I say, almost rising to my feet.

"Relax," Dad stops me, using his casual charming voice. "This isn't a hit, this is something else."

Lincoln moves closer. I can tell that he's intrigued. His life in the suburbs has gotten a little bit too boring and he needs a distraction.

Lincoln likes to play with fire. I think he needs to get back to his wife and think, and kiss her feet for being the wonderful woman that she is and pray to God that she never finds out about any of his indiscretions, his sexual ones being the least of his concerns.

"There's a rare book that I need and the two of you are just the kind of experienced thieves who can get it for me."

"What about you?" I say, sitting back in my chair. It makes a comical squishy sound every time I move and I wish that I could sit on a hard, unrelenting bench instead. The less comfortable, the better.

"What kind of rare book?" Lincoln asks.

"It's located in Montauk, not too far from your mother's home in the Hamptons."

We all know where Montauk is. It's on the tip of Long Island, windswept and not as fabulous and full of parties as the Hamptons is, but nevertheless, charming and beautiful.

"There's a wealthy rare book collector who lives there."

"Isn't it too salty for rare books to live someplace right on the water like that?" I ask.

I don't know much about books as objects, but I do know that they have to be held in humidity controlled environments, that is if you want them to last.

"It's being held in an average \$2 million home, nothing too extravagant. You'd never know from the outside, but there's a secret basement with a trap door and that's where this man has a collection of books worth millions and

millions of dollars. This one in particular that is so rare, that few people even believe that it exists, but I know that it does."

"How?" I ask, leaning forward.

"Let me keep that to myself for now. If you go ahead with this job, I will tell you everything, but for now I have to hold my cards close to my chest."

"Why do you need this book?" I challenge him with another question.

"It's worth \$10 million, maybe more, maybe a lot more. It's priceless since very few people know of its existence."

"So, what good is it to you?" I ask.

"It will solve all of my problems. Let's just put it that way," Dad says, being as cryptic as ever.

I need to know the answers to all of these questions, but I know my father; he won't share a thing he doesn't want to.

"Why do you need us?" I press. "Why can't you just do this on your own?"

Dad hesitates and the arrogant expression on his face fades a little bit, or perhaps just morphs into something I haven't seen before. His eyes narrow on mine and he nervously brushes his fingers through his hair, in that way teenagers do when they're trying to buy extra time to answer a particularly difficult question.

"It seems that after all of this time, my life is in danger, boys, and you're the only ones that can help me."

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DANTE

I stare at my father. I want to hear where he's going with all of this, but I also know that he's quite good at making up lies and making people around him hear what they want to hear.

But something is different now, he seems frail almost... lost. Those scars on his stomach had to come from somewhere.

I take a gulp of the scotch, get up and walk around the room, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger.

"Tell us what's going on, Dad," I say, starting to feel frustrated.

I crack my knuckles and clench my jaw. I feel irritated and annoyed all at once. I don't want to be here. The last thing I want to do is help him but something is different.

He has never asked for my help this way before.

"You need to give him time." Lincoln walks up to me and whispers into my ear. "You know that this must be hard for him. He can't just ask for help; that's not in his personality."

And yet, it is.

I pour myself another scotch and I decide to hear him out. It's not that I don't have a choice, it's that I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. If this is something that he needs time to tell me about then fine, I'm here, but I'm only going to wait as long as I'm in this hotel room.

"What do you need us to get from that house in Montauk?" I say, walking back to the couch and sitting down.

This time I sit on the couch next to him and narrow my eyes.

"What do you need and why can't you get someone else to do it for you?"

"This book is very valuable," Dad says.

"No more dancing around," I snap. "You tell me the truth. You tell me what's going on, or I'm not going to be here much longer."

He bites his lower lip, adjusts his collar, and then nods.

"That's fair," he says, "but what I tell you cannot leave this room and you have to promise to do it."

"I'm not promising anything and I'm not participating in anything without knowing what it is first," I snap. "I have done too many deals for you already."

"Have any of them gotten you in trouble? Have any of them actually hurt you in any way?" he snaps.

"I have blood on my hands," I say in a low voice, slightly below my speaking voice, but not exactly in a whisper. "I did unspeakable things to people on your behalf because you asked me, because you're my father. Maybe you don't realize that. If you don't think that that has had an impact on who I am as a person, then you don't know the first thing about being human."

"They were all bad people, Dante," Dad snaps and stands up in a huff. "They were terrible, terrible people and they deserved what was coming to them."

"Were they all that bad? I mean, I know that this recent case involved someone who defrauded a lot of elderly people, but death? You sentenced him to death! No trial, no jury, no judge... just you. Is that okay?"

My dad swallows hard and our eyes meet. His are full of mist.

"That man raped and tortured a little boy," he says after a long pause. "He kept him in his house for days and then paid his mother a big bounty not to

tell the cops."

"How do you know any of this?"

"The father wanted him dead. The father didn't care about the blood money that he paid to make up for his mistakes. That kid will be traumatized for the rest of his life because of that sick fuck. I can show you all of the conversations. As you know, I keep very good records."

My father may be a liar, but I've known him long enough to know when he's telling the truth.

"Fine," I say, "but what about the others? Were they also terrible and you're the only one that has all this secret knowledge about them?"

"Yes," my father says with a casual shrug. "It's hard to believe, I know, but you did not eliminate anyone who hadn't killed or tortured or raped at least one other person. I didn't want to bog you down with the details, but I'm more than willing to share them at your convenience."

"That doesn't make it okay," I say, shaking my head.

"Probably not, but in the grand scheme of things, there is a little bit of an eye for an eye going on. And yes, when I told you that they had it coming, I wasn't lying. I was telling you the truth. I always told you the truth. I never wanted either of you to be part of anything that was bad."

"So what about this job?" I ask, taking another sip and relaxing just a little bit, suddenly feeling at ease even though I probably shouldn't.

"This case is different, no murder, nothing with blood. You just have to break into this house and you have to break into the safe in a secret basement and you have to steal a book."

"Tell me about it." I sit back.

"It's the first Folio of Shakespeare."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"William Shakespeare plays used to be published as collections in these big books called Folios. The first Folio is a collection of plays published in 1623. It is one of the rarest books in the English language.

There are only fifty-six Folios in the world, and this is the one that is the most well preserved. One copy sold at auction in New York for over \$6.1 million in 2001. Recently an anonymous buyer bought it for \$9.98 million.”

“Is this the one that happens to be in the house in Montauk?” I ask.

He nods, giving me a mischievous smile.

“On the black market, it's probably worth over \$12 million.”

I pick up my phone and I see the Shakespeare folios, all later editions, tend to run over \$7 million.

"This one is special," Dad continues, looking over my shoulder. "It's in great condition and the buyer has no plans to sell it, which makes it rare and scarce. Collectors will pay anything and this is one of the most expensive, rare books in the world and I have a buyer for it."

"Why do you need this \$12 million so badly?" I ask, reading that glint in his eye as desperation.

"Because it's \$12 *fucking* million dollars. This is my retirement. And the thing is that I need to retire as soon as possible."

I shake my head. There it is again, that cryptic conversation. He's told us some of the truth, but not all of it and that's always been the way it has been with Dad.

He will reveal just enough to keep you on the hook, but keep some things to himself just in case.

It's a security blanket or maybe an insurance policy. But in this case, I need to know everything.

I swirl the scotch in my glass and watch the amber-colored liquid cover the ice in little waves. When I look up at him, and our eyes meet, I ask, "Who wants you dead?"

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DANTE

My dad hesitates. He's trying to buy himself time, but I have plenty of it and I wait. Lincoln doesn't look as eager, but I put my finger up and tell him to stay calm, in not so many words.

"This time, Dad, I need to hear everything." I swallow and adjust my body, swinging my arms around the back of the couch.

"I did this deal," he says. "Maybe I shouldn't have, but I did. Somebody wanted one of the Crown princes of Saudi Arabia murdered."

"Someone in the family?" I ask.

"The uncle," he says, "if we're being completely honest. It's a large family with about 15,000 crown princes. So there are plenty of enemies and plenty of friends and allies. They paid me a lot of money. I probably should have relied on you and your help, but neither of you were returning my calls. I was desperate. I had gambled a lot and I had lost a lot. My relationship with Miriam has fallen apart and, of course, I got nothing in the divorce. It got so bad that I couldn't afford the rent on the \$2,000 a month condo."

Wow, that is bad, I say silently to myself.

When rich people talk about losing money, they make a big deal about every little bit. But I've never heard it be put so bluntly about just how little money he had.

"It was a dark time in my life and I was drinking a lot. I just kept

gambling, trying to make up for all of these debts that I owed. But no matter how much I won, I could never get ahead. There were just more and more bills.”

Lincoln and I exchange looks.

"I hope you two never know what it's like to be actually poor, but it reminded me a lot of what my life used to be before I met your mother. Your mind is just so full of thoughts about money. It's the most banal thing to think about; how to pay the rent, how to make it from one month to the next, but you can't not think of it because what else would you think about?"

Dad hesitates for a moment and I actually feel bad for him.

"The casinos were an escape. The card tables were a hope. And at that time, I needed a lot of hope," he continues. "So, I kept trying and I kept losing more and more. And at one point, I owed over \$200,000 to someone who shall remain nameless. I played games that I shouldn't have played, bad underground ones full of dirty money and people who spoke with accents."

He finishes his drink and pours himself another. The silence in the room is deafening.

"Just like you, I tried to get away from doing the one job that I was ever really good at, and that is killing people. I tried to get away from it, but when I was all out of options, that was all I had. And so I went back.

"An old buddy of mine told me about a secret hit, more secret than even all the others, against this Crown prince in Saudi Arabia. He was going to be visiting New York City, and it was supposed to be done so that he had a heart attack, nothing violent. Of course, the family would be suspicious, but there wouldn't be any proof of who was involved.

"The price was half a million dollars. It was more than enough to pay off my debts. It was more than enough to put me back in the black and have a little nest egg to start my life over. Does that sound familiar, Dante?"

Dad finally brings his eyes back to mine.

I nod. It's much more familiar than I would ever want to admit. I hate that

about my family. We're so alike and no matter what I do with my life, I seem to never be able to get away from it. This darkness just keeps pushing me further and further down.

"I did this job. Poison. I'll spare you the details if you don't want to hear them, but it was blamed on the Russians, at least that's what the family said publicly. But privately, they interrogated this uncle who paid me the money. And you know what he did? He confessed. They used various methods of interrogation. Not exactly on the up-and-up but then again, what about that family is on the up-and-up?"

I shake my head, not wanting to hear the rest.

"My name was never supposed to be revealed. There were supposed to be at least two or three people in between us so no one would know, so it would be easier to protect myself. But they all talked. They followed the chain and they pinpointed me. And now, they're out for blood."

I crack my knuckles, not knowing whether to punch him or hug him.

"I can't trust any of my old colleagues or people I used to call friends. The Crown family has so much money that they can pay off anybody and get them to do anything. And if that doesn't work, they can threaten their families and their loved ones and get the information that way. It's a carrot-on-a-stick situation, and one of those things will make just about anyone confess."

"Where do we come in?" I ask.

"You come in because you're the last people that I know that I can trust. I know that we've had our disagreements and you were right, most of the time, I was a terrible father. I shouldn't have introduced either of you to this lifestyle. I should have just kept you in the dark, being two rich little boys who listened to their mother."

"I wouldn't recommend throwing out insults when you're asking for help," I correct him.

"I was stupid. I was drunk. I was irresponsible," Dad continues. "I was everything you want to call me, and I take all responsibility for all of my

actions. But mostly, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for never being there for you and for leaving you and for lying and for everything that I've done. You two deserve a lot more, and you deserve somebody who would love you and cherish you as two wonderful boys, and now the men that you are."

"What do you want, Dad?" I ask, glancing over at Lincoln and seeing that he is on the verge of tears. Our father has never apologized. He never even came close. So, to hear these words pouring out of him now, it's a little more than either of us can really handle.

"I need your help because I need to steal this Folio. I need to sell it. I need to get this money, and I need it to last me for the rest of my life if I have any chance of living another three months, three years, thirty years."

"And what's going to change? I mean, your life has been in danger before," I say. "What's going to be different this time?"

"I'm going to make changes. They fucking stabbed me and I barely got away. I don't want any more close calls like that."

Lincoln and I exchange looks.

"Boys, there's something else," Dad says with a heavy heart. "They're not just going to come for me. They're going to come for all of you and all of your loved ones. They're out for blood. And if it means taking out five people who are the closest to me, then that's what it means."

My blood runs cold.

"What are you talking about?" Lincoln says.

"It's not just my life that's in danger," Dad reiterates. "It's your mother's. It's yours. It's Marguerite's and your new baby and Jacqueline's. And who knows? Maybe even her mother's, too. Anyone you care about."

My mouth becomes parched and I stare at him in disbelief. He gives me a nod, biting his lower lip.

"How do you know about Jacqueline?" I ask.

"I know because they know. I've put you all in danger, and now I need your help to get you out."

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JACQUELINE

When the call doesn't connect to Sergeant Mallory, I dial his number over and over again, but I don't get through.

Was that just an accidental call I wonder. Or did he get distracted? Is something keeping him from calling me?

I don't know the answer to any of these questions. I stare at my phone and then pace around the room.

I call Allison back, but she barely looks at me when she tells me more about Richard.

"What are you doing, Jacqueline?" She demands to know. "Are you even there? Are you even listening?"

The truth is that I'm not. I'm completely, single-mindedly focused on why Sergeant Mallory would call me. Why did he call me? What did he find?

When I tell Allison about the call, she tells me not to get my hopes up.

"It's probably about the letter," I stress.

"What if it's a joke?" she asks.

I shake my head no.

"What if it's someone trying to tell us something? Someone who can't get through any other way."

"Well, does it change anything?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

“Does it change anything about Michael's death? He's still dead.”

“Of course, it changes things. I thought that he died in a car accident, just run-of-the-mill, plain old car accident. And now it seems like somebody actually tried to get him killed. That's murder and I have to find out the truth.”

“I know you do, but I just want you to be prepared.”

“I cannot be prepared. This is the first bit of news that makes any sense.”
“Does it though?” she asks, tilting her head. “Does it make sense or do you just want it to make sense?”

“I'm not crazy, Allison!” I snap.

“I'm not saying that you are. I'm just saying that you're hurt and you miss your brother and I want you to protect yourself.”

“You know what?” I ask, my blood boiling. “It's easy for you to just go on with your life, okay? You went out with him like once and you can make new friends, but he was family to me. If something happened to you, I would do the same thing. I would want to find out the truth. I wouldn't just pretend and bury my head in the sand and say, ‘Oh, it's fine, probably was an accident after all.’”

I hang up.

I don't want to see her face anymore. Allison calls me back a few times, but I let them all go to voice mail.

A few very long hours later, Sergeant Mallory finally calls me back. My hand shakes as I answer.

After a little bit of small talk, that I struggle to keep up with, I get to the point.

“Why are you calling, Sergeant?” I finally ask.

“Well, I wanted to tell you that we got a lead in the case.”

“You did?” I gasp, my head nodding.

“I don't know how to tell you this, but it seems to be that there was some sort of forgery involved in your brother's case.”

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's all very preliminary, but I thought that I would call you and get in touch."

He's talking in circles. This is his way and I let him go on because I need to know the truth.

"We have discovered that there might have been some irregularities about the confirmation of the dental records."

My head starts to buzz. The grip on the teacup in my hand starts to loosen and I slam it down on the kitchen counter before I drop it completely.

"So, that's not his body?" I whisper.

"It's not clear yet, but the confirmation doesn't seem to be accurate. We need your mother's permission to get his other records from a different dentist. Once we get that, we'll know for sure."

"What does this mean?" I ask.

"It means that that might not have been him in that accident and that might not be Michael's body that we got from that accident in the first place."

"Do you think he might be... alive?"

A gasp gets caught in my throat.

"I don't know what to think. I don't know who that body belongs to, but as it looks now, it does not belong to Michael Jonathan Archer, your brother."

I gasp. I hear him hesitating.

"There's something else," he says after a moment.

"What? Tell me everything!" I demand.

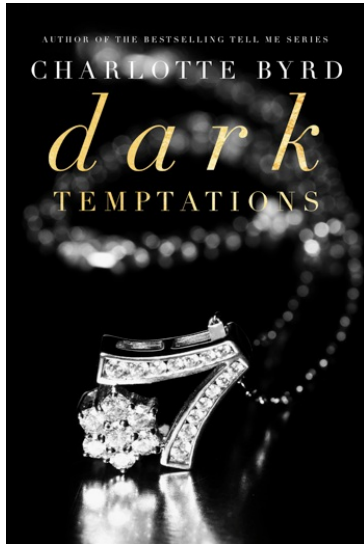
"We found a photograph of your brother and Dante together."

I shake my head in disbelief.

"I'm not sure what it means yet, but the one thing that does seem to be true is that Dante and Michael know each other."

THANK you for reading DARK SINS! I hope you are enjoying Jacqueline and Dante's romance. Their story continues in Dark Temptations.

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I pushed her away to keep my secrets to myself. **What I don't yet know is that her life is already in danger.**

I have so many regrets. If we had never met, she'd be safe now.

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Ours was quick to ignite, scorching and branding our souls before we've even taken that first breath.

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Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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