



# THE BARGAIN

HOW DEEP INTO DECEPTION WILL YOU GO TO STAY WITH THE ONES YOU LOVE?

R.G. ANGEL



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*To Henry Cavill - You don't know me but thank you for  
inspiring so many of my heroes.*

The Bargain

By R.G Angel

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# CHAPTER ONE

*Amber*



I jolted awake due to the wailing of the infant in the Pack ‘N Play beside me. Rolling over in my single bed, I looked at the clock. It was already 5:00 am. I had to be up in an hour anyway.

I yawned, stretching my sore back, trying my best to fight my urge to fall back asleep. I turned and stood up, looking at Timmy for a couple of seconds before picking him up. “Someone’s hungry.” I smiled at him.

His cries never bothered me. I cherished them - every single one of them because I knew I could lose them at any moment. Timmy’s sick heart could give in and take him away from me, so every minute with him was precious.

I rocked him gently as I went to prepare his bottle. My smile vanished when I realized how little formula was left. I would only have enough for today... But that had to be a problem for later. Right now only Timmy’s feeding mattered.

I prepared his bottle, mixed his heart medication in, and, as usual, got lost in his beautiful, emerald eyes as he drank. Eyes so similar to his father’s. A father he had never met and never would as Eddie had died seven weeks before Timmy’s birth.

“It’s going to be fine, my boy,” I whispered, trying to convince him as much as myself.

Once I’d finished his feeding, I changed his diaper and prepared his diaper bag.

I only had enough formula for his next three feedings. I checked my wallet. I had five dollars. And my online banking was not looking good either - only twelve dollars remained. That wasn’t even enough to buy the small can of his special sensitive formula.

Trying not to despair, I looked around my tiny studio apartment which despite being smaller than a shoebox was painfully bare. I’d sold everything I could recently which wasn’t much. Now, I realized that I’d actually reached the bottom of the barrel.

The little boy was asleep again. With his chin being slightly dimpled and his hair a soft dark brown, he was a painful reminder of Opal - and consequently myself.

Yawning, I made myself a cup of tea. I then looked around the cupboard for food, but they were as empty as I’d expected them to be.

Sighing, I made a second cup, hoping that it would lessen the pain of hunger.

Looking at myself in the bathroom mirror, I tightened my long, dark hair into a ponytail. The light was not flattering for sure, but even it couldn’t account for the haggard image staring back at me. The deep, dark circles. The bloodshot eyes. The pale skin and gaunt frame. Looking at myself, I blinked back tears. How had this all happened? When had I become that girl terrified for the next bill to come in the mail or the next shut-off notice to appear on her front door?

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, I didn’t have the luxury to break down. I had a job to go to and a sickly, six months old baby to take care of.

I changed into my itchy, polyester uniform - a green, ill-fitted shirt, black skirt, and green apron. Then I slid on my overused, black sneakers.

I walked back into the room and sat on the bed, looking at Timmy playing silently in his bed, chewing on his Sophie La Giraffe, a generous present from Dee - one of so many.

I smiled when his eyes connected with me. Once again, I felt that overwhelming wave of love that made every sacrifice worthwhile.

“Everything is going to be fine, baby boy, you’ll see.” I checked his day bag once more, which basically consisted of his bottle, the leftover formula, a few diapers, and the most critical item - his heart medication.

Picking Timmy up from his Pack ‘N Play, I kissed his head. Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply. I knew it would not last, but it was the best smell in the world.

“Okay my boy, be good to Auntie Dee, won’t you? I’ll be back as soon as can.”

Timmy cooed and grabbed at my cheek. I interpreted that to mean, ‘Cool, Ma. We’re good’

I took the stairs to the next floor up and knocked softly on Dee’s door just in case her husband was still asleep. He’d just finished a nightshift at the hospital, working as a nursing assistant, so I felt quite guilty standing there. But Dee had assured me he slept like a log.

Dee opened the door with a wide smile as if life had always been kind to her.

“How is it that you always look like a supermodel and I look like a hobo reject?”

She laughed. Her red lips were striking against her Espresso brown skin. “It comes with the job, honey. Ain’t nobody wants their beautician to look like a mess.”

She said that, but Dee had always looked like a Nubian Queen - even when she’d been working as a prostitute.

Dee had quit the streets seven years ago, just a couple of years after Opal had started.

Dee had met Raoul and married him before obtaining her beautician license.



She has been a mother hen to all the street girls since then and very much a mother figure to me since I'd moved with Opal at the tender age of eleven.

"You look tired, my girl," she said with concern as she took Timmy from me. "I really don't like this look on you."

"Way to tell me I look like shit. Thanks, Dee." I tried to diffuse her concern with a joke; it was better than bursting into tears. My state of worry and tiredness was bringing me closer and closer to the edge of a mental breakdown.

She narrowed her eyes, her lips pursed. "We need to talk, sweet girl."

I'd known this was coming. It was a discussion we'd had a few times already. How Opal wouldn't have wanted this life for me.

Well, I'm sure Opal hadn't planned on getting knocked-up by Eddie, her heroin-addicted boyfriend, who even if he'd had a kind heart, had been a train wreck. I was also sure she had not planned on dying from sepsis a week after giving birth, leaving me as the sole guardian of a baby boy born both with a heart defect and a drug addiction, and yet, here we were.

I sighed. "Yes, but not now I need to get to work."

She nodded. Looking at Timmy, she ran her long red nails across his tummy, making him giggle.

"I love this little one, you know," she added, still looking at him.

"Yes, I know. Thanks again. I know helping can't be easy; I really appreciate it."

She smiled up at me, but her whiskey-colored, kohl surrounded eyes suddenly turned sad. "We're family. I'd lost one of mine when we lost Opal. You're family, sweet girl. I saw you grow up. There's no shame in asking for help."

I looked down, rubbing my arms self-consciously. "I know that. Anyway, I really have to go. I can't miss the bus. I'll be back as soon as I can."

“Take your time. My clients never mind this little one’s interruptions. They are mothers too, so they understand.”

I had to run to the bus stop. I caught it just as the driver was closing the doors. It took almost four stops for me to catch my breath; I really was taking being unfit to a whole new level.

“Ah, here you are, sunshine.” Rodrigo, the old Puerto Rican chef, smiled and pointed to a plate full of eggs, bacon, and waffles. “I made a mistake on an order. Why don’t you eat it?”

I blinked back tears. We both knew it hadn’t been a mistake. This would probably be the only real meal I’d have all day. I couldn’t be more grateful for this man. He looked stern and unapproachable, but he had the biggest heart a man could probably have.

“You’re fading away, Mami. You need to eat more,” he whispered as I shoved half of a waffle into my mouth.

I nodded. I would if I could, I thought, but Timmy’s needs came first - always and forever.

Rodrigo looked at me as he flipped some bacon. His chef hat perched crookedly on his head. I didn’t like being a source of worry for him. He had a wife and a son in college; he didn’t need to worry about poor little Amber Collins.

Putting the last piece of crispy bacon into my mouth, I savored the sensation of a full belly - something that was rarer than I cared to admit or think about. Jumping up from my spot on the counter, I gave him a kiss on the cheek and straightened his hat. “Thanks again for everything, but things are getting better.” How could I even say that with a straight face?

I put my bag in my locker and clocked in on my punch timecard. I was about to walk onto the floor when Denny exited his office.

“Amber, could I see you in my office for a minute, please?”

I looked at the clock. The morning rush hour was about to start. It was the best time for tips; I couldn’t afford to miss any

of it.

He seemed to understand my conflict because he gestured me in. “It will only take a minute. Just come in, please.”

I nodded as if I had a choice. Denny was fair, but firm and didn’t tolerate any disrespect; it was all I could really ask for from a boss.

“Amber, I noticed the schedule has been changed and you’re covering for Maria tomorrow.”

I frowned, sitting in the seat he’d just gestured me to. He’d never minded that before. He has always said that as long as he has coverage, he doesn’t care who does what. “Yes. She has to help her sister with some wedding arrangements. I don’t have a problem covering for her.”

“You don’t, but I do. Amber, you’ve been working for me for how long? Two years?”

I nodded.

“But recently, I’m worried about you, kid. The other staff is too.”

“I’m doing a good job!” I exclaimed. “I’m a good waitress.”

“You are, probably the best I have, but you are walking a fine line. You are so thin and tired. No amount of makeup can hide that.” He shook his head. “You’ve worked twenty-three days in a row. If you keep on going like this, you’ll get sick, and then you won’t have a job and I won’t have my best waitress.”

“Yes, but -” How could I even ask him for a pay advance now?

He raised his hand. “I understand that life has not been kind to you recently with your sister passing away and her sick kid becoming your charge, but think about him for a minute, if you don’t want to think about yourself. What will happen to him if you get too sick to take care of him? Who would care for him then? He’ll end up in the system and that’s not a place for a kid, let alone a sick one.”

I looked down at my hands. Denny was an orphan that ended up in the social system, somewhere I would have ended myself if it hadn't been for Opal.

“But -”

He shook his head. “No, Amber. This isn't healthy, so you're going to take this -” he slipped an envelope toward me - “and then take tomorrow off.”

I took the envelope and looked into it to find \$200. I had to blink back tears. “I don't want charity.” Why was I saying that? I didn't have the luxury to refuse, especially since I knew I would have to apply for food stamps in the very near future.

“It's not charity, trust me. Someone left it as a tip on your table last night.”

I rested the envelope against my chest. “Thank you.”

He shook his head. “Now go and do your shift, and I better not see you until Thursday, okay?”

“Okay, thank you. Really.”

He grunted, looking down at his desk, clearly dismissing me.

I walked into the kitchen a little lighter. I tucked the envelope into my apron pocket before looking at Rodrigo, who was giving me a knowing smile.

“Was that you?” I whispered as I stopped beside him and pointed toward the office.

He shrugged. “He just needed a reality check.”

“You're good to me.”

“You deserve it. Now go; the room is filling up.”

For once, my shift was enjoyable. The tips were generous and combined with the “tip from last night,” I was ready to leave with a total of almost \$240! I could pay the electricity bill, buy a couple boxes of formula, a big bag of diapers, and enough ramen noodles to last me a week. I could probably even indulge in a couple of Mars bars too.

“I’ve heard Denny’s put you on house arrest for two days.”

I cringed at the voice of Zack, Denny’s nephew. He was a self-entitled asshole who was supposed to be working here in order to learn about values, but who would never do.

I turned around with a fake smile. Zack was only a few months younger than me, but he acted like an immature teenager. He’d never had any issues in his life, and though that was good, it meant that he had no idea about what life was really like.

“Ah, well you know, it’s okay. Thanks for the concern.”

He leaned against the wall beside me, his red hair falling in front of his eyes. A grin that didn’t predict anything good, appeared on his lips.

“Maybe I can help you with that. I have a job for you.”

“Okay...” I trailed off. I was not against making a little more money, but working for Zack was not that appealing.

“Yeah. So I have this party this weekend but have nobody to take. I’ll pay you \$300.”

I frowned, grabbing my bag and holding it against my chest like a barrier. “You’re a decent looking guy. I’m sure you don’t need to pay anyone.”

He shrugged. “I just don’t want to work too hard for the after soirée. With you, I’m sure to get what I want.”

I froze, ice settling in my stomach. “Excuse me?”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Ah, come on. I know what your sister’s job was. It has to run in the family and I’m sure you can use the money.” He sighed. “Okay, I’m ready to go up to \$400 if you let me shove it up your ass.”

Bile rose in my throat at the thought of having sex with him or anyone for that matter, especially for money. How did he find out about Opal? And was it like this for her? Was she propositioned even when she didn’t want to be?

“No.” How had he ever thought I’d agree to this?

He arched his eyebrows in surprise. “Why?”

I snorted. “Why?” I shook my head. “I’m not even sure what to say. My sister’s career choice was made out of desperation, not pleasure. Besides, what she did, doesn’t define me.”

“Of course it does. Your sister was a whore and I’m sure it won’t take much more for you to be as well. It’s in your blood.”

I was a breath away from kicking him in the nuts, my job be damned, but then he moved from his spot.

“Just think about it.”

He walked away nonchalantly, as if he hadn’t just insulted me, and in his head, he probably hadn’t.

I took a deep breath. *Water off the duck’s back. Water off the duck’s back.* I repeated the mantra as I forced my anger away.

After taking the bus back to North Philadelphia, I walked to Walmart. I bought all I needed and breathed a little lighter when I managed to pay my electricity bill, knowing that the lights would stay on for at least another month.

I was looking forward to getting some sleep the next day; I could even take a nap. I smiled at the thought - sleeping and eating - two wonderful things so many people took for granted.

I carried the bags back to my apartment, then took a quick shower to get rid of the greasy smell of work before going to pick up my little boy.

I texted Dee to let her know I was on my way up. I didn’t want to interrupt her if she was with a client.

“Timmy is sleeping,” she said, inviting me in. Her apartment was probably three times the size of mine. She had two bedrooms, one of which she’d transformed into a treatment room.

She is the reason I got the studio apartment I lived in.

I used to live in the Badlands, North Philly’s roughest area, with Opal. We had a place in a building full of prostitutes and

drug dealers. It was not uncommon for us to come home to bloodstains in the corridors.

When I turned eighteen, Opal had decided to leave. I'd come back from school to find a note saying that she had decided I was old enough to take care of myself and that she needed to go take care of herself. I couldn't blame her, really; she had sacrificed a lot for me. But then a few of her dealers had come knocking at my door, requesting me to pay for her debts either with money or an alternative payment.

When I'd missed a payment, one of them had tried to force himself on me. That day, Lady Luck had been on my side, all things considered. I had managed to escape, running the seven blocks to Dee's place with a bloody nose, a swollen lip, and a ripped tee shirt. She had never let me leave.

After convincing the landlord to rent the minuscule studio flat to me at a discount, which she'd accomplished by offering to provide his wife with free treatments for the year, Raoul had left to pack up my stuff.

I'd managed to go to community college, taking night classes as I worked at Denny's. Things had started looking up until Opal and her boyfriend had shown up at my door. She was four months pregnant then and trying to get clean. Eddie was high, but kind.

“Have you heard a word I've said?”

I shook my head. “Sorry, I was thinking about Opal.”

She sighed. “That's the problem, sweet girl. You have a hard time asking for help.”

“The tips at Denny's were good today, and I'm off for two days.”

She nodded. “Okay, then you know what you'll do? You'll drop the kid off here in the morning and then go enjoy a 'you' day.”

“A me day?” I eyed her curiously. “How –”

She chuckled. “Just be the kid you still are. Go to the cinema, the museum, grab some junk food.”

“But - “

She shook her head. “No, just one day. You’ve been a full-time mother for six months. Just take one day. Self-care is not a luxury, sweet girl; it’s mandatory.”

“I need to go to the hospital tomorrow. I need to get Timmy’s meds renewed. It’s always -”

She shook her head. “Nice try, but Raoul will get them for you. He said he can get Timmy enrolled in the permanent program of renewal. Why didn’t you ask him to do that earlier?”

“I didn’t want you to think I was using you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. You’re probably the most selfless person there is. Raoul has been working there for over twenty years. Now let me make you a hot chocolate with whipped cream and extra marshmallows”

“Thank you.” I beamed. When I was with Dee, I felt like a kid again. It felt nice; her maternal vibe was like a balm on my weary heart and I loved her like my own blood.

“Oh, the white bag on the console is for you,” She called from the kitchen

“Dee...”

“It’s not from me. Tasha dropped off my cosmetic order earlier and brought that bag for you. She said your marketing plan was working well.”

Looking in the bag, I found a bottle of Victoria’s Secret body lotion, numerous tubes of lipsticks, nail polish, and a few other frivolity items. I would not be able to afford any of it if it wasn’t for Tasha and her store. I usually traded my two years of college experience in Marketing for free goods.

“You deserve it, you know,” she said, coming back with the hot chocolate and two pieces of pie. “You’re good at it. Since you started helping me, my clientele has increased by fifty percent.”

I shrugged. “It’s nothing special.”



“Yes, it is, and you should finish your degree or get a better job.”

I sighed. “Denny understands Timmy’s situation. He knows that sometimes I might not be able to come in and on zero notice, but maybe after Timmy is better, I’ll go back to school.”

“You know, Raoul and I’ve talked about it and you only have a year left. We could -”

I raised my hand. “No, absolutely not! Never.” I shook my head. “You keep your hard-earned money. Please, don’t. It would break my heart.”

She sighed. “At least stay for dinner. I made jambalaya.”

I lit up. Dee was originally from Louisiana; her Cajun food was out of this world.

“You don’t have to ask twice!”

Once Timmy fell asleep after dinner, she painted my nails a vibrant red. I sighed with contentment on my way back to my studio. My belly was full and a sleepy Timmy laid in my arms.

I laid Timmy down for the night and smiled at his peaceful face. Today had started out quite darkly, but it had brightened in ways I hadn’t expected it to.

Maybe things have finally started to turn around, after all.

# CHAPTER TWO

*Amber*



I was startled awake by a commanding knock on my door. I growled, looking at the clock. It was barely 8:00 a.m. and I had just managed to get Timmy back to sleep less than an hour ago.

Last night had been the first time in twenty-three days that I could sleep the full night through and somebody had to knock at my door. People never came to see me, especially not at that time.

The knocking turned more insistent, louder and louder - loud enough to wake Timmy from his slumber and make him wail in frustration.

“You and me both, kid, you and me both,” I mumbled, picking my nephew up and stumbling to the door, my brain still partially fogged with sleep.

I unlocked the door and froze just as I was about to open it. I realized, almost too late, that this could be one of Opal’s dealers who had finally found me. And then what? These men would have no consideration for a woman and a baby. All they wanted was money. Or something they could trade for money... I shivered at the thought.

“Open the door now, Miss Collins,” the firm, calm voice didn’t sound like any of Opal’s dealers. This voice lacked the unmistakable Philly drawl and none of them would ever call me or Opal ‘Miss’ anything. Our titles usually varied from “dumb bitch” to “fucking crackwhore” or something of that sort. They were always so classy.

I balanced Timmy on my hip and opened the door a sliver. It was just enough to see a man looking down the corridor, giving me a perfect view of his profile: chiseled jaw, long, straight nose, perfectly groomed, short beard, and dark hair in a tapered cut, which looked a bit like Leonardo Dicaprio’s haircut in the *Wolf of Wall Street*. I looked down to detail his attire: impeccably shiny, black shoes, fancy, black suit, white shirt, and grey tie. Everything about him screamed money. Lots of it.

I gasped when I met his irritated gaze. Those eyes - they were too unique for it to be a coincidence. I’d seen them in Eddie, Timmy, and now this man. An emerald so vibrant that almost didn’t look real. When I’d first seen Eddie, I had thought the color was due to contacts, but then I’d realized that his hands shook too much for that to be the case; he could never put contacts in.

I let go of my hold on the door. He nudged it open, his eyes going straight to Timmy. Some of his previous irritation faded, but his air of authority still very much suffocated me, his face was still grim.

“Opal Collins, I need to talk to you,” he announced with a deep, cold voice. It was not an option, but an order. His demeanor was as commanding as possible. I was certain that this man’s orders were never questioned.

“I, umm, yes, but -” I needed to tell him I was not Opal, but as if on cue, Timmy started to cry again.

“He’s hungry. I need to feed him.” I hoped that this would give me time to face the man who I presumed was Eddie’s older brother. Eddie had not talked about him much. They were obviously estranged, but he’d always said his brother

was as ruthless as he was smart and as calculating as he was cunning.

The man gestured for me to proceed. “Don’t let me keep you.”

I took a step back to close the door, but he took a step forward and followed me in.

What could I say? Ask him to leave? He was obviously here on business and I highly doubted he would do anything I asked.

I sighed, giving in. I didn’t think he would hurt me, but at the same time... I clutched Timmy closer to me as I made my way into the small kitchenette area to prepare his bottle and medication.

“Formula, I see...”

I rolled my eyes. He was one of those - a man with an opinion on how mothers should raise their children. Wonderful.

I turned around. This man was so out of place in my space. He was so tall and wide, he consumed most of the breathing space. And his look of disgust as he detailed my furniture was showing clearly what he thought of my place. If only he knew how hard I had worked to get this place and purchase the furniture I have.

“Timmy has some very specific nutritional needs, which only a specially formulated formula can fulfill.”

“Really? I would have thought that the milk of a crack addict prostitute was premium quality.”

“Heroin, not crack.” I didn’t even know why I had bothered correcting him. But Opal had been addicted to heroin, not crack, and for me, that mattered.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I stand corrected.”

He jerked his head toward Timmy. “At least I won’t have to bother with a paternity test on the child. His eyes and birthmark are enough proof for me.” I looked at Timmy’s thigh where the man had just pointed. “The heart?”

He nodded. “Yes, all the men in my family have it. That child is my family. However -” he cocked his head to the side assessing me - “you’re not what I’d expected.”

I squirm under his critical eyes. I had just woken up. I looked a mess on my best days; I couldn’t even imagine what I looked like right now.

“You’re not the enticing siren I had expected you to be for my brother to fall off the rails for. You’re so thin, the wind could blow you over!” He snorted. “And you look barely out of school. They said drugs were aging...”

I was six years younger than Opal and had only turned twenty-one last week. Having watched my sister get destroyed by heroin, I’d sworn never to touch any drug, not even a joint.

“Why appear now? Six months later?” I asked, hoping he would drop the questions surrounding me and my looks. He was sharp for sure. I’d tell him his mistake...eventually. I just needed to know why he was here first and what he wanted from Timmy and me.

“I would have come earlier, but I hadn’t known this child existed. You were irrelevant, especially since you had been so blatantly missing at his funeral - not that any of us had been saddened by that fact.”

“Timmy was born the day before. Sorry I had been otherwise occupied.” We hadn’t even known Eddie had died then.

Opal had been sick one night close to her due date. We’d taken her to the ER and they had discovered Timmy’s heart issue. Eddie had gone to see his family or so he had said. He’d said they would give him money for the baby to help with the medical bills and any care Timmy might end up needing.

We’d trusted him. We really had, but he’d never come back. We’d assumed he had just bailed on us. I think that was also something that had broken Opal’s heart.

I’d only found out he had died when Timmy was a month old. The dealer who’d used to provide him and Opal had told Dee.

I sighed. “You never told me your name.”

“Dean Beaumont. I am - was Edward’s older brother. He never mentioned me, I presume?” He gave me a sarcastic smile. “Color me hurt.”

I shook my head. “He did, but never by name. He only called you his ruthless older brother.”

“Ruthless? That’s actually quite nice coming from him. He had called me much worse - especially when I’d refused to give him more money for his doses.”

Eddie had been Edward Beaumont? A Beaumont? Had Opal known? Was it why she’d grabbed him? I loved my sister. I really did. But money had always been a factor for her actions.

“What is it you want from me, Mr. Beaumont?” I asked, proud of how calm I still somehow sounded.

“From you?” He shook his head. “Nothing.” He pointed at Timmy. “I want him.”

“You want Timmy?”

He grimaced. “Is his name really...Timmy? Timmy Beaumont.”

That angered me. “No,” I replied, rocking Timmy softly to burp him. “His name is Timothy Francis Collins.”

“Francis?” he asked, visibly having not expected that.

“Indeed.” I was not a fan either, but Eddie had insisted.

“That’s my father’s name.”

It was my turn to be surprised by his admission. “I know.”

“Not the reason for my visit.” He sighed, pointing at my surroundings. “We can’t have the Beaumont heir living here. He will most likely become the owner of Beaumont Enterprises one day.”

“Don’t say that. With your charms and kind personality? I’m sure you’ll find a woman desperate enough to marry you and give you a spawn - I mean a child.”

His glare turned murderous. I looked at Timmy, the glare increasing the anxiety I was feeling at having this powerful man in my small place.

Timmy was blinking rapidly - sleepy again. I laid him back down in his bed.

“This is not your concern, and the opinion of a drug-addicted, low-class whore is of no interest to me.”

I stared at him, my face blank. His insults hadn't touched me. They'd all been about my sister, not me.

He sighed, reaching into his suit jacket. He rested an envelope on my small, plastic table. “Here, we both know a child is more of a weight on you than anything else in the life you lead.”

“What is that?”

“A check for \$50,000. I'm sure it's more money than you've ever seen.”

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. “And what do you want in exchange?”

He removed folded papers from his other pocket. “You sign all parental rights to me.”

I snorted. He couldn't be serious. “You want to buy him?”

He shrugged. “Call it as you wish. I see it more as a rescue mission from the miserable basic life he will have with you.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Oh, I see.” He smiled wider. “We're negotiating. Would \$100,000 satisfy your poor, bleeding, motherly heart?” The sarcasm was biting with this one.

How could he hate my sister this much?

“It's a good offer. Imagine all the drugs you can buy with that.”

It's official. I hated this man. He was Satan for sure.

“No.” I pointed at the door. “Leave now.”

“I wouldn’t advise going against me. I can hire the best lawyers there are and take him from you for no money at all.”

“No, you won’t. If you could, you would have done it already.” I was not bluffing. Eddie had said how cold and calculating his brother was. “I might have no money, but I’m not taking drugs. I’m fit for my role.”

His scowl deepened. I was right. Something was stopping him from crushing me like a bug and it was not the lack of desire to do so. This man was looking at me with nothing more than contempt.

I was suddenly grateful I hadn’t corrected him about my identity. Opal had changed her name a month before Timmy had been born in an attempt to escape the bad people in her life - something that Satan didn’t seem to know. I knew firsthand now how horrible this man could be. If he knew I was only Timmy’s aunt with as much right as him, he wouldn’t think twice about taking him from me - regardless of the papers Opal had signed before dying.

That was not something I could accept. I couldn’t have this sweet baby turned over to this heartless man in front of me.

“He has a sick heart.”

Dean took a step toward the bassinet and looked down at the sleeping infant. “He doesn’t look sick,” he stated with suspicion.

“No, and that’s because I’m taking excellent care of him. His needs come first, always.”

“How much?” he asked.

Hasn’t he heard a word I’ve said?

“Name your price. I’ll have your check drawn up in the next thirty minutes.”

“No.” I moved to stand between him and the cot. “No amount of money will make me abandon him to you.” I crossed my arms on my chest in defiance. “All the money in the world would not make me change my mind.”



“Would you deny this child the best school, best medical care for his heart, best...everything!” He threw his hands up in exasperation.

“No, of course I want all of that for him and more!” I shot back angrily - well, as angrily as a whisper could allow because waking Timmy up was the last thing I wanted to do. “But there are some things crucial in life, some things money can’t buy.”

“Oh yeah? Such as?” he asked tauntingly, crossing his arms on his chest and mirroring my position.

“Love, care, understanding, patience, kindness, understanding.... Things I highly doubt you can provide him.”

His nostrils flared, his jaw ticking with exasperation.

“I’m going where he goes.”

A glint appeared in his eyes as a smile spread on his lips. It was anything but nice; it was cold and calculating. “You think you’re a good mother?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I know I’m a good mother.”

“Fine, let’s strike a bargain then.”

I looked at him, inviting him silently to continue.

“Prove to me you’re a fit mother. Come with him to my country estate for six months, stay drug-free, and show me you are what this child needs, and I’ll help you.”

“Help me how?”

“I’ll set you up in a nice place here in Philly, give you more than a generous alimony for you to raise him, and I’ll pay for all the doctors, private schools, activities, and everything this child needs.”

“Okay...” I trailed off, waiting for the punchline.

“But if you fail, if you take drugs or endanger this child in any way, I’ll get full custody and you will lose your rights. Are we in agreement?”

That would be easy for me, way too easy. This felt like a trick. No, he thinks you are a drug addict. He expects you to fail. Opal had failed and I'd missed it - she'd sworn up and down she had been clean since she'd found out she was pregnant and yet Timmy had been born an addict.

"Too difficult of a choice for such a good mother?" he asked mockingly, taking my silence for hesitation.

"How can I be sure you'll keep your words?" That was a fair question. This man was a shark and I should know better than trust him.

"We'll draw a contract exposing all the terms - which will include a bi-weekly urine test. I'm not going to take just the word of a junky."

"No, you wouldn't, but I understand. I wouldn't want to take the words of the heartless man you are either."

He nodded. "I'll be back at the end of the day with the contract ready. Pack your bags and be ready to leave by the time I'm back."

I nodded. "We'll be here."

He took a step toward the door before turning back to me, his lips pursed into a thin line. "Don't make me chase you, Ms. Collins. You won't like the result."

"We'll be here. I trust my motherly abilities and Timmy does deserve the best. As long as the terms of your contract are fair, I won't object."

He nodded sharply and left.

I let go of my bravado as soon as he closed the door behind him. I started to pace the floor, my hands shaking with adrenaline. I'd been scared to lose my boy, so scared. And it could still happen - not because of the drugs, but because of who I was.

I had voluntarily cheated that man. Had lied to his face. My intentions were commendable of course. I knew Timmy would have been miserable with him, but I felt like I was making a huge mistake.

Still in my pajamas, I gently picked up Timmy so as not to wake him and made my way up to Dee's apartment. I needed her guidance, her advice.

I needed to hear her say I was doing the right thing.

"I need to tell you something," I said as soon as she opened the door. I was not even surprised to see her all made up already.

"Does it have anything to do with the Porsche that was parked by the entrance?"

I sighed with a nod. "How do you know about the car?"

"Raoul went for donuts. I intended to prepare you a nice breakfast. Just put Timmy down in the bassinet in my bedroom and I'll get us coffee."

I sighed after putting him down and gently brushed my fingertips on top of his soft dark curls.

I looked at him for a few minutes, hoping once more that I was not making a mistake.

When I walked back into the living room, Dee and Raoul were already sitting side by side in front of a plate full of donuts and looking at me like expectant parents.

I explained to them the visit of the older Beaumont and his proposal.

"So, Eddie was a Beaumont?" Dee asked with a whistle once I was done.

I shrugged. "I guess so; he never said."

"A Beaumont..." Raoul shook his head. "You know they'd donated a wing to the hospital? A wing m'hija."

"Do you think Opal knew?" Dee asked, tapping away on her tablet.

"I don't know. Why?"

Dee looked at me with doubt in her eyes. "I love you kid and I loved your sister, but this pregnancy -" She sighed. "This

was so unlike her. Even high as a kite, she required a condom.”

“You don’t think -” I shook my head. “No, not possible. She wouldn’t play with the life of another human like that.”

Dee looked at me for a few seconds and I knew what she was thinking and maybe there was a chance that it was true, but I didn’t want to think about that. I didn’t want to put dirt on my sister’s memory.

She turned the tablet toward me. “The Beaumont kids don’t have many photos online. The only one I could find, after a quick search, is this one from ten years ago. Was this the man that came to you?”

The photo was of two boys and a girl all dressed in black. It was captioned, ‘Dean Beaumont twenty-four, Lea Beaumont twenty, and Edward Beaumont eighteen. At their father’s funeral, Francis Beaumont II.’

I smiled sadly at the photo. Eddie looked strong, his hair beautiful and lustrous. He actually resembled his brother then, before years of drug use had changed him into the thin man he’d been when he’d met my sister. I could only see part of Lea Beaumont’s face in the photo. She was looking at her younger brother with concern, but Dean... Dean was looking straight at the camera, his emerald eyes hard and full of anger and reproach. He looked ready to set the world on fire.

“Yes, it’s him. His eyes looked eerily similar today.”

She nodded, turning the tablet toward her. “I’m not sure this is a good idea, Amber sweetheart. That man is not going to take it lightly if he ever finds out you’re not Opal. They have billions; he can crush you without breaking a sweat.”

“Actually, I think she should do it.”

Dee and I looked at Raoul with mirroring shock. The man rarely intervened in what he called ‘chica drama’ and yet, I think that this was the first time I’ve heard him go against Dee.

“Oh, do you now?” she said with an edge to her voice, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

“Si.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Getting the medication is getting harder, mami. Soon Amberina will have to wait hours for just a box and we know the surgeon appointments are so difficult to get. If she goes with him, he’ll get Timmy fixed in no time.”

I nodded, looking down at my hands folded on the table. “It’s my main reason too. Once Timmy’s heart is fixed, once they replace the valve and repair the hole in his heart, he’ll be good.”

Dee sighed, “He doesn’t strike me as a man willing to make a deal he can lose.”

I nodded. “No, he doesn’t, but he thinks I’m a druggie, alcoholic, promiscuous woman. The likelihood of Opal failing if she had money is close to a hundred percent; we both know that.”

“You really think you can pull this off? Living six months with a man who clearly despises you?”

I shrugged. “There isn’t much I wouldn’t do for Timmy and it’s either that or I lose him, so what choice do I really have, Dee? This could change everything for us. I have to try.”

She turned to Raoul.

He took her hand and kissed it. “She can do it, Mama. I’m sure she can.”

Dee sighed. “Be careful sweetheart, men like that - they have appeal, but you can’t trust them.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t! And he wouldn’t either. I disgust him.”

Dee rolled her eyes. “You’re so innocent, my girl.” She sighed. “Promise me though, if anything, anything at all, goes wrong, you will call us. We’ll come to you, okay?”

“I promise but it will work. It has to, for Timmy.”

She nodded, uncertainty still obvious on her face. “For Timmy.”

# CHAPTER THREE

*Dear*



I hoped for most of the day, as I arranged everything for this woman to invade my life, albeit temporarily, that she would change her mind - take the money and walk away. Let me raise Edward's son the way he was supposed to be raised. Educated in the best schools, taught polo, chess, and art like all proper men of our society.

I was so hopeful that, even after my lawyer had finished drafting the contract for the six-month trial, I asked him to redraft the parental rights abandonment papers, leaving the amount to be paid blank. I was ready to give her more money, even a million, just to make sure she would not be in my life. She was the reason for Edward's death, the enticing snake that had brought my brother down one time too many.

Unfortunately, I wasn't as lucky as I'd hoped; Opal was already dressed and ready to go when I made it to her apartment.

She wore black leggings, a long red sweater dress, which had clearly seen better days, and ankle boots that belonged in the *Misérables*. However, the kid was actually really nicely dressed; it was almost like she was putting his needs before

hers. I shook my head as I set both documents on the wobbly table in the middle of the room. *Don't let her fool you.*

“Two contracts?” she asked, coming to stand beside me.

I pointed to the five-page one. “This is the one we’d discussed before. The number is blank. Just put an amount - anything.”

She rolled her eyes. “And the other one?”

“It’s the deal we made.” It was quite a significant sized contract and quite one-sided too. I basically had no obligation other than to make good on my promise of giving her a monthly alimony of \$5,000 and provide her with a fully paid two-bedroom apartment in the Old City.

Her obligations were never-ending and as she read quietly, I detailed her face, looking for any sign of deception. Her dark hair was in a high ponytail, her face bare of any make-up. She looked so young; she didn’t look a day over eighteen despite being twenty-seven. She was thin and pale, but she didn’t seem to be the shell of a human Eddie had become over the years. It had taken me years to realize that my brother was an addict. He’d started taking drugs when he was sixteen, or so he had said, but at that time I’d been too busy to notice. I’d been trying to hide our father’s ineptitude in controlling our empire, been forced to handle it all myself from the shadows. I’d only been twenty then, fresh out of Harvard and handling more than I could. I hadn’t kept a close enough eye on my siblings, and I couldn’t help but think I’d failed my brother. Then our father had passed and I’d officially become the bearer of all obligations. Eddie had slipped through my scrutiny until he’d come home from Dartmouth at the end of his first year, the shadow of the young man he’d been. I’d sent him to a detox center that summer and he’d sworn up and down that he was fixed. That was the first time I had believed one of his lies.

I took a look around Opal’s room again. It was tiny, probably smaller than my closet with furniture so mismatched and banged up that I didn’t think anybody would use any of it by choice. Even Timothy’s bed was an ugly faded foldable plastic horror held up by duct tape. The place they lived in,

located in the worst area of town, was a liability in my nephew's life. And so was she. I needed to get rid of them both.

Opal looked up from the page she was reading. "No paid promiscuity? Really?"

I shrugged. "You will be staying in my family home, not a brothel. I don't need that dirt on my family name."

"I just -" She sighed. Shaking her head, she resumed her reading.

She signed it and gave it back to me. "I'd like a notarized copy of this please."

I smiled. "Someone knows big words. You don't trust me."

She snorted. "Not even a little."

I nodded. "That's fair and likewise."

She smiled too much and hers missed the bitterness mine had. "I hadn't expected anything less."

"Questions?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, let's go. Take the child," I jerked my head toward the car seat he was already asleep in. "I'll take your bags."

The entirety of their belongings fit inside only three medium-sized travel bags. It would have been sad if I didn't know she had chosen to spend any money she ever made on drugs.

"His name is Timothy or Timmy. He is not 'the child'."

I waved my hand dismissively before picking up the bags and exiting the apartment.

She followed me down silently and settled the child in the backseat, checking three times to make sure it was secure.

She sat beside him and remained silent as we exited the city.

I glanced at her a few times as she seemed lost in her own head. I was still uncertain about why she had signed the



contract. She was going to come out with nothing in the end - a druggie was a druggie.

This woman sitting beside me in my Porsche was really not at all what I had expected one of Edward's messed up girlfriends to be. How was that even possible?

"Why do you keep looking at me?" she asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"What?"

"You keep looking at me. I'm wondering why?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I just can't help noticing how thin you are - just like Eddie was. The druggie diet, is it? How you two managed to have a child, albeit a defective one, baffles me."

She gasped and turned toward me. "Timmy is not defective! He has a heart defect like millions of other babies are born with every year. I don't mind you disrespecting me, calling me names -" She waved her hands as if my words truly didn't affect her, and maybe they didn't. Oddly, I found that that bothered me. "But you leave him out of it. He's the best baby there is and he has been through enough."

"Thanks to whom?" I bite back.

She sighed. "Oh and also one more thing - the 'druggie diet' is not the reason for my looks. It's what I call the 'no money diet.' Apparently, a woman can't live exclusively on ramen noodles...who knew?"

I glared at the road, wanting to unleash my wrath on the woman beside me. But I knew it would not be productive to do that while driving and especially not with the baby in the back.

She was a complication I didn't need in my life. I wanted to take the child from her and let her try to fight me on it, but she had been infuriatingly right. If I could have taken the child from her, I would have done it in a heartbeat.

Unfortunately, Beaumont Enterprises was just starting to recover from the scandal caused by our former Finance Director. He'd left his dying wife and run away with his

assistant, leaving in his wake a file full of sexual harassment complaints.

How that file had found its way to the media, I was not sure. But in one day, our shares had plummeted twenty-one percent, losing us nearly two billion dollars. Nobody had believed that higher management had not been aware of their Finance Director's actions. And truthfully, I had known; I just hadn't cared. The company was turning a profit. He was good at his job. His character hadn't mattered - but maybe it should have.

Beaumont Enterprises had just started to recover from this - after an extensive PR maneuver, a women rights campaign, a new woman CFO, and the financing of numerous sensitivity programs across the country.

Taking a sick child from an addict pretending to be on the path of recovery would have been a blow to the company's still recovering image. "Billionaire Magnate Stealing Child from a Poor Mother" - that would have been mediatic suicide.

After she had fought me this morning, I'd gone to speak with our head lawyer, Phil. The man was in his mid-fifties and looked like a defenseless older man with his short frame and imposing gut, but he was as cunning as he was smart and he had saved us in more ways than I could count. He had been in place when my father had been on the decline, and he'd helped me keep the pretenses.

When I'd gone to him today, I'd told him we needed to come with a plan B and as usual, I hadn't been disappointed.

*'You know that given the right circumstances, druggies always fail. Take her in, just do your thing, and when she falls off the rails? You swoop in, get custody of the child, and look like a hero doing it. You took it upon yourself to help the mother of your nephew, but she wasn't ready to be helped, so you are keeping her son safe. The selfless uncle. That's PR gold, Dean. Just do it.'*

It had been cunning advice that I'd been eager to take. I wouldn't even need to set her up to fail. Druggies were druggies. Edward had relapsed too many times to count.

One time too many, I thought bitterly. And she would too. Given the time and the opportunity, she would too. I was just forced to suffer her presence in the meantime.

I sighed.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know. I never asked for your help.”

I threw her a look. It was true, she hadn’t. “You said you didn’t know Edward was a Beaumont.”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Even if I’d known, I wouldn’t have come.”

“Yes, you would. You people always do.”

“Wow, a way to make a generalization there.”

I chuckled, but it lacked humor. I knew she couldn’t be that naive, not with the life she led. She literally made money using her body. No, she was just a skilled liar. I needed to be more watchful.

“This is where you live?” she asked with awe looking at all the greenery, spotless streets and big expensive houses in the distance.

“Yes,” I replied curtly as I pressed the button for the iron gates, which were adorned with the B of Beaumont. This house was nice, yes, but it wasn’t even the biggest in the area despite us being the richest family in the town - hell, in the state and quite possibly on the east coast.

‘Live’ was also a bit of a stretch. I barely came here anymore. There were too many memories, too many nightmares.

This was the first time I had been back in over eight months. Staying here for an extended amount of time was something I looked forward to about as much as spending some time with the woman sitting beside me.

My parents had visited this house for a fundraiser when my mother was pregnant with me, and she’d fallen in love with the gardens. My father could never refuse her anything and so had purchased it for her.

If she could see the gardens now...

“This is magnificent,” Opal whispered, her eyes opened wide in awe.

“For you, evidently,” I replied after parking in front of the six-car garage.

“Yes, evidently.” She turned toward me and the winter sun lit her eyes, showing that they were not the dull brown I’d thought they’d been under the poor lighting of her dump-of-a-studio apartment. Rather, they were a rich honey, eerily quite similar in color to my signature drink - honey bourbon.

“This is small as far as estates are concerned.” I got out of the car as a couple of our staff hurried towards us. I gestured to the trunk for them to get her bags. “It only has ten bedrooms.”

She snorted. “Only. Wow. I guess I’ll have to slum it.”

This almost made me smile...almost. She had a sense of auto-derision I hadn’t expected.

I looked at her as she unlocked the child from his seat. Did she really have to dress like a twelve-year-old?

I sighed. “Come on. Let’s go inside.”

“You’re sighing a lot, you know,” she remarked as we walked up the wide stone steps to the house.

“I never used to. I guess that’s your effect on me.” It was not a lie. She was aggravating me. Everything I had expected her to do, she’d done the opposite. It would have been so easy for her to just take the money. Why did she need to make it so difficult? What did she expect to win coming here? Trap me? I snorted internally. I was neither high or stupid. An overused, cheap, junky whore wouldn’t make my list of potential girlfriends. Or maybe she wanted to steal from me? I shook my head. Well, good luck with that one. I had cameras everywhere and I’d be making sure they were monitored closely.

As I took the stairs up to the first floor, I turned to warn her about the security system, but she was not beside me.

I turned around to find her still in the middle of the entrance hall, the child clutched closely to her chest as she took in the room in a sort of reverent awe you'd expect from an art lover visiting the Sistine chapel for the first time. It was not really for a middle-range mansion.

I detailed the hall as well. I had walked it thousands of times, so it didn't really register anymore. The old patterned wooden flooring, the high engraved ceiling, the portrait of my mother hanging proudly in the entrance - the last gesture of an old fool full of love and grief...

"Could you please move!" I snapped, colder than I'd intended. Thoughts of my mother often had this effect on me.

Startled, Opal looked at me, the hurt in her eyes evident. *Ah, well, go show someone who cares...*

"I have a conference call soon." I most likely didn't, but I was a busy man. It was possible.

"You have a conference call at night?" she asked curiously as she picked up the pace to meet me on the stairs.

Did she miss anything?

"Yes, I do. We're a global company with a lot of responsibility. Much of it would go over your head," I added as I resumed my walk to the nursery.

"This is the child's room," I said, walking in. "And this is Ms. Reynolds, the live-in nanny I hired to ensure his needs are filled. "

"I'm here to fill his needs," she replied with a glare. She turned to the nanny with a smile. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Reynold. I didn't mean any offense."

The nanny nodded. "None taken," she replied, but her pursed lips and tensed back said otherwise.

Opal stood in the middle of the room and looked around; the dozing child still held closely to her chest. It seemed like holding him brought her a sense of security, a comfort. How peculiar for a druggie to seek comfort with a child instead of drugs.

The room was state of the art, designed in all shades of white and pure lines by one of the most sought-after home designers. But Opal didn't look impressed. Judging by the slight downward tilt of her mouth, I would even say she disliked it. What a strange bird.

I looked at my watch. I needed to get away from her. "Why don't you leave him with the nanny and I'll show you to your quarters?"

Her hold on the child tightened and I knew I would not like what was about to follow.

"What do you mean? My quarters?" She pointed to the connecting door that was open and revealing an adjacent bedroom. "This will be my room."

"No, it will be the nanny's room." I pointed to the austere woman who stood awkwardly by the crib. "Yours is in the east wing." As far from me as possible.

She shook her head. "No, I'm staying with him. There will be no nanny. I told you before, Timmy is special. He needs me."

"And I'm telling you that this nanny has gone through rigorous vetting. She is the best there is."

She shrugged like it didn't matter one bit. "No one is better than his own mother."

Debatable. I ran my hand through my hair in frustration. "Your room is far better, the top of luxury - TV, jacuzzi bathtub, fireplace. This room is bare and is only attached to a small shower room." Luxury will work; it has to.

She shook her head again.

*Damn it!*

"You've seen where I live. This will be like a stay in the Hilton for me."

"Oh, because you know the Hilton? I didn't know they rented rooms by the hour." That was a cheap shot, I knew it, and I felt a little scratch on my conscience when she blushed with embarrassment and threw a quick look at the nanny. "I'm

staying with my child. I'm moving in there -" she pointed at the room - "and that's final. You want me to prove I'm a fit mother, right? Or is this all a scam?"

She got me there. How could she be that quick to the draw? Hadn't the drugs destroyed her brain in some way?

"Fine," I sighed with rendition. "Ms. Reynolds, you haven't moved in yet, have you?"

"No, sir. I'm still in the servants' quarters."

I nodded. *Don't worry, Lady, you'll move into this room before the month is up.* "Perfect. You will stay there and assist Ms. Collins should she need assistance."

"Very well, sir," she nodded sharply. "Please ring if you need me, Ms. Collins, Mr. Beaumont," she added before exiting the room, a scowl of reproach on her face.

"She hates me," Opal stated when the door closed behind the woman, I guessed she wasn't as clueless as I'd thought. I needed to reassess her and my plans because failure was not an option. I needed her gone.

"Can you blame her?" I asked, turning my back to her and exiting the room. "You're taking her job away."

"Please. You hired her when you thought I would just give him to you. A child needs genuine love and care. Timmy is not a 'job.'" She followed me down the corridor and down the stairs again. "This is why I fought you so hard. You would not give him what he needs."

I threw her a sideways look. "How selfless of you. The kitchen is through there. Our head housekeeper should be there. Let her know what you need and she will accommodate you." I pointed to the heavy door down the corridor. It was my office - formerly my father's, which I'd redecorate as soon as I could to ensure that nothing reminded me of him. "I have to go now." I turned around, took a few steps away before turning around to look at her again. "Remember your contract. I'll be sending someone to get your urine sample in the morning, and just so you know, there are cameras in every room in the house."

She smiled. She had the audacity to actually smile. “Is that code for ‘don’t steal the china?’”

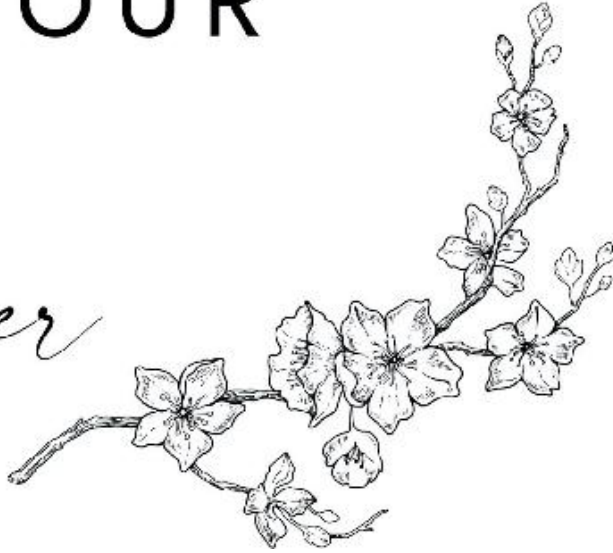
I pursed my lips. I wanted to lash out at her, release my frustration for every disturbance she was causing in my life, but I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t allow her to be the victim in this somber story. She would fall all by herself. I just needed time. Druggies failed, they always did.

“Have a good evening, Ms. Collins.” I turned around and disappeared into my office where I planned to spend most of my evening.



# CHAPTER FOUR

*Amber*



I sighed blissfully. Stirring in bed, I rolled over.

This was the first time in my life that I'd slept in a double bed. After four nights at the Beaumont family home, the novelty of being able to stretch out in all directions had not yet worn off.

My room was clean, spacious, and comfortable. The memory foam mattress was heavenly, and even if the window was small, it gave an outstanding view of the property garden - a garden so big I could not see the end of it.

I looked out the window from the comfortable warmth of the down duvet. The sky was blue, the sun bright. It was deceptive as I knew the February wind would be biting.

I looked at the clock. It was already 8:20 a.m. Timmy had had a great night, only waking up three times for food and diaper changes. It was like he was adapting to his new lush environment as well.

He seemed more peaceful, so maybe it was true what they said. Babies did respond to their family stress levels and mine had gone dramatically down since I'd learned that Timmy would always have food and be warm over the winter.

My bladder squeezed, a painful reminder of my need to pee.

*You'll have to wait a few more minutes.* Dean's appointed nurse would be knocking on my bedroom at 8:30 a.m. sharp as she had done my first morning here. She would do it twice a week and sometimes for random checks.

I rolled my eyes. Once a week would have been more than enough, but the overzealous Dean Beaumont was just so hell-bent on seeing me fail.

Little did he know that me seeing my sister go down the hell of drug use had been so traumatic that I'd never even touched a joint.

A sharp knock at the door brought me back to reality and I looked down at my duvet wistfully. Despite my need to pee, I was quite reluctant to leave the amazing warmth and comfort of my bed.

Sighing, I left the warm cocoon to open the door.

"Morning, Susan," I said with a smile at the scowling elderly nurse standing in front of my door, a sample pot in her hand.

I wanted to call her Nurse Ratched, who I suspected was her nursing inspiration, but she disliked me enough as it was.

Susan gestured toward the bathroom. "If you please."

*Sure, because I really have a choice.* I walked ahead of her into the bathroom and did my business under her eyes, which were full of judgment and reproach. I wondered what Dean might have told her about me, but I didn't care enough to actually ask.

"Here you go. Have a nice day." I extended the sample to her.

She nodded her head sharply and exited the room as rigidly as she'd come in.

I shook my head. I would not let this woman, her invasion of my privacy, or Dean Beaumont's scheming ruin this for me.

I took a shower and dressed for the day before checking on Timmy.

“Could you be more adorable?” I asked him with a smile as I found him playing quietly in his white crib.

Of all the rooms I’d seen in this house, Timmy’s bedroom was my least favorite. While state-of-the-art, the room was all white and impersonal. No care had been put into it and that was sad.

Did Dean intend to raise him like that? Without warmth or love? I sighed, picking Timmy up to give him a bath.

“That will not happen, sweet boy,” I cooed, kissing his head and rubbing my forefinger against his chest, over his little sick heart. “I’ll always fight to stay with you.”

I put him back in his bassinet, dressed him in warm clothes, and made him a bottle. I liked that I had everything in my room - the fridge and the bottle warmer included. It would have taken me forever to go into the kitchen and make him his bottle back home.

My stomach growled as I made him burp. I thought about the plate of food that would be set in front of me if I went into the kitchen.

I had to admit that I’ve been enjoying just stepping into the kitchen and having a plate of delicious food appear in front of me.

Having a full stomach, having access to food all the time, was the most luxurious thing to me.

Much more than this house and its gigantic garden, even more so than the library and its hundreds of books.

I walked down the corridor, heading toward the kitchen. Timmy sat securely in his baby carrier against my chest.

The more I walked down these halls, the more I discovered small details, leading me to suspect that the ominous, gloomy atmosphere of this house was more due to the present owner and the drama that had happened here rather than the building itself.

I let my fingers trail against the refined wooden moldings fresco on my way to the kitchen.

“Good morning, Ms. Collins. Did you have a good night?” Mrs. James, the housekeeper asked, as she set a plate of waffles and a glass of orange juice on the table for me.

“Very good, Mrs. James. This is the best bed I’ve ever slept in.”

I saw some compassion and sadness flash in her eyes as she helped me put Timmy in the baby booster feeding seat.

This woman had been nothing like I’d expected.

After Dean’s rebuttal and barely veiled hatred in my apartment, I’d expected all of his staff to give me the cold shoulder as well. But where he has been mean, they have been kind. Where he has been dismissive, they have been inclusive, and where he has been cold, they have been warm.

Mrs. James was older than I’d expected. She told me she’d been working here since the Beaumont family had moved in.

She explained that the house was mostly unoccupied and running on a skeleton crew, which still counted seven staff members. That apparently was minimalist in the rich world.

“How is your grandson?” I asked in between mouthfuls of buttery goodness. “Did he make the team?”

She smiled, nodding. “Yes, he did. He is ecstatic. He’s the only sophomore to make varsity.”

“That’s great!” I turned to Timmy. “Maybe he’ll show Timmy how to play one day.”

“Yes, of course!” We were good at pretending that Timmy’s heart was not sick, that he was okay and would be able to play sports one day.

“What are your plans today? Will Young Master Beaumont behave?”

I chuckled, looking at Timmy trying to chew his giraffe. “You have to stop calling him Young Master Beaumont. He’s just Timmy! You can call him Timmy, you know.”

She smiled and shook her head. “No, Miss, I’m afraid I can’t. This young man is the Beaumont heir. There’s a certain hierarchy to preserve, Miss.”

“I just -” I looked at Timmy again, who was now looking at me curiously with his big green eyes. “Mr. Beaumont is barely here; you can call him Timmy.” It was true. Since I’d moved in, I’d seen him only briefly - a few glimpses in corridors or opened doors, but he’d never spoken another word to me. I could count the sightings of him on the fingers of one hand, not that I would complain. I could do without his animosity.

“He is always here, dear,” she said, and while her voice was amicable, her eyes contained a clear warning. He was watching me.

She removed my plate as I patted my stomach. “Your food is beyond amazing. I will be sad once I move out. My signature dish is boxed macaroni and cheese.”

She threw me a look of horror. “Oh no!” She shook her head, wiping her hands on her apron. “That won’t do. Would you like me to teach you?”

“You’ve just made my day!” I was bored out of my skull here. Despite the vast number of books in the library and my full-time role of looking after Timmy, I needed more to do.

“I’m going to take him for a walk in the garden, but I’ll come by after that.”

She gave him a tender smile. “He is so precious; you must feel blessed.” I saw the affection plain on her face. She cared about Timmy, deeply and genuinely, and it made me like her even more.

“I do,” I confirmed. “I would not exchange him for all the money in the world.” She didn’t even know how true that was.

I finished my glass of orange juice, put Timmy in his quilted pram suit, and laid him on the baby carrier. Then I grabbed my jacket hanging up by the kitchen door and took the staff’s exit to the garden.

I shivered as I was met by a frigid gush of wind, a rude reminder that we were still in the heart of winter. The February wind was not something that my thin, overused, secondhand, fleece-lined, fake-leather jacket could really protect me against, but it was all I had. *Beggars can't be choosers*. That had been my motto for way too long.

Tightening my hold on Timmy, I started down the white gravel path. Timmy really enjoyed the country air.

The gardens were huge and so clinical, it was sad. Except for the perfectly manicured lawns and trees that were now leafless, there was nothing at all - no rose bushes, no flower beds. It resembled more of a golf court than a garden, and that was just a shame in my opinion. This place could be made into a real Eden for the spring and the summer.

Another gush of wind made me gasp.

*Sorry, sweet boy, that's going to be enough for one day*, I told Timmy before turning around and hurrying back to the house before hypothermia got us.

When I walked in and the delicious heat surrounded me, I shivered. Closing my eyes, I let out a blissful sigh. I could finally feel my face again.

I opened my eyes to meet Dean Beaumont's cold orbs. He was impeccably dressed in a dark-blue Prince of Wales checkered slim-fit three-piece suit. Did he ever dress down? I would have laughed in amusement if I didn't dislike the man so much.

"Mr. Beaumont," I greeted as I removed a now dozing Timmy from his baby carrier.

Fresh air was the trick with my sweet boy. It always made him sleepy and I was already looking forward to reading the book I'd picked up last night in the library. While he slept, I'd sit on the rocking chair by the window in his bedroom, which overlooked a small duck pond.

"Ms. Collins," he replied just as formally.

I'd given up on the idea to even try with this man. He hated me on principle and for unknown sins.

I rested Timmy on the kitchen table to remove his suit before setting him back in the baby carrier.

I shivered again, the cold from our walk still anchored inside me.

“Your test came back negative,” he added.

“Okay.” At least he had the courtesy to give me the results this time, not that I’d ever had any doubt.

“Jeremy Hunt called me back. He will be seeing Timothy on Monday upon his return from New York,” he continued.

That was progress. Timmy had gone from ‘the child’ to Timothy. I looked at Dean. Did he think he was explaining himself though? Who was Jeremy Hunt?

He sighed with annoyance. Lord, what was wrong with this man! I annoyed him just by standing here.

“I told you about the world-renowned pediatric surgeon that would be monitoring Timothy’s treatment.”

I nodded. “Yes, you mentioned him, but never by name.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “I assume you will want to come with us, so you will need to be ready by 7:30 sharp. He is seeing us before his first appointment.”

I would have loved to see him try to stop me. Timmy was my heart, nothing and no one could keep me away from him, including the terrifying Dean Beaumont.

I shivered again, the cold from the frigid wind still deep in my bones despite the warmth of the kitchen. I regretted going out, but maybe a hot shower would help.

I looked up at Dean, who was not really looking at me anymore. Rather, he was detailing my clothes.

“Why are you dressed like that?” he asked, detailing my leggings and thin long-sleeved shirts.

I didn’t understand the question. He was probably trying to belittle me as usual, but I’d missed the punchline this time.

He pointed at my clothes and I've never felt more out of place than under his critical eyes.

"Whether I like it or not, you're the mother of the Beaumont' heir. This -" he pointed at my beaten-up shoes - "will clearly not do. You can't go around looking like you live in a trailer park."

"What's wrong with the trailer park?" There were good, hard-working people in trailer parks. I knew that for a fact.

He rolled his eyes. "And what about this jacket?" He pointed at the rack, his mouth tipped down in disgust. "We're in February, not June."

Was he stupid? Did he think I would not have worn a better coat if I had one?

I just looked at him silently. I would not grace his stupid assumption with a comment.

His eyes widened, finally understanding. "I see," he sighed, straightening his single-breasted suit jacket. "Lets go."

"Where?" I asked, my eyes narrowing in suspicion

He sighed again as if I was the most insufferable person he'd ever met, and in some ways, I was sure that I was. He was not the type of man to be questioned.

"Shopping," he replied curtly. "I can't have you dressed like a hobo or a whore in this house. We'll go make you...at least, presentable." He shook his head. "I must stay at the manor for a while instead of going back to Philadelphia, not something I had really planned, and some of my business partners may come here for meetings. I don't need them questioning your presence after seeing your pauper-like looks."

"But Timmy is sleeping."

"Let him sleep, we're not taking Timothy."

"He has needs." I looked down at the sleeping baby wistfully. "I can't leave him alone."



“He won’t be alone. Well, the nanny won’t be here. She was the best money can buy, but she left yesterday. She said she’ll go to a house actually using her services.”

“I didn’t like her. She was too stern, too clinical. Timmy needs more.”

He shook his head as if I was a stubborn child. “He is not alone; he’ll be here with Mrs. James. She’s more than adequate for this.”

“It’s just-”

He raised his hand to stop me. “Are you going to tell me you took him to work?” He paled, genuine concern on his usual expressionless face. “You didn’t do your *thing* with him in the room, did you?”

I looked at him with incredulity. Was he serious? Was that really the opinion he had of me?

“No, I didn’t do my *thing* with him in the room. I have not done my thing for a long, long time - way before Timmy was born. I worked at a cafe, and yes, I left him with a lovely neighbor, but we’d needed food, medication, and a roof over our heads. The needs had outweighed my desire to stay with him.”

“Yes, well, your desire to be presentable should do that as well.” He pressed a button and Mrs. James appeared. I was almost certain she’d heard the whole conversation. “Could you take care of the child for the next few hours? Ms. Collins and I have somewhere we need to be.”

“Of course.” She came toward me and gave me a lovely smile, a motherly one. It reminded me of Dee, making me a lot more confident about leaving Timmy with her.

“We won’t be too long,” I assured her as she took the carrier from me.

“Let’s go,” Dean commanded as soon as Mrs. James had Timmy. “I don’t have all day. And don’t forget this pale excuse of a jacket,” he added before turning around and exiting the room.

I met him in the corridor as he pulled on his grey wool-blend tailored overcoat.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Walnut Street.”

“In Philly?” I shook my head. Philly was the home to loads of luxe and fashion-forward brands and not a place I would shop, even if I didn’t have to pay for it. “No. Do you have a phone? Can I borrow it?”

He looked at me with suspicion. “Don’t you have one?”

I waved my flip phone at him. “I need the internet.”

Sighing, he extended his unlocked phone. Of course, it was the latest iPhone.

“Let’s go to Oaks Mall. It’s only fifteen minutes away and has everything I need.”

“It’s...retail,” he said, his face morphing with disgust.

“And this is Goodwill. Anything new will be a step up!” I sighed. “Plus I’m not driving two hours to Philly and trust me when I say, brands are irrelevant. You can look glamorous in a ten dollars dress and you can look cheap in a thousand dollars dress.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll take your word for it since you know all about looking cheap,” he added before opening the door and folding himself into the car.

I almost smiled at that one. I’d given it to him and he’d gone straight for the throat. But all humor evaded me when I stepped outside, where the wind seemed to be even colder than before.

By the time I made it to the car, I was shivering.

He looked toward me. “Buckle up,” he ordered as he cranked up the heat. This little gesture, as small as it was, also warmed me inside. I snorted internally, annoyed at how that little act, him simply increasing the heat, was making me feel grateful.

He didn't talk all the way to the mall, but I didn't mind. His presence was too overbearing. I was not sure if that was due to him simply being a man, his power, his raw appeal, or his hate of me.

“Park here. Macy's will have everything we need.”

He parked and sighed, looking at the store's sign. “Macy's....”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, let's go.” I didn't want to spend too much time away from Timmy, and Dean was not really a person I wanted to spend my time with.

As soon as we walked in, Dean grabbed a sales assistant. “I need you to help her shop.”

I glared at him because A. I could do it myself and B. I hated the way he'd talked to the poor woman.

She smiled at him; I guess his pretty face excused the rudeness. “Well, we do have personal stylists, sir.”

“Perfect. We'll have one now.”

She giggled, actually giggled. What was wrong with this woman?

“I'm sorry, sir, but she's on appointment only. I can try to arrange something for next w-”

“Absolutely not.” He got his wallet out of his suit jacket and flashed her a black and silver card. “I'm sure you know what this card means. Get her here, now.”

Her eyes widened and I didn't need to see the card to know it meant, ‘I'm loaded as shit.’

She nodded. “I'll get her.”

“Thought so,” he grumbled as we watched her hurrying away.

“That was unnecessary.” I sighed as I started to look at the coats nearby. I picked up the cheapest one.

He appeared beside me and put the coat away. “I beg to differ. This coat is cheap. Plus the color is not flattering.” He

put it back and picked up a beautiful red asymmetrical cashmere coat with brass buttons. “This one.” He pushed it toward me.

“Good choice.” We heard a voice say from behind us.

I turned around to see a stunning blonde woman in her forties. She was perfectly dressed; everything was matching, even her make-up and hairband.

“My name’s Sabrina. I’m the personal shopper at this store and am happy to be of assistance.”

I opened my mouth to greet her, but Dean spoke before I had the chance.

“Thank you, Sabrina. She needs a full wardrobe - undergarments included, I presume.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t bother correcting him.

For the next couple of hours, I suffered under the hands of Sabrina - pants, shirts, skirts, jumper, socks, stockings, matching sets of underwear, and bras... The woman left nothing out. I was grateful I didn’t know the prices. I was pretty certain I would have had a heart attack if I did. I was grateful that despite Dean’s orders to make me presentable I’d managed to add two pairs of jeans and sneakers to the lot.

Dean didn’t seem bothered about all the purchases. He sat on a brown leather sofa by the single VIP changing room, typing away on his phone. It seemed he never really stopped working and that was a shame. Not that he should be enjoying my company, we were never going to happen, but he should enjoy life.

I sighed with relief when Sabrina finally stopped having me try on clothes.

“We need an evening gown just in case,” Dean stated, not looking up from his phone. “I hardly think the dresses she used to wear would be suitable for any party other than an orgy.”

I blushed a deep crimson as Sabrina’s eyes widened in shock.

She turned toward me, detailing me, probably trying to decipher if he was joking or not.

But I couldn't even say anything. I was too angry with him. Just when I'd started hating him less, he snapped back with a passion. If it wasn't for Timmy, I would have jumped on him right now and beat him as much as I could. But I knew that if I so much as slapped him, he'd take Timmy away from me, calling me violent and unstable.

"I- I- I think I have a few great choices. Just give me a few minutes. I'll be back with something." Sabrina rushed away, probably ready to gossip, and explain to her colleagues that she was witnessing a remake of *Pretty Woman*.

I snorted, she didn't know that man was a mental and emotional terrorist whose sole goal was to steal my child...yes a real prince.

I reached behind me, trying to unzip the black and white dress, but it was stuck.

*Fuck it!* I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible and end this nightmare. I would just take the first dress she brings and be on my way.

"Could you help me, please? The zipper is stuck."

Dean finally looked up from his phone. He looked at me for a second, his eyebrows slightly raised in surprise.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, turn around."

He stood up, walked behind me, and brought my zipper down slowly.

I couldn't help but shiver when his knuckles brushed my spine, and I hated myself for it.

I looked at him in the floor-length mirror. His head bent closer to my neck as if he was going to kiss me. I froze. This was not happening; he despised me.

He straightened sharply, as if he'd finally remembered who I was.

"What is that smell?" he asked sharply, almost accusingly.

I frowned. That was not the reaction I'd expected.

"Victoria's Secret aqua kiss body cream," I replied, closing the curtain of the changing room and slipping out of the dress.

"I see... No money for food, but money to entice men. I guess that is your business."

I rolled my eyes and thought about ignoring him, but yet... "We trade favors."

"I see... Sex for body lotion. You went lower than I'd thought."

I bite my bottom lip as tears start stinging my eyes. I knew it would be pointless to justify myself to him. He was obviously a stubborn man and once his opinion was made, nothing could change it. I didn't know why I kept justifying myself to him, why I tried to make him understand and yet, I couldn't seem to help myself.

"No, most of us don't have money, so we trade favors. My friend owns a small drugstore. I help her with marketing. I update her website, Facebook page, and other social media in exchange for free products and makeup that are close to their expiry date."

He didn't have the chance to reply as Sabrina came back with the dresses. I tried the first one, not even bothering to see how it looked in the mirror. All I knew was that it was red.

I was done. I'd taken enough punches for the day, I wanted to go back to the only person who would ever love me unconditionally, my Timmy.

Putting my clothes back on, I exited the changing room.

"Are you not going to try them?" Sabrina asked, carefully taking the dress.

"This one's fine," I let out emotionlessly. I was done playing nice for the day. Just an hour with him had exhausted me emotionally.

Dean looked up. "Done?" But the bastard was not looking at me; he was looking at Sabrina.

“Seems like it.” She smiled so brightly at him, I suspected that today’s commission would probably be worth a month’s pay to her, if not two. I had everything already packed and ready to go. “Two of our shop assistants are waiting by the checkout counter. They’ll take everything to your car.”

“Perfect.” Dean stood up, putting his phone back into his interior jacket pocket. “Let’s go.”

Standing behind him, I almost choked on my own saliva when the total was announced. Almost \$10,000. Dean handed his credit card over as if he was paying for a five dollar purchase.

“Give her the coat now.” He turned to me. “Just give them your poor excuse of a jacket to burn.”

Did he know that everything he said came out as an order? I didn’t think I’ve heard him ask for anything.

I slipped into the coat and couldn’t help releasing a little sigh of comfort when we stepped out of the store and the wind didn’t affect me.

As the shop assistants piled our bags into the car, my stomach growled loudly. Dean closed the trunk and turned toward me.

“Hungry?”

I looked at him silently. What could I say? I was ravenous, but he was not one to care about my needs.

He sighed. “Come on, let’s go. I know a little Italian restaurant we pass on the way back. We’ll eat there,” he announced as he climbed in behind the wheel.

Was he high? He’d made me bleed enough for the day. No way was I going to spend more time with him than was strictly necessary.

“No,” I replied as I buckled my seatbelt.

He turned toward me, looking confused. I assumed ‘no’ was not a word he heard often.

My stomach used that moment to betray me again, its growl even more deafening inside the car.

His eyes trailed down to my stomach before returning to my face. His emerald eyes, cold and bright like a piece of broken glass ready to pierce my skin. “Don’t be a child. Or do you not like Italian? Do we need to go to Chuck E. Cheese?” he asked, starting the car.

*No, it’s you I don’t like.* “No, because I don’t want to. No, because I’ve spent enough time with you. No, because I want to go home to Timmy.” I shrugged. “Take the answer that fits your ego best. Either way, I’m not eating with you.”

He looked at me silently, his nostrils flaring, his lips pinching in a tight line. He was furious at me and I took a little pleasure in that.

“Very well,” he snapped. Revving the car like a madman, he drove out of the parking lot much faster than I would have liked.

He was silent for a few minutes, speeding down the road. I glanced his way, not missing the muscles of his jaw bulging as he ground his teeth.

“One more thing,” he announced so coldly I knew pain was coming. “You’re not going home. This is not *your* home, it’s *my* home, Timothy’s home. You’re just a broken piece that doesn’t fit anywhere and who’s here based on my goodwill only. Don’t forget that.”

How could I? I’ve never fitted anywhere and I’ve been broken since I was born. “I won’t,” I replied as calmly as I could despite the lump of tears building in my throat.



# CHAPTER FIVE

*Dear*



“Are you ready to go?” I asked the infuriating woman who was already waiting for me in the kitchen. The child was nearly dressed too.

She was not at all what I’d expected her to be. She was ready on time, helping around the place, and taking very good care of the child even when she thought nobody was watching.

She was an addict though. She knew how to fake, how to cheat her world. I was a smart man, a cunning man, and yet, Edward had managed to fool me more times than I cared to admit.

So far, she’d yet to fall for my traps. She had not stolen the diamond ring that was ‘lost’ on the floor. No, she’d sought Mrs. James and had given it to her for safekeeping.

She’d not taken the platinum money clip that had fallen out of my pocket. Instead, she’d knocked on my office door and given it back to me.

She’d take the bait eventually though. She was simply smarter, more prepared than I’d given her credit for, but with the right trigger, she would fall. I knew it.

She nodded. “Just let me put Timmy in his suit and we’ll be ready to go.”

I detailed her as she dressed the child, trying my hardest to contain my sigh.

I’d spent nearly \$10k in clothes and accessories for her just a few days ago and she was still dressed down in a pair of dark blue jeans, a red henley I didn’t even remember buying for her and a pair of biker boots. With her hair held up in a high ponytail and her face make-up free, except for a little lip gloss, she looked so innocent, so pure. I was almost fooled, I would’ve been if I didn’t know better.

“Okay, I’m good to go,” she said after securing the child in the car seat.

I extended my hand toward it. “Allow me.” It was not so much a request, but an order.

I looked deep into the child’s eyes as I reached for him. His eyes were so similar to mine, to Edward’s, and my heart gave an unfamiliar squeeze. It was a feeling I was not willing to explore - now or ever.

I cleared my throat. “Time to move. We can’t be late.”

She grumbled something behind my back - I was sure it was all but complimentary - as she grabbed the changing bag. As we reached the entrance, she grabbed her coat.

The drive to the hospital was made in silence, but it didn’t seem to bother her. I scowled at the road. That also was something new - women always wanted to talk, just like Helle, who just couldn’t shut up.

“Wow. It looks just like the hospitals on TV,” she said as we parked by the entrance. It helped that we were meeting Jeremy before the hospital had even officially opened for the day; the car park was practically deserted.

“Based on how much it costs to be treated here? I sure hope so,” I replied, dismissing any further tentative conversation with her.

I grabbed the child and looked down at him again with a frown. "I never hear him cry. Is he defective?"

She scowled at me, pursing her lips. "No, he is not *defective*. He's just a very quiet baby and his heart condition makes him more tired, hence why he's sleeping more." She sighed. "Unbelievable." She shook her head, took a deep breath, and then a step back. "Lead the way."

I nodded, walking ahead of her. She was showing more self-control than I'd thought she would.

We took the elevator to the pediatric floor and passed the empty reception desk to the already open door of Jeremy's office.

"Ah, Dean, right on time." He smiled, looking up from his computer as I walked in, closely followed by Opal.

His eyes collided with Opal and his eyebrows raised slightly. Ah, he liked what he saw. I turned toward her and saw the same. She liked what she saw too and for some reason that didn't settle well with me.

Jeremy had always been a hit with the girls, even back at school. His mixed features of a Chinese mother and American father had given him striking and exotic features -crow black hair, golden skin, and slightly slanted blue eyes.

I was not a witch doctor like my sister was, but I could read people. These two found each other attractive, but they were never going to happen. I couldn't have Jeremy meddling in my plans - no matter how good he was.

Jeremy stood up and walked to Opal, extending his hand to her. "You must be Opal."

She smiled brightly at him - not a smile she would give me, that was sure. Maybe because she knew she could not fool me, that I knew how rotten she was, and how she'd pulled my brother under one too many times.

Jeremy looked down at the detachable car seat that I still held. My hand was in a tight fist, my knuckles white.

"This is Timmy," she offered gently.

“Timothy,” I corrected her coldly. “His name is Timothy, not Timmy. He is an heir.”

She sighed but didn’t comment.

Jeremy nodded. “Very well. I want to discuss a few things before we send Timothy for any tests, okay?”

She nodded as I grunted. I should not let that woman get on my nerves and yet, that seemed to be an impossible task.

She sat down, opened her bag, and extended a beat-up green binder to Jeremy. “These are all of the results of Timmy’s - sorry, *Timothy’s* tests since he was born. There’s also some research I’ve made based on his condition, some potential treatments I thought we could explore, and also some of the feedback from the free pediatrician clinic we’ve been going to.”

Jeremy nodded, taking the binder from her and looking through the pages, visibly impressed.

I scowled. Didn’t he know what she was? I snorted. “No offense, but what do you know about treatment plans? Were you multitasking? Surgeon by day, low-grade prostitute by night? That sounds like a terrible plot if you want my opinion.”

Her cheeks flushed slightly under the jab, but she straightened her back and looked straight into my eyes. “If you wanted to make it clear to your friend what I did for a living before having Timmy, I think you made that clear,” she enunciated coolly, so coolly it was unnerving. She turned toward Jeremy, holding herself proudly. “In case you didn’t understand, I was not a surgeon in my downtime, but a prostitute.”

I was almost impressed by her composure and calm; I could have been if I didn’t hate her so much.

Jeremy nodded at her with a little teasing smile. What the flying fuck was this? She was the mother of a patient, not an easy lay - not today.

“Thanks for clarifying because based on all of this research, I was not sure. It’s very thorough and cleverly done.”

She straightened on her seat, beaming at the compliment. Pathetic.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my legs, resting my ankle on my knee. “Can we move on now? I believe you have a packed day and I have a job too.”

“Right.” Jeremy rested the file on his desk.

“Plus, bringing the file was unnecessary.” I pointed at Jeremy. “Jeremy will do all the tests. You are in front of one of the best pediatric surgeons in the country. Whatever your files have to say, is useless.”

She looked away, focusing on Timothy. “Sorry. I thought it would help.” Jeremy threw me a look that unsettled me. It was the kind of look that Lea threw my way sometimes - part disappointment, part shame. I could accept it from her, but not from him. We might be friends, but he needed to learn to keep his place in life and society. I met his look with the cold stare I used in boardrooms.

He shook his head and looked back at Opal, resting his hand on the folder. “Actually Ms. Collins, this is invaluable. You kept all the test results and all the potential treatment plans. It will help greatly to see how this little man’s condition is progressing. May I ask what pushed you to do that?”

“Oh, you know, the free clinic is a nightmare to get through -” she waved her hand dismissively - “and I had to fight like crazy to get on the list. The doctor has to see so many patients that you get an allotted fifteen minutes. This binder allowed me to maximize every minute.”

I almost asked if ‘fighting like crazy’ meant taking it up the ass, but I held my tongue as my dark thoughts were now intrigued about her ass and her willingness to please.

I stood up briskly and walked to the window, urging my cock to behave. It was not allowed to react without my consent and certainly not for this trainwreck of a woman.

“Okay, so I won’t be examining Timothy right now,” Jeremy started, but I kept my back to them. “His coloring seems okay now but I want to see how it all progressed. I’m

more concerned about the hole in his heart and artery at this stage. We need to ensure it is not increasing in size.”

“I’ve been counting his heartbeats at random times while he sleeps and I’ve logged them at the back of the folder.”

I closed my eyes - a hole in his heart so small and yet so life-threatening. It was quite an ironic thought. In my family, I was the cold logical brain, Edward had been the over-sensitive heart, and Lea was blessed with the mix of both - making her the unicorn of our family. How ironic was it that the heart of the family had created a child with a heart defect?

“Dean?”

I turned around briskly, meeting their questioning eyes.

“What?”

“I said the tests will take about two to three hours. We need to send Timmy -”

“Timothy,” I corrected him coldly. It was enough that Opal called him that ridiculous nickname. I certainly wasn’t going to allow someone else to call him something unworthy of the heir of the Beaumont dynasty.

Jeremy’s eyes flashed with annoyance. Ah, he was not the bottomless well of calm and patience he was pretending to be.

“Very well. Timothy needs to get blood work, a pulse oximetry test, an echocardiogram, and an electrocardiogram. Depending on the result of the blood work, we may need some further tests.”

I nodded. “Do what you need to do. I’ll go to the business center to do some work.”

“What kind of hospital has a business center?” Opal asked, neatly folding Timothy’s coat and outer layer of clothes before placing them in her bag.

Jeremy chuckled. He liked her, that much was clear, and it was really grating me the wrong way. “Private hospitals. People have a hard time disconnecting.”

“That’s sad.”

“Some of us have responsibilities, Ms. Collins. Not everybody can earn money simply by lying on their back.”

She nodded. “That’s true,” she replied softly.

It was infuriating how she was not upset about what I was telling her. I wanted to affect her as negatively as she was affecting me, but she did not seem to care.

When Jeremy shook his head, I smirked. At least I was aggravating someone.

“I will go get Charlotte. She is the nurse assigned to Timothy for the day.”

“I can stay with him, right?” she asked, resting his grey teddy against her chest.

That thing was old and threadbare. I was sure it was something she’d gotten second-hand and yet, I could not separate the child from it.

“He’s much more settled if I stay with him during the tests. Believe me, it will go much more smoothly.”

Jeremy smiled at her brightly. I frowned. It was a warm smile, almost flirty. It reminded me a lot of high school Jeremy. *Not a chance, man. You won’t go there and destroy my plans.*

“Jeremy, with all due respect, I don’t have all day.”

He smirked at me. “Since when do you respect me?” He made it sound like a joke, but we both knew it wasn’t one.

I smiled back. “Since you’re the doctor I need now.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Opal waited for Jeremy to leave before turning to me.

“You know, Eddie might have been a lost drug addict, but he was a better man than you. He was never mean and belittling just to make himself feel good,” she said with such an even tone, it was like she was scolding a child. Didn’t she know, nobody ever dared talk to me like that?

“How dare you express an opinion about me? Any kind of opinion.”

She shrugged. “It’s not an opinion; it’s a fact.”

I grabbed her arm. She winced as I applied pressure, but she didn’t try to remove it. She didn’t complain. No, she wanted to show she was stronger than that. *Oh, I will enjoy breaking you down.*

“Yeah?” I nodded. “Tell that to my sister, who gave him so many chances only for him to steal her credit card and buy *you* over ten grand’s worth of jewelry!”

She frowned with confusion.

“Please don’t play fucking dumb with me. He admitted it. He was completely under your spell and where is that jewelry now, huh? You clearly didn’t spend it on medical bills or shelter.” I squeezed her arm even harder, making her gasp and yet, she didn’t struggle. “I bet that money is running through your fucking veins, so save your sermon and other platitudes for someone who actually believes you. I don’t give a fuck about what you think. I’m not that person.”

Timothy chose that moment to start crying.

She looked down at my hand biting in her forearm. “Could you please let go? My son needs me.”

I let her go at once and she rubbed her arm as she went to the crying child.

I looked at my hand. I hadn’t meant to hurt her, at least not really, but she was destabilizing me, taking away some of my cold rationality I adored. It had to stop.

“I’ll leave you to it, the nurse should be here soon. Just tell them to find me when you’re done.”

She nodded and started to undress the child to, I presume, change his diaper. “I’ll let you know what they say.”

“No need. I’ll have the full report before this evening,” I added, leaving the room at once.



I walked briskly to the business center, the scowl never leaving my face. I needed her gone. I needed her gone now and I knew exactly how to do it.

# CHAPTER SIX

*Amber*



I rubbed at my arm and the faint bluish bruises Dean Beaumont's fingers had left there. It had been three days and they were finally starting to fade.

I sighed, putting some hydrating cream on my arm. I knew he hadn't done it on purpose, at least, not really. He just hated me - well Opal, so much.

But truth be told, no matter what he thought had happened with his brother, it was no reason to treat me the way he did. Dean Beaumont was probably the most horrible, infuriating man I'd ever met.

I huffed, tightening my hair into a ponytail before looking back at my reflection in the small ensuite bathroom. My face was radiating with anger and frustration, something I was doing my hardest to hide when he was around.

I was sure he was getting off with every jab he was throwing my way. Showing him he was getting to me would most likely only enhance his pleasure. No, I would not give in.

I walked into Timmy's room and watched him play in his crib. I now knew the exact extent of his problems. We now had

a treatment plan and just for that, anything Dean Beaumont could throw my way was worth it.

“What do you say we go get some apple jam? Yum yum!” I smiled at this beautiful innocent child, who had come into this world under all the wrong circumstances and yet, was just a happy little fighter.

I got him out from his crib. He’d already had his bottle and had been bathed and dressed. Now was the time for his heart medication. Dr. Hunt had prescribed him something much more efficient than what I had been given at the free clinic.

I held Timmy closer. Burying my nose in his soft neck, I inhaled his baby scent.

“I love you so much, my little boy,” I whispered. “So, so much.”

A small knock made me swirl around to find Dean leaning against the door frame, his hands in his pants pockets.

“May I assist you with something, Mr. Beaumont?” I asked, holding Timmy tighter against myself.

“I have to go to Philadelphia today.”

I looked at him silently, unsure why he was telling me.

“I won’t do anything,” I replied after a while when he just kept on staring.

He rolled his eyes, moving from his spot at the door. “Would you like to come with and bring Timothy?”

“Why?” I asked. I couldn’t help but feel suspicious. I’d only been here for a little over a week and somehow, I already knew that this man would never do anything nice for me.

“Why not?” He gestured around Timmy’s room. “I know you don’t like this room.”

“What’s not to like? It’s basically a lab room.”

He threw me an exasperated side look. “Well, I opened a credit line at Little Cherubs. Here.” He extended me a credit card. “While you’re there, buy whatever you need for you and the child.”

I looked at the card he was extending me as if it was a scorpion ready to strike. It felt loaded, like taking it was a trap.

“If you have a credit line at Little Cherubs, then it should be fine.” I looked away from the card. “I don’t need that.”

He locked his emerald eyes on mine. They were so intense; it was genuinely unsettling. “Humor me. You’ll need things. No issues, just take the damn card.”

“Fine!” I grabbed it from him. He was not wrong. “I would need lunch and some essential toiletries. I just need a few minutes to give Timmy his meds.”

He nodded. “I’ll see you in thirty minutes in the corridor.”

I watched him leave the room, suspicion settling in my stomach. I’d never been an over-trusting person, but he’d been nice... Well, no, not nice. I didn’t think that man would ever be able to be nice, even if he wanted to. But he had been cordial and that was different from his usual hate.

I gave Timmy his meds, grabbed everything I needed and joined Dean in the hall. He was in what seemed like a conference call though, so just gestured me toward the car.

“I’ve put the stroller in the car, Miss,” the driver said as he opened the door for me.

“Thank you, David.”

He smiled, bowing his head slightly. “You’re very welcome.”

Dean spent the whole drive on his conference call asking about share price and takeovers. It was all so unbelievably boring that I tuned him out after five minutes and started to play with Timmy.

Just as we parked in front of the Beaumont Enterprise tower, Dean disconnected his call.

He looked down at his watch.

“Little Cherubs is two streets down. I believe you can find everything you might need in this neighborhood, but should you need to go anywhere else, you can use the car.”

“That won’t be necessary. I know the city. There’s everything I need in this district.”

He nodded sharply. “Very well.”

I watched him disappear into the tower in his perfectly tailored suit, the security guard scrambling to open the door for him like he was a god. Although, I suspected that’s exactly what he was in this building.

I sighed and shook my head, trying to get Dean Beaumont out of my mind.

I texted Dee, asking her to meet me for coffee in a couple of hours if she could. She replied almost immediately, saying that she missed me so much, so of course she’d be there.

I smiled at her reply. It was a nice change from the constant animosity I was facing with Dean Beaumont.

I entered the store, bracing myself at having to justify my presence. Little Cherubs was the most exclusive and expensive baby store in all of Philly. The shop assistant detailed me, looked at the stroller, and then smiled broadly.

“Welcome to Little Cherubs,” she said, rushing toward me. She peered into the stroller to find a sleeping Timmy. “Oh, he is adorable!”

As I looked down, I realized that the stroller was a very expensive brand and I was wearing the amazing red cashmere coat that Dean had bought for me - a coat I was more than grateful to have on today with the freezing, unforgiving wind.

I did look rich. I smiled at her. I would spend money today alright. Timmy would have the best there was.

“Hi. I have a credit line opened for Timothy Beaumont.”

“Ah, yes, of course!” Her eyes light up with dollar signs. “What is it you need?”

I looked down at Timmy and smiled. Be ready for the bill, Dean Beaumont. “Everything.”

I shopped for the next two hours, buying everything I thought Timmy would need for the next eighteen months. I

even added paint and stencils to decorate the white clinical walls I hated so much.

By the time I was done, I was exhausted. I changed Timmy's diaper and fed him in the store's state-of-the-art room I was sure was not provided to every mother. But I'd just spent five digits in this store - more than my yearly wage before tax!

When I met Dee, I was ravenous and so decided to treat us to a late lunch, using the credit card. I deserved that much for being Dean's in-house punching bag.

We sat at a table at the back. As usual, Dee looked stunning, wearing a leopard-printed dress that molded her generous form to perfection. Her make-up was flawless, her deep-red lips matching her bag and shoes.

Picking Timmy up from his stroller, she kissed him on his forehead, leaving her usual lipstick mark there. "I've missed you, sweet boy." She stroked his cheek softly. "How is he doing?" she asked me, rocking Timmy against her chest.

I smiled. "He's doing good. The Doctor Dean took us to is a world-renowned pediatric surgeon and a nice man. He will fix Timmy's heart, I'm sure of it." I smiled fondly at the little boy starting to doze on his unofficial godmother's chest. "He is still getting tired, but the new meds are fantastic. The side effects are barely there anymore. He can eat without getting sick and no more diarrhea."

She looked down at him and brushed the top of his head with her nose. "That's good. At least something good will come from this. This little boy deserves the best." She looked up. "And so do you, sweet girl." She detailed me as we ordered our food and drinks.

"What?" I asked subconsciously.

"You've put some weight on." She nodded. "It looks so good on you. Just a few more pounds and you will be perfect."

"I've only been gone two weeks, Dee, but yeah, I guess that's what eating your fill will do to you, huh?" I've put on

six pounds in two weeks. The constant dull ache in my stomach is gone. It was a luxury most people took for granted.

“How are things there? Really,” she asked as she settled Timmy back in his stroller and the waiter brought us our lattes.

I drank a bit, giving myself time to think of what to say. I didn't want Dee to worry more than what she already did.

“The house is amazing. You should see this place. And the library is enormous. I think I've read more in two weeks than I have in five years!” I smiled. “The staff is very lovely too, Mrs. James, the head housekeeper, is teaching me how to cook. I know quite a few recipes already. I love cooking.”

She nodded, resting her chin on her knuckles, her eyes shining. I clearly had not fooled her. “How's it going with the oldest Beaumont?”

I was grateful the waiter came then with the food.

I cut a piece of steak.” Well, I can't say he's a fan,” I admitted before putting a piece of meat in my mouth.

“Uh... Why do I think you're hiding things?”

*Because I am.* “It's not that bad, really.” *Yes, yes, it is.*

She detailed me silently, her lips pursed. “You know, honeybun, you don't have to take whatever that man is throwing your way. Just because he's rich and powerful, doesn't mean he's better than you.”

“According to society, he is.”

“And since when do I care what society thinks? Ain't no time for that shit.”

I chuckled. “It's not so bad, really.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes.

I sighed. I needed to know the truth. “Do you think she did it on purpose? Get pregnant by a Beaumont?”

Dee frowned. “Why do you ask? You've never questioned it before.”

I leaned back in my seat. “You do, don't you?”

Dee shook her head. "I don't speak ill of the dead."

I looked down at my plate. My sister had been as calculating as Dean accused her of being. "I thought about it and it made sense now you know. The newspaper cuttings she had... Eddie had not been her usual type, too soft and lanky. She played him, didn't she?"

Dee let out a weary sigh. "I'm not certain, honeybun, but what I do know is that your sister always knew how to keep herself safe. She'd had an implant and even when she was high, condoms were a must." She shrugged.

I nodded. She didn't need to say more, I understood Dean had been right and, whilst misplaced, his anger and dislike was.

"But what she might have done or not doesn't matter. She'd loved this baby you know."

"I do." I nodded. That was the only thing stopping me from being mad at her right now.

"He is just so -" I shook my head. I didn't know how to put it without worrying poor Dee too much.

"So?"

"Angry all the time. He is hot and cold. One moment he almost seems concerned and then the next, he's treating me like Typhoid Mary."

"Ah." She nodded. "He's attracted to you, but doesn't like it." She cocked her head to the side. "You can always use that to your advantage."

I snorted at that one. "Yeah, I don't think that's it, Dee. No, the disgust on his face when he looks at me is clear enough. And even if that was the case, I'd never use anyone like that and you know it. I'm not Opal."

She sighed. "That man clearly would..." She pointed at the credit card I'd put on the table to show we were ready to pay and then to the cashmere coat folded neatly on the seat beside me. "That man clearly is. But take what you can, baby. You deserve all that and more. And if you feel guilty, don't. Dean



hasn't gotten where he is by being kind. He also threatened you and wanted to *buy* your child."

I nodded. "Yes, you're right." Dee knew me well; she knew I wore my heart on my sleeve and would never try to use anyone.

"You deserve the best in the world, baby, and so does this little boy." She sighed, looking at her watch. "Ah no matter how much I want to stay, I need to go."

I looked at mine too and almost jerked up. "Oh, yeah please go. I've got to be at Beaumont Enterprise in thirty minutes, anyway."

She cuddled Timmy as I paid. After putting on my coat, we exited the warm restaurant, stepping out into the cold and already darkening streets.

"Don't be a stranger, okay? Call me whenever and if it ever gets too much with the man, we'll figure something out."

She pulled me into one of her motherly hugs and I let it consume me, her kindness, her warmth, her love. I would not have made it without Dee.

"I love you, Dee."

She pushed me back gently and detailed my face once more with concern. She brought her hand up and used her thumbpad to dry the tear that had escaped the corner of my eye.

"I love you too, sweet girl. Remember how good you are and never compromise." She smiled and kissed my forehead. "Having you as a daughter would have been the most precious gift."

I let out a tearless sob. That was probably the best compliment she could have ever given me.

I walked back toward the building, lost in my thoughts. I was excited to redecorate Timmy's room. I was just thinking about the color scheme I picked when my path was blocked by a twitchy lanky man. His eyes darted all around him.

I sucked in a breath and took a step back, holding the stroller tighter in my hands. I didn't need to know this man to know what he was. I'd met too many of them in my time living with Opal. He was a druggie.

"You Eddie's chick?" he asked, taking a step toward me, his bloodshot eyes detailing my stupid, expensive clothes.

I looked around for help. "Take what you want. Please don't hurt him."

He looked down at the stroller and raised his upper lip in disgust, revealing his rotten teeth.

"I ain't want your shit." He shook his head. "I saw you with his brother. You go round uh?" He chuckled.

I remained frozen, my muscles tensed, ready to flee.

"You Opal?"

I nodded once. Why on earth did I do that?

"Here, take this." He extended a small brown bag toward me.

"What is it?"

He nudged the bag toward me again. "Don't fucking play dumb with me. Take the fucking bag."

He was getting restless and I didn't need this unstable man any closer to Timmy than necessary.

I took the bag reluctantly.

"You don't say to no one Ricky don't pay his debt," he stated before leaving the way he'd come.

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm myself, before opening the bag with shaky hands. There were at least three or four doses of heroin in. I sighed, looking around. I couldn't just throw them away in the garbage for anyone to find.

Retracing my steps, I found the sewer opening on the pavement and threw the bag where it belonged.

By the time I made it to the building, my heart had quieted down and I was normal again. The driver was already waiting in front of the car. He was helping me with the stroller when Dean came out, walking proud and tall, his dark hair still perfectly in shape and the perpetual dark scowl still on his face.

“You’re on time, good.” He gestured towards the car. “Did you find everything you wanted?”

I nodded. “Yes, some were on backorder, but I’ll get everything next week.”

“Very well. At least this trip was productive. Anything else?”

I was taken aback by his question. He’d been anything but inquisitive these past couple of weeks.

I shook my head. “No, nothing else.”

He looked at me silently for a few seconds before looking away and making a call.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

*Dear*



I looked out of my office window, making sure Opal was out in the garden for her morning walk with the child.

I glared at her back as she walked slowly, holding the child against her chest.

Sighing, I shook my head. She seemed to be caring for the child, genuinely. All the cameras I'd hidden in the house showed nothing less. But even if she believed it now, the love of drugs would one day be stronger.

I felt guilty for a fleeting moment, but I'd learned this the hard way with Edward. No matter how much you loved someone or something, nothing would really trump the love for heroin. I didn't intend to risk the well-being of the heir of our fortune by betting on an unreliable mother.

*Like yours?* A teasing, acerbic voice whispered in my head.

Turning from the window, I headed towards her bedroom. The dealer had confirmed he'd given her the doses and yet, both her surprise and her planned urine tests had come back negative.

And that made no sense. I knew the nurse couldn't be bribed because I paid her enough to ensure that and she was probably the meanest person I'd ever met.

I just needed to find the drugs in her room. That would probably be enough to scare her into leaving me the child.

I entered her room. It smelled floral just like her. Before I'd even realized it, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply.

I sighed. I needed to remember that everything about her was carefully crafted to entice.

I looked at the book on her nightstand. *Me before you* by Jojo Moyes it was just a beat-up and overused copy. I opened the first page - it was addressed to a Mary, definitely a secondhand copy.

Putting the book back, I looked around the room once more. Everything was in perfect order, clothes folded neatly in the nearby chair, some baby toys in a box by the connecting door. Again, not really the type of environment I'd expected from her. Was she faking it? Was she just this good?

I stopped for a minute trying to remember where my brother used to hide his stash. I had twenty, thirty minutes tops to find what I needed to.

Opal had a routine. Take the child for a walk. Give his medication. Then head back upstairs to take care of him.

I started at the obvious places under the bed, under the mattress, behind the dresser, in the toilet water tank. Nothing.

Okay. She was smarter than Eddie had been.

I opened the first drawer. At the sight of her panties, I couldn't help but frown. I did feel a bit like a pervert as I detailed her underwear. Except for a red thong, which seemed to be an anomaly, it was all white cotton briefs with flowers or other childish designs on them - not what I'd expected for a hooker.

"What are you doing in my room?"

I froze for a second at the voice before turning around, my nostrils flaring in anger, showing her what I'd found. She was

even more of a conniving bitch than I'd thought.

"It's my house. Nothing here is yours - especially not this!" I barked, nudging the gold bracelet wrapped around my forefinger. "Where did you find this? Did you break into my mother's room?"

She tightened her hold around the child. "I've not been anywhere in this house except for this room and the kitchen. That bracelet is mine." She jerked her chin toward me in defiance.

I took a threatening step toward her, growling. How fucking stupid did she think I was?

"You're going to tell me you bought this? I dare you to fucking lie."

"No." She shook her head. "Eddie gave it to me as a present for-" She stopped again. "He gave it to me over a year ago."

"He didn't!" Eddie wouldn't have taken something from my mother. He knew how defensive I was about all of her belongings. He would not have been that reckless, especially not by giving it to someone he knew would sell it.

"Yes, he did!" She insisted. I couldn't see any deception on her face.

"Why hide it then?" I challenged. "If you had nothing to hide, then why keep it under your underwear?"

"Because I know the opinion you have of me. Because I knew your reaction would be something like what it just was and because I knew you wouldn't believe me. I'm just a cheap whore, aren't I? With no conscience or morals. But even when I was starving, even when I had to sell my own clothes to feed Timmy, I kept it." She pointed an accusing finger at me. "I knew how much it meant to Eddie. I knew what it meant to him, giving it to me. I. Didn't. Steal. It."

She looked at it with longing, she clearly cared for it. Sighing, she looked down at the child. "Take it back if you want. I guess Eddie didn't have the right to take it anyway."

Shaking her head, she walked to the connecting door into the nursery.

She stayed there for a few minutes. Whilst my instinct told me to take the bracelet back and leave the room, I waited for her, uncertain as to why.

Part of me wanted to know her, to find the chink in her carefully erected armor but she could not win, not against me. She had the drugs. I knew she did. Both the druggie and my man had told me she'd taken it.

I looked around her room again, still standing in front of the dresser. I could still look if I wanted to. It was not like I owed her any respect. And it was not like she could go anywhere.

She came back, surprised to still find me here.

She looked down longingly at the bracelet still in my hand.

“This was one of my mother’s favorite pieces of jewelry,” I told her, unsure as to why. She didn’t deserve any explanation. I revisited the memory of my mother, the burning pain mixed with anger burned my lungs and turned everything inside out.

“It’s a very lovely bracelet,” she replied gently. I didn’t deserve that tone, not after the way I’d treated her.

I lifted it up to eye level, dangling the bracelet on my forefinger. This was one of the cheapest pieces she’d owned. Using my thumb, I gently brushed the delicate cold gold band. I looked down at the three dangling charms: the butterfly, the heart, and the anchor.

The anchor - her family. That had not been enough for her to stay. “It’s not worth much,” I said, keeping my eyes on the bracelet.

“It was worth a lot to Eddie. He cared for it very much.”

“And he gave it to *you*?” I couldn’t help but comment.

She winced, but for once I was not even trying to be mean. I just knew how drug addicts sold everything. I was also still surprised that he’d managed to take it from our mother’s room.

I sighed, putting it back on her dresser. If she hadn't sold it by now, she would not sell it. *And if she did, so what? Your mother didn't love you enough to stay, so why should you care?*

I sighed, jerking my head toward the book on her nightstand. "You like to read?"

She detailed me, all tensed, her lips pursed.

"What? Is the question that difficult to answer?" I was trying here, but she was irritating me again.

"No, I'm just waiting for the punchline," She replied, trying to sound detached but there was hurt in her voice.

"Punchline?" What the hell did she mean?

She shrugged. "You know, maybe, why do girls like me need to know how to read? Kamasutra is a picture book, but that's not painful enough. Come on, give me your best."

I stared at her angrily. She was really getting on my last nerve.

"Come," I barked. Turning around, I headed for the south corridor. That was my side of the house, a part that had purposely not been shown to her. I was not even sure why I was taking her there now.

"Where are we going?" The uncertainty in her voice made me roll my eyes. She lived in the worst area of the city, used to have sex with strangers and she was afraid of me? Ludicrous.

"Well, I've been thinking. You must be a bit bored since you can't fuck on an hourly basis..." I trailed off coldly. I was just trying to be civil to her, why was she questioning me.

She remained silent as we stopped in front of two heavy wooden doors. I was slightly disappointed that she hadn't taken the bait. She gripped the baby monitor closer to her chest. I hadn't even thought about the child, but she had. She always did.

"So I thought we may as well occupy you in a more...*productive* way."



She was about to answer when I opened the door. Anything she might have said died in her mouth.

She walked in with an awed look on her face, her mouth slightly ajar.

“This is unbelievable!” she gasped, swirling around slowly, craning her neck to see the many shelves full of books. They ran floor-to-ceiling and against every wall.

“It’s like stepping into *The Beauty and the Beast!*” When she beamed, I was taken aback by her smile. The freshness of her face without her permanent wariness. She looked so young, so innocent, especially dressed in her faded blue jeans, checkered shirt, and red converses. She looked like a sweet young girl.

I started to smile too before remembering who she really was - the addicted, manipulative, vindictive hooker who’d driven my brother to an early grave.

I guess the fresh youth look was quite a big seller in her circle.

“You’ve got two libraries?” she asked, turning her back to me, as she inspected the shelves closer to her. She ran her forefinger along the spine of each book.

I looked at her finger going down softly, as if she was caressing the books and I could almost feel her on my skin. I was startled at the thought and angry too that she could entice these types of thoughts in me. She was sleeping with literally everyone. It’ll be a cold day in Hell before I stuck my shaft into her overused cunt.

“Mr. Beaumont?”

I cleared my throat, scowling at her. “What?” I barked.

“I, uh -” She took an instinctive step back, colliding into the bookshelf. “I was just wondering why two libraries.”

“This is a library-” I motioned around us. “What you saw before is barely a salon, a place to receive guests somewhere a little more inviting than my office.” I sneered, “But you know all about ‘inviting environments’, don’t you?”

She looked away and blinked rapidly, most likely trying to keep the tears at bay.

I did feel like a bastard. I did. I was not cruel, no, truly I wasn't. I was ruthless. I took what I wanted and didn't have much consideration of what stood in my way and she stood in my way - in more ways than one and she was a fiercer adversary than I'd anticipated, and I needed her gone. She'd give up, there was only so much hate and condescension a person could take. I was crushing her, degrading her every chance I got - She'd have to give in soon.

"Can I use it?" She asked and I almost felt guilty at the tremble in her voice...almost.

"Why else would I have shown it to you?" I adjusted the sleeves of my suit before pointing at one of the highest shelves on the left. "I believe you'll find what you're looking for on this shelf - all the erotic literature, not many illustrations or pictures I'm afraid but you may be able to keep up." I looked at my watch. "I have other places to be." *Anywhere you're not.* "You're welcome in this room, but nowhere else in this wing. All the doors are locked and there isn't much to steal".

She pursed her lips and hugged herself but didn't say anything else. What could she even say?

I turned around but as I reached the threshold, she spoke.

"Thank you," she enunciated clearly, her voice was devoid of sarcasm. It was one of genuine gratitude.

I should have kept on walking as if she hadn't spoken. Her gratitude didn't deserve my acknowledgment and yet, despite everything I knew I should do, I didn't...I couldn't.

I nodded, keeping my back to her. "You're welcome," I growled. I then left, not stopping until I was in my office and helping myself to a glass of bourbon.

*What are you doing to me, Opal Collins?*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

*Amber*



Dean Beaumont was Satan but for his library alone it was almost worth making a deal with him.

I wasn't sure why he was so mean all the time. I'd like to say it didn't hurt me, but it did, of course it did.

I'd never been hated before. And even if I kept repeating to myself that it was not for me, that he was hating Opal, not Amber, his animosity still hit my soul.

I sighed as I finished the clouds on Timmy's wall fresco. I took a few steps back, stopping beside Timmy's 'sit-me-up' floor seat.

"What do you think?" I asked him as he played with his giraffe.

He looked at me and smiled.

I nodded. "Yep, I love it too."

We received everything from the store two days ago. I worked on the bedroom for hours, mainly to avoid Dean and also because I truly hated the clinical look of his room. It had no personality and all the books I've read said that colors and shapes were crucial to a child's development.

I shook my head, concentrating on the new crib. I knew this could have been done by professionals, but I'd loved doing it all by myself. I was a hands-on type of person. I loved building things, making old, discarded things pretty again.

I yawned just before putting the final touch on the crib. These two days of work were not the only reasons why I was tired, Dean Beaumont was also a reason. Now Timmy was sleeping better at night, since the medication was working well and I should sleep well too but it was not the case, no my sleepless nights were mostly due to the web of lies I was so ingrained in I couldn't see a way out. The more I lied the more I knew I'd be stuck with it - even if I managed to finish the six months what then? Would I need to remain Opal Collins for the rest of my life? I couldn't! I loved my sister deeply, she saved me but I needed to be me, Amber. But I could see Dean Beaumont for what he was, a cold unforgiving man. I knew that even if it was in six months, one year, five years! If he ever found out I was not Timmy's mother he would take him away from me.

I looked down at the beautiful little boy I loved as if he were mine, this was also the reason why I spent every second I could with him, I didn't know how long I could keep my secret.

I yawned again. "What about a story?" I asked him as he extended his giraffe toward me.

"Yes, we'll read the one with the jungle animals." I smiled at him. "What do you say, bottle and then story?"

Timmy let out a little shriek.

I chuckled. "I'll take it as a yes."

I picked him up and brushed my nose against his head like I always did when he was in my arms. Would I ever be over his baby scent?

"I love you, sweet boy," I whispered to him as I prepared his bottle. "Always and forever."

As I fed Timmy, I sat down on the rocking chair by the window and looked out at the garden.

I looked down at him, meeting his curious green eyes, and smiled. Everything that was happening was worth it - for him, everything was worth it.

I burped him, secured him on the side of my chest, and rocked softly as I started to read the book.

I must have fallen asleep because I automatically tightened my hold on Timmy as I felt him being lifted from my arms.

I opened my eyes to find Dean leaning over me. "It's okay, let go," he whispered and, in my sleep-muddled brain, he sounded almost kind, caring. Which, in itself, was a cause of concern.

I relaxed my arms, allowing him to take Timmy. I turned toward him, trying to wake up, seeing such a strong austere man carrying a small child caused my stomach to flutter. It was a vision that brought ovaries to life.

"Why aren't you married?" I asked, the remainder of sleep loosening my tongue.

He tensed, his softened features hardening as he turned toward me.

"Why? Are you interested? Don't bother. I've got standards."

I sighed, looking away again. Why did I keep on trying?

"You look tired," he commented as he laid Timmy down in his bed, I realized that this was the first time I'd seen him hold Timmy.

"Do you care?"

He shrugged. "I don't. But you need to be healthy to take care of the child and right now, I'm not sure that this is the case."

"Why would it matter? You want him anyway, don't you?"

He sighed, looking around the newly decorated room. "You know we've got people to do that." He gestured at the walls. "What took you days would have taken a team of experts only hours."

Standing up, I winced at the shooting pain in my lower back. I had pushed it with that design on the wall, but I'd wanted to finish it today.

"This has nothing to do with that. They might have even done a better job than me. I'm not denying that but there's a certain pride to doing it myself. In creating the right environment for Timmy. It's bringing a little part of me to his space." I shrugged. "I know it probably doesn't make much sense to you."

He looked down at me strangely. It wasn't with hate for once. No...it seemed to be confusion. My heart accelerated in my chest. Dean was a beautiful man when his deep scowl of hate was missing.

"Did you need anything?" He hadn't been in Timmy's room since that first day.

"What?" he asked, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

"You came here for something, no?"

"There's a dinner tomorrow night." He replied sharply, his critical eyes now on the boat I'd painted on the wall.

"Ah." I nodded. I knew about the dinner. Mrs. James had told me about it when I was in the kitchen with her and she had started working on a menu for the evening. A menu I hoped I could watch her cook.

"Don't worry. I'll stay here with Timmy. Nobody will know I am here."

He sighed, shaking his head as if I was infuriating him... well, I was infuriating him.

"No, you will attend and you will behave properly. The guests' list is limited to a few close business partners and my sister."

I frowned. "It sounds a lot like an order."

"Because it is. "

I looked at him, mouth agape. What could I answer? He was such a horrible commanding man.

He looked a lot like Eddie, there was no denying these two were brothers but where despite the drugs Eddie was all heart and love this man in front of me was cold and unfeeling.

“Why do you want me to attend? You clearly don’t want me there.”

“Is the reason important?” He crossed his arms on his chest. “I said you’ll attend and that’s what you’ll do.”

“I’m not your possession, you can’t just order me.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “I believe the contract you signed says otherwise and as far as being a possession,” His eyes trailed down my body, and despite the sneer and dislike I felt for the man I couldn’t help but shiver with a hint of desire under the appraising eyes. “You’re the epitome of a possession don’t kid yourself.”

I shook my head. “I’m not that woman anymore.” I needed him to see me more like myself than Opal. I was not sure why. It shouldn’t matter, but I didn’t want this man to hate me.

“You *will* attend this dinner, Ms. Collins, and you’ll behave and dress appropriately.”

He pointed at my ripped jeans and my old tee shirt. “This won’t do.”

I didn’t even try to tell him that I’d worn this because I was painting. I didn’t want to argue with him. “Would you like to pick my outfit too? I mean, you’re already dictating all other aspects of my life...”

He gave me a withering look. “Don’t try to pull one of me, Ms. Collins. If you think I’m unpleasant now, you’ve seen nothing yet.”

I believed him. Despite how despicable he has been to me, I believed him. It was all there on this face the promise of endless pain and suffering.

“Is it a test?”

He sighed, waving his hand dismissively. “See it as you want. I couldn’t care less as long as you’re downstairs

tomorrow by 7:00 p.m, properly dressed, and behaving like a decent person and not the low-class whore you are.”

“Your wish is my command,” I replied sarcastically.

“If it was the case, Ms. Collins, you’d already be gone,” He added coldly before leaving the room.

*Dick!* I glared at the door as it closed behind him. No wonder he was alone. Who would want to be close to someone so heathen?

I wondered if he was always this despicable with people or if he was being extra for me.

I’d never seen him interact with anyone other than his staff. He was cold and commanding with them, but never rude or impolite. No, he kept that for me.

What about his family? His sister? They couldn’t have been close. I’d been here almost a month and I’d never met her. She never came...nobody did, come to think of it.

Was he always so alone in this big soulless house? Was that something he wanted or was it what had turned him into the cold monster he was?

For some reason, against my better judgment, I wanted to find out.



# CHAPTER NINE

*Dear*



“Hello, brother, dear!”

I sighed, looking up from my laptop and the financial statement I was studying. My sister stood at the threshold of my office. “Have you ever heard of knocking?”

“It’s my house too, brother. Don’t forget that.”

How could I forget? My careless father had died without a will. Three children and a lot of shit had fallen on me then. “True, but it’s my office, Lea. Some people have jobs.”

She rolled her eyes and walked in. “Are you still saying I don’t have a job?”

I sighed. Leaning back in my seat, I gestured to the one across my desk. “You sit with people, listening to them talk all day. I’m sorry, I fail to see how that’s a job.”

“I’m a psychiatrist, Deano. I graduated top of my class from Harvard, got the best clinical internship.”

I shrugged. “A glorified witch doctor.” I looked at my watch and frowned. “You know you’re over an hour early?”

“No, I’m not. I’ve been good, Deano. I’ve stayed away as you’ve asked, but now I want to meet them.”

“She’ll be down for dinner as you requested,” I replied. I really didn’t want my sister and Opal to meet now. Opal was infuriatingly likable.

She shook her head. “I still can’t believe you were not going to have her down there.”

I sighed. “She doesn’t belong in this house, in our lives. You’ll see that tonight at dinner.”

“No, I want to meet her and my nephew before that.” She cocked her head to the side. “Why are you stopping me, brother? Is there something you want to say?”

I pursed my lips. I would not give her more ammunition to mess with my head. I shook my head. “No, let me take you to them.”

I walked stiffly to the child’s room; my sister close behind.

I found the woman sprawled on the floor dressed in black leggings and a red sweater dress playing with farm animals on the floor. The baby giggled as he watched.

“Ms. Collins?” I tried not to sound as firm and cold as I usually did. I didn’t need my sister trying to read me.

I sighed internally. I loved Lea to death, but it was tiring always being on my guard whenever she was around. I felt like every word I said, every gesture I made was analyzed and compartmentalized. If she’d been anyone else, I wouldn’t have cared; I could have just told them to fuck off, but not Lea. She was the only blood I had left.

Opal sighed. “Don’t worry. I’ll be ready on time. I won’t shame you by acting like a, what did you call me earlier? A ‘cheap whore?’”

I could feel my sister’s eyes on my back, but I refused to turn around. “If I remember correctly, I called you a ‘low-class whore.’”

She let out a humorless chuckle, still not looking at me. “I stand corrected. Sorry, I sometimes forget all the lovely names you have for me.”

“Indeed...” I was going to kill this woman. Yep, kill her dead.

She'd probably heard the edge in my voice. Her face softened as a blush of self-consciousness marred her cheeks. “Oh, hello,” she said, looking quite embarrassed.

I would have been amused by her reaction if she had not just given so much ammunition to my sister.

Opal sat up on the floor, detailing my sister curiously.

“Mr. Beaumont, I told you I didn't need a nanny for the evening. Mrs. James will keep an eye on Timmy for the next few hours.”

I turned toward Lea. Opal's assumption made sense. Although Edward and I looked the same - both dark-haired like our mother and having the Beaumont trademark green eyes and aristocratic nose. Lea couldn't look more different. She had our father's red hair and our mother's brown eyes and button nose.

“This is my sister, Lea. The child's aunt.”

“Oh!” Jumping to her feet, Opal ran her hand through her hair trying to give herself a sense of composure. As if that would change who she was... “I'm sorry.” She took a few steps toward Lea, extending her hand with a bright smile. “It's a pleasure to meet you.”

My sister nudged me out of the way and shook her hand with an equally warm smile. It didn't have to mean that Lea liked her. She just knew how to put people at ease.

“I'm so happy to meet you too, Opal.” Lea turned to the child. Resting a hand over her heart, her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Timmy!” She looked at Opal. “He is so beautiful.”

Opal beamed as if she'd just been given a million dollars.

“May I?” Lea asked, extending her hands toward the child.

“Yes, please of course.”

I glared at her. *Why is she being so friendly to Lea? Because she's not a raging bitch, that's why.*

As Lea played with the child, she and Opal chatted as if they were old friends. How could my sister just ignore what this woman had caused? How? Because of her, our brother was rotting in the ground.

My dark thoughts brought the familiar warmth of anger to my chest a feeling I was so familiar with, it was almost comforting.

“Mr. Beaumont?”

Turning to see the butler standing in the corridor, I looked at him in a silent invitation for him to continue.

“Mr. Hardwell is here.”

I frowned. Why the fuck was my lawyer here already? “Doesn’t anyone know what a set time is?” I growled with frustration. “Show him to the small library. I’ll join him in a minute.”

I turned back to the two women and the child.

“Lea?” I gestured for her to follow me out of the bedroom. I didn’t want her with Opal without my supervision. I didn’t want her using any of her mind-boggling witcheries.

Sitting cross-legged in front of the child’s seat-up, she shook her head and waved me away. “I’m good here, brother. You go do your stuff. Opal and I will be down at seven sharp, won’t we, Opal?”

Opal looked at me with wide eyes. At least someone was scared of me. “I- uh- Yes, of course.”

“Lea...” I trailed off, barely containing my temper. I didn’t have time for her fucking games. I had a plan and a goal. I couldn’t have her messing it all up.

“Deanoooooo,” she replied, not even caring enough to look at me. She picked up the child’s giraffe and walked it on the plastic table in front of him. “I’ll see you later.”

*Fuck that shit!* I pursed my lips, straightening as my muscles tensed painfully from all the frustration.

I walked stiffly to the library.

“What do you want?” I barked to my lawyer as soon as I walked in. He was sitting in one of the leather chairs, a glass of liquor in his hand. “Please make yourself at ease,” I added with a bite of sarcasm.

He frowned but took a silent sip. He knew me by now; my angry outbursts didn't faze him anymore. Phil Hardwell had been working for Beaumont Enterprises for over twenty years. He helped me hide my father's ineptitude and my taking over the company when I was only fourteen. His loyalty through the years had earned him a certain leeway other couldn't afford.

“Is the whore giving you trouble?” he asked with a small side smile.

I snorted, as I walked to the wet bar. Grabbing a glass, I helped myself to a healthy dose of honey bourbon. “Don't worry about her, Phil. She's just a cheap whore of limited intelligence.” I shook my head as I took the seat across from him. “She is no match for us. It's a matter of days.” However, I was starting to suspect it would be the opposite - I was quite reluctantly, starting to think that I may have underestimated her. I'd seen the books she'd picked from the library. She was not an idiot, this woman. I was sure that, given the right circumstances, she could become someone.

“Uh... If you say so.”

“I do.” I gave him a dark scowl.

He nodded.

“Why are you here, anyway? You're not expected for at least another hour.”

He cocked his head to the side. “I've wanted to discuss business with you for a while and you're never in the office anymore.”

I could not deny that. I hadn't planned on staying at the estate all this time. I'd planned on going back to Philly at least three times a week, but I'd been only once since I'd brought her back here.

“I work just as well from here.”

“You do,” he confirmed. “But I’m old-school, Dean. I’m fifty this year. I like to be in the same room as my interlocutor, and there are a few strategies I’d like to discuss for the new Mariners contract.”

“Okay, lets go to my office.”

“Helle came to the office again,” he added just as I stood up.

I froze, looking at him warily. Helle was my latest squeeze, a Danish model I’d met a few months ago. She needed a place to stay, so I’ve been letting her use my luxury condo. Given I used her rocking body, it was a fair trade.

But that didn’t make her a whore, did it? Not like the woman upstairs. It was the irony of double standards.

“She caused quite a commotion. I had to take her to my office.”

“What did she want?”

He looked at me like I was stupid. “You, it seems. You’ve been avoiding her calls.”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s been calling twice a day, Phil. She’s not my girlfriend. I don’t *do* girlfriends. She is my latest steady fuck at best.”

“Yes, a steady fuck that has been unused for three weeks,” he added with a dark chuckle.

His eyes glinted with wickedness. The man was twisted in ways I never wanted to find out.

“I still allow her to stay in the apartment as repayment for letting me use her. Did you know she could do the splits? Just for that, she deserves the place.”

Phil laughed. “I think she wants more, my friend, Your bank accounts, your name, and your dick - probably in that order.”

I nodded. I had a nice dick, bigger than average, and I was a skilled lover, but Phil was right - nothing attracted them

more than my fortune and name, the size of my dick be damned.

“I’ll just have my assistant send her a necklace or something. I’ll go to Philly next week. I’ll want her by then, but after that, I don’t want her there anymore. Make sure the security team in the building is aware that her dismissal will happen soon. Book her a suite at the Waldorf in New York for a month. It will soon be time for her to find another rich dick to ride.”

“She’s going to go nuclear.”

I shrugged. “She knew what she was signing up for.” They all did, but they never cared. Just the chance of getting a ring on their finger, just the opportunity to change me, was enough to have them agree to anything. If only they knew that they couldn’t change me, that they couldn’t have my heart because I had none. That useless organ had stopped functioning twenty-four years ago when I’d walked into the white marble bathroom tainted red.

“I’ll deal with the crazy consequences,” I replied, getting out of my own head and the path my thoughts were taking.

I tried to concentrate on the documents that Phil wanted to discuss, but my mind kept going to Opal and all the horrible things she was probably telling my sister. I was relieved when the butler interrupted the more than usual dull working session.

“Sir, the guests are arriving.”

I nodded, standing up. “Very well, thank you. Please make sure that Mrs. Beaumont and Ms. Collins will be joining us downstairs.”

I walked into the hall, Phil right behind me, just as William, mine, and previously my fathers’ Vice-President, walked in.

“Will, happy you could make it.” I smiled, shaking his hand.

He laughed. “Always happy to join.”

The front door opened to reveal Jeremy Hunt.

I frowned.

“I invited him,” Lea piped as she walked towards us.

“Why?” I asked her. Jealousy reared its ugly head when Opal, now dressed snugly in a pencil skirt and red blouse, walked over to him with a bright smile on her face.

“Because you said I could bring a plus one.”

Keeping my eyes on Opal, I scowled as Jeremy beamed at her.

“I meant your wife, Lea.”

She snorted. “Susan can’t stand you.”

I shrugged. She’d met Susan in med school. She was a witch doctor too and she saw me as a destructive man - if only I cared. “Why Hunt though?”

She threw me a side-look. “Because we’re close friends. Because I thought you liked him and because he is our nephew’s doctor. I wanted to discuss that with him.”

I smirked down at her. “Don’t pretend to be a *real* doctor, Lea.”

“I’m a psychiatrist!” she hissed, elbowing me in the stomach.

“Yes, *exactly*.” I walked over to Jeremy and Opal. Why did he have his hand on her back? That was really uncalled for.

“Jeremy, nice of you to join us. Lea didn’t tell me she’d invited you.” I smiled. “What a nice surprise!”

Jeremy smiled back. He knew I didn’t mean it, but he clearly did not care. “I’m glad to be here.” He turned to Opal. “It’s nice to see you outside of the hospital.”

She looked down with a faint blush. Why the actual fuck was she blushing? She was a sex worker, not a sweet innocent teenager. Maybe she needed a reminder. “Ah, you probably could have found her on the corner of 22nd Street and Erie Avenue.”



Opal looked away as my sister glared at me. Jeremy shook his head.

“Let’s go. I’m famished,” Jeremy joked, trying to ease the atmosphere.

She smiled coyly at him and I had to do my best not to roll my eyes. He couldn’t be stupid enough to fall for that but seeing as his smile brightened, maybe he was.

I caught her arm just as she was about to pass me, probably holding a bit tighter than necessary as was clear by her wince.

“Remember your contract,” I hissed coldly, just loud enough for her to hear.

“How could I forget?” she replied, pulling her arm out of my grip.

I walked into the dining room just in time to see Lea switching some of the name tags to seat Opal between her and Jeremy.

I ground my teeth. I wasn’t sure what my little sister thought she was doing but there would be hell to pay.

Every time I had an opening during dinner, I went for the throat and took my frustration out on Opal, but she kept dismissing everything I said as if it didn’t touch her.

At least, I’d thought so until desert when Lea asked her if she had read any children psychology books to help her design the nursery.

“Don’t embarrass her, Lea. Miss Collins doesn’t read that doesn’t help her lucrative career as a hooker, isn’t that correct? Kamasutra maybe?”

William choked on his drink and Jeremy’s nostrils flared in anger. Only Phil chuckled that was enough for me to know I’d pushed it to the limit.

Smoothing her skirt, Opal reached for the baby monitor she had on the table. “Well, Timothy is awake. If you’ve had enough fun at my expense, Mr. Beaumont, I think I will call it a night.” She smiled at Lea and Jeremy before concentrating

on me again. “But maybe you can go out and pick on homeless or orphans. That’s always fun too.”

The rest of the dinner was a little colder, and based on the looks my sister kept sending me, I knew I was in for a life lesson.

Phil and William left first, leaving me with Jeremy and a still quite angry Lea.

When the butler came to ask if we needed anything else, I shook my head

“No, Dr. Hunt will be leaving soon. He has work in the morning.”

Jeremy stood up, a little sardonic smile gracing the side of his mouth.

“Yes, saving lives is an important job. Have a good night.”

Jeremy had barely exited the room when Lea lashed out.

She stood up, pointing an accusing finger at me. “You had no right to treat her like that!”

I snorted. “I’ve every right actually, so butt out of it.”

Lea shook her head. “She’s our nephew’s mother, Dean. She deserves respect. We don’t want to create any family dysfunction. It won’t be good for Timmy’s development.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop with your two cents of psychology. She won’t be a problem much longer.”

Lea frowned. “Dean, what are you doing?”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. I’m dealing with it.”

“Dean, don’t do anything you can’t take back. Don’t disappoint me.”

I snorted. “I’ve been disappointing you since our mother’s death. What’s one more time?”

She shook her head. “No, Dean. You haven’t disappointed me, never, not until today when I watched you belittle a woman who has never done anything to you.”

I looked at her with incredulity. “Never done anything to *me*? Never done anything to *us*? Have you forgotten how our brother went back on drugs? How he stole money for her?” I shook my head. “She’s the reason he’s dead.”

Lea shook her head again. “Don’t let your preconceptions cloud your mind. Don’t see her how you’d imagined her. See her how she is. And don’t hate her because you want her.”

I jerked straighter on my chair. “I *want* her?” I repeated as if I’d misheard her.

My sister jerked her chin stubbornly toward me.

I let out a laugh, but it had no humor. “I *want* her? Fuck me!” I kept on laughing. “Yeah, sure I want an overused cunt that has probably been fucked by half of Philly’s slum. She is clearly a petri dish for STDs.”

She curled her mouth downward. “Don’t be crass.”

“And don’t be stupid. I’d never want to fuck that.”

“Ah, I see you’re in denial,” She nodded. “Fine. We’ll discuss this when you’re ready to accept it.”

Anger built inside of me. “You seem to forget that you’re my little sister.” I pointed at her coldly. “If I hadn’t stepped up when I had if I had not made the sacrifices I made, you wouldn’t be who you are. Remember your *place*.”

“And I’m grateful for what you did, Deano. You know I am, but don’t start with that shit either. You enjoyed taking over when you did. You like control. You want to control your universe and that woman upstairs.” She pointed up. “She is a variable you didn’t consider. An anomaly in your normally so carefully planned life.” She shrugged. “And I’m not sorry about that.”

“I think you’ve overstayed your welcome for the night. Goodnight, Lea.”

She stood up, unfazed by my rude rebuttal. “Goodnight, Deano. I’ll see you real soon.”

I ground my teeth as I sat on my own. Why had that sounded like a threat?

I was beyond furious now, and I knew it was almost exclusively due to the harpy sharing my home.

“Send her to my office!” I barked to the butler as I walked past him stiffly. I didn’t need to use her name. Only one person had the power to put me in such a dark mood and she was living under my roof.

“Want her.” I snorted. Now that she’d put on a few pounds, her curves were becoming far too distracting. Jeremy and Phil certainly thought so too. I’d seen it in the way Jeremy had looked at her and the lewd glint in Phil’s eyes.

But I knew who she was despite Lea’s words. I knew what she’d done to Edward.

She was no saint despite her air of innocence and ingenuity. Both of which I was sure were acts for her clients.

Maybe I just needed to fuck her once. Fuck her into submission, show her I was the boss and that I meant business. Maybe once I had her sloppy cunt, I wouldn’t be so distracted.

She’d forced me into celibacy after all. There was no way I was going to leave her alone at the estate and there was no way I was going to let one of my squeezes come here. She’d caused the dry spell; she had to take care of it.

“Mr. Beaumont?”

I looked up to find her leaning a hip against the doorframe, her plump bottom lip, painted red, caught between her teeth.

“You’ve been particularly rude tonight.”

“Have I?” She walked towards me, her hips swaying with each step she took in her red stilettos. She’d really stepped up her game tonight, looking like a sexy secretary - tight black pencil skirt, red shirt matching her stilettos and lips. She’d clearly checked all of the male fantasy boxes.

“Maybe you’d like to punish me?” she purred, her voice lower, sexier.

My dick immediately hardened. At least she was done playing innocent. She was finally acting like the vixen I knew she was. That, I could somehow respect.

“Don’t push me, Ms. Collins, or I’ll bend you over this desk and fuck you into tomorrow.”

“Oh, will you?” She came closer and bent over the desk, putting her ass in the air, a lustful smile on her lips. “Maybe you should. Maybe I deserve it. You should show me my place.”

I jumped up from my seat, uncaring that my erection made a tent at the front of my pants, showing her the effect she had on my body.

“You asked for it,” I growled. I pulled her skirt up roughly, revealing her perfectly shaped ass and red thong. Of course she’d worn the fucking thong.

I tore it from her. She hissed as it bit into the soft flesh of her hips and left angry red marks before ripping free.

“Bend over more. Part your legs,” I ordered, not recognizing my own voice by how deep it sounded.

She executed the order immediately, giving me a better view of her wet pussy. I could see it was drenched even in the low lighting of my office.

“You’re enjoying it,” I said out loud. Her physical reactions couldn’t lie.

She turned her head toward me and licked her lips. “Aren’t you?”

I smirked at her. She was in for a treat.

Undoing my pants, I released my raging erection and slammed into her at once. She gasped as I groaned. She was tighter than I’d expected a woman selling her body to be.

I grabbed her hips tightly, threw my head back, and started to piston inside of her. Hard and fast, I chased my own release, not caring about her own pleasure. Her moans though confirmed she was enjoying it too.

“Dean! Dean! Mr. Beaumont? Mr. Beaumont?”

I blinked, looking at the closed door.

*Was I daydreaming?* I looked down at my dick, firmly held in my hand. I'd barely had the time to roll my seat forward before she opened the door.

I took a deep breath, hoping she couldn't see on my face what I'd been doing. I laid my hand on top of my desk as my still fully erect and extra sensitive cock brushed painfully against the underside of my desk.

"You requested my presence?" she asked, resting by the door.

"Took you long enough." I snapped, both angry and frustrated with the woman who had caused me to masturbate and then hide it like an embarrassed teenager.

"Come in and close the door," I barked, gesturing her forward.

She shook her head. "No, there's no one around. It's not necessary."

"You've been particularly rude tonight."

"Have I?"

Was my dream becoming a reality?! My dick was already out and ready for it.

"Leaving like that was particularly rude and uncalled for."

She nodded. "I see. Well, I guess it is to be expected from a low-class whore, isn't it?" She cocked her head to the side. "Just so I know for future reference, did you send a group email explaining my previous field of work to all of your contacts?" She gestured to her clothes. "Why did you even bother with the clothes and hair? Let me be the wreck you want people to see."

"It has nothing to do with you being a wreck. It's about authority and respect." I leaned back in my chair, mostly in an attempt to ease the pressure on the head of my cock. "You are not dismissed until I tell you that you are."

"I see."

I raised an eyebrow in incredulity. She was giving in way too easily, and it infuriated me that she was not willing to come into my office. “You do?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. It won’t happen again. Please accept my apologies.”

I narrowed my eyes in disbelief. *You could apologize by wrapping your lips around my cock and taking care of the problem you’ve created.* I thought so loud it felt like I’d said it out loud.

“You’re dismissed,” I said waving my hand. “And close the door as you leave,” I added.

As soon as she’d closed the door, I leaned back in my chair and started to masturbate again. But this time I imagined it was her mouth around my dick and not her cunt. As I came all over my hand, I vowed that before her six months were up, I’d have her lips around my cock.

# CHAPTER TEN

*Amber*



“Honeybun! Long time no talk.” Dee’s voice had the ability to warm me even through the phone.

I could almost feel her pulling me into a hug and smell her patchouli perfume. I felt guilty that it had been over a week since I’d spoken to her but I’ve been busy with Timmy, his tests, Dean Beaumont.

“I’m sorry for dropping the ball. I should have called before.”

Dee laughed. “Nah, don’t worry. I was just giving you a hard time. I bet dealing with that beast of a man can’t be easy.”

“He’s just so moody,” I admitted. “One moment he is decent, almost kind and the next, he is all dark and broody like I’ve personally offended him just by standing here.”

Dee chuckled. “That man wants you.”

I removed the phone from my ear, looking at it as if it was an alien.

“Are you high?” I asked her, putting the phone back to my ear.



She chuckled. “Not since the eighties, dear. But there is a very fine line between hate and desire. I think that man hates desiring you.”

I snorted. She hadn’t seen the way he was treating me. I’ve been downplaying it for her sake. “No, there is no desire there.”

“Babe, there is desire, trust me on this. You’re way too innocent to know, but I know men. The players are different, but the game remains the same. But it’s a good thing, babe. You can use his desire to control him.”

I had to laugh at that. Dean Beaumont was an island. I didn’t think anybody could control him...ever.

“Who knows, sex may be a way to his conscience.”

I had to laugh at that. Dean Beaumont? With a conscience? I didn’t think that man had one. “Opal would try,” Dee replied.

I shook my head. “I’m not her, Dee. I’m nothing like her.”

“No, honey, you’re not. You’ve got a heart and a soul.”

I frowned. “She did too. What happened about not talking ill of the dead?”

Dee sighed. “I’m not talking ill. And, yes, she did, probably, once - before the heroin and...everything else. She loved her son. That was obvious, but...She would have done it, you know.”

I looked toward Timmy’s room, knowing he was sleeping soundly. “Done what?”

“Sell the baby to Dean Beaumont. We all saw how hard it was for you, how many sacrifices you had to make to keep Timmy alive. Opal would not have done that. She would have taken the easy way out.”

“Never!” I exclaimed vehemently, but the little voice in my head screamed that Dee was right. Opal had taken me away from our abusive father, but she’d gotten money for it. And she’d left me when she’d realized she actually had to take some responsibilities. Still, she had saved me.

“I have to go,” I told Dee a bit more coldly than I’d intended.

“Honeybun, don’t be mad at me, please.” The warmth and sadness in her voice thawed my heart. Dee was the mother figure in my life. I knew how much she loved me. How she helped me and protected me.

“I just - She saved me, you know.”

“I know she did, but what I’m trying to say is that you don’t need to make yourself miserable or suffer because of ill-placed guilt or gratitude.”

“No, that’s not the case. This is for Timmy.”

“Okay...You’re not mad, right?”

I shook my head before realizing she could not see me. “No, Dee, of course not. I love you.”

“I love you too, sweet girl. Just remember, if it gets too much, you don’t have to take it. You can leave. We’ll figure something.”

I turned toward Timmy’s room again. “Yea I know.” But Timmy was paramount and I’d take everything Dean Beaumont could throw my way if that was the only way of ensuring Timmy was cured and could stay with me. “I’ll call you again later this week. Love you, Dee.”

“Love you too sweet girl.”

My stomach growled, since I’d been here and eating my fill my stomach had woken up with a vengeance and I was eating a lot all right.

I was walking to the kitchen for food when I heard my name.

“Ms. Collins? Do you have a minute?”

I froze at the sound of Dean’s voice coming from the small library. It was never a good thing when he was seeking me.

I stopped at the threshold. “Yes?” I asked. He stood behind the small desk in the corner,

dressed in an impeccable suit with black pants, a white shirt, and a blue tie. Only the jacket was missing but I suspected he'd left it in his office.

He threw me a look before pointing at the computer. "It seems you forgot to close Google." He turned the screen toward me, showing me the list of colleges I'd searched for.

"I - You said I could use it."

I was not an idiot. I knew he was probably monitoring everything I looked at. This was probably also the reason why he'd set a desktop computer in the library, for control.

He sighed. "Just come in and close the door behind you."

I took a tentative step forward and stopped again. This man was bigger than life, physically, in personality, and ego. Being with him alone in an enclosed room was overwhelming, suffocating on so many levels. What terrified me most was my attraction to him despite his coldness and despicable attitude.

He sighed again, his aggravation becoming more palpable. "What are you scared of? That I'll fuck you? We can't say it would be a first for you, can we? And believe me, if I fucked you, you'll come back asking for more."

I was not an expert on sex, far from it, but I believed his words. His confidence was oozing from him and his steps were so lithe, so calculated. He was all about precision.

"I said, come in and close the damned door."

I took a couple of quick steps forward and closed the door. I didn't need to anger him any further as it would not be in my favor. Stepping back, I rested my back against the door, putting as much distance between us as I could.

He rolled his eyes. "What do you want to study?"

I frowned. This was not how I'd expected this conversation to go. "Excuse me?"

He rolled his neck. "You know I don't foresee much success from your college endeavors if you can't even understand and answer the simplest question. No matter the college you pick."

“Creative writing and marketing,” I replied quickly.

He raised an eyebrow in wonder. “Why marketing? To help you promote your prostitution business? Let me help you,” he sneered and I knew immediately that his next words were going to sting. “‘The tightest cunt you’ll get for a fifty.’ Catchy, isn’t it?”

I knew I shouldn’t take the bait and yet, I took a step forward. “I was more expensive than that!”

His eyes lit with victory. He’d wanted to bait me, to have me come closer. He snorted. “Please, I’ve seen where you live. I said fifty to be generous. I thought twenty was more like it.”

It hurt to admit, even if only to myself, that he was not wrong. Opal, before meeting Eddie and getting pregnant, would have probably had sex with anyone for just a shot of heroin.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll pay for college - I mean based on their horrible ratings they can’t cost more than ten dollars, right?”

I pursed my lips, scowling in disapproval. Did he really have to shit on everything I wanted? The quality of college was one thing, but the finance part was the most critical. I was making plans for when Timmy and I got out of here. Dean would give me \$5,000 a month for living expenses, but that was all for Timmy. Any money I didn’t use, would be put aside for him later. I just needed a job, so I could pay for college that way. I didn’t need Mr. Beaumont, Harvard graduate, to rain on my parade.

“Why would you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Call it charity, if you want; I don’t really care - I could pay for a college at the top of the pathetic list.”

At the top of my list was a very decent community college in the good part of town, but it was five thousand for the year - a fortune for me, probably the price of a suit for him.

“What do you want?” I didn’t know him well, but something I did know was that charity was not in his

vocabulary, and certainly not with me given all the hate and disgust he felt for me.

He grinned. "Come closer and I'll tell you."

I took a couple of steps forward, waiting silently for him to continue.

"Let's bargain for it."

"Okay..." I trailed off.

He looked different. His eyes darker than usual, but not because of anger. It looked like...lust. Was that even possible?

"I'll pay for college if you suck my dick," he said calmly, all chilled as if he hadn't just requested a sexual favor for money.

"What?" I looked down at his crotch. The shape of his dick was starting to show. He was growing excited by this.

"Don't play coy with me, Ms. Collins. How many dicks have you sucked? This can't be a new experience for you."

*How many? A grand total of zero.* I kept my eyes on his growing erection, quite mesmerized and even a little thrilled that I had such an effect on this powerful, stunning man.

"Get on your knees and suck me off. Show me why my brother has followed you down the rabbit hole."

He unzipped his pants and got his hard cock out, his face stoic. He was literally holding his appendage, but acting like there was nothing to it. Maybe there wasn't.

Despite having only had sex with Alex back in high school I had seen a lot of penises. When my sister had brought a few well-paying customers who'd paid extra to have the underaged, still virginal sister look at them fuck. Some twisted men loved that.

This penis was a good length. I'd say an N2 pencil so seven inches and a very impressive thickness. He was cut, the head and shaft were well proportioned. Yep, Opal would have given this penis a nine out of ten.

“Like what you see?” he asked, nudging his cock toward me. I hated to admit it to myself, but I did like what I saw. I wanted to sink on my knees and put this powerful man’s cock into my mouth. I started to get wet just at the thought.

Oh Lord, what was happening to me? This man had mistreated me every chance he got and yet I wanted to please him? What kind of slut was I becoming?

Dee had once said that *for every woman, there is a man who can wake up her inner slut*. Why did this man have to be Dean Beaumont?

“Either get on your knees or leave, Ms. Collins. The choice is yours.”

And while logic told me to turn around and leave, I found myself walking toward him and sinking to my knees in front of his parted legs.

He just stood there eyeing me with both coldness and lust. It was a combination I didn’t even know could exist and yet, it made sense when it came to him - This was a hate fuck... Well, a hate blowjob.

Tightening his hold around his cock, he brushed its head against my mouth, spreading precum all over my lips.

I looked up at him, seeing the challenge in his eyes. Holding his gaze, I licked the precum on my lips, slowly, delicately. I knew it affected him despite the rigidity of his body and the bored look on his face. I could see it in the slight flare of his nostrils, the lock of his jaw. I was fueling his desire.

Seeing the desire in his eyes grow because of me made me wetter. Having this man want me despite the circumstances, made me crave everything he wanted to give me. And if that made me twisted, I didn’t care. Shame would probably come later, but right now...

I wrapped my tongue around the head of his cock sucking it softly before swiftly running my tongue on the underside of its head and then across his frenulum.

When he let out a sigh, my lips quirked up in a small smile. I licked my way up and down his impressive cock as if it was my favorite gelato on a hot summer day.

As I reached the head of his cock on my second stroke of his length, he grabbed my ponytail and shoved his dick unceremoniously into my mouth with a growl.

“Suck!” he commanded with a voice I barely recognized. He tightened his hold on my hair as he pulled me toward his groin until his dick hit the back of my throat.

My eyes watered and I gaged at the intrusion of his cock hitting the back of my throat.

He groaned with each forceful thrust, seeking his own release, using my mouth as he would use his hand. Just to come.

I closed my eyes, trying to relax my throat to take him all in. After a couple more unforgiving thrusts, I managed to swallow his cock and the half-shout, half-mewling he let out made all the work worth it.

I did my best to suck, pressing my tongue on the underside of his cock despite the fast and forceful pace of his thrusts. After a few more minutes, his pace became more erratic, his dick harder. He roared, pressing my face against his pubis blowing, his load into the back of my throat.

He finally let go of my hair and I pulled back as his cum trickled out my mouth as I gasped after he'd cut my air influx with his cock as he came.

He looked down at me, his face back to the stoic mask it had been. It was like I'd imagined the man who'd come undone as I sucked him. He wiped his saliva-drenched cock against my cheeks before putting it back in his pants.

“That's actually what you got paid for?” he asked, taking a step back, his mouth tipped down in disgust.

I stood up, my legs shaking a little after being on my knees for such a rough face-fucking. I'd wanted to please him and yet, he reacted like I'd been an annoyance, a waste of time.

He gestured to the corner of his lips with his forefinger. "You didn't swallow it all."

I was engulfed in shame as I wiped at the corner of my mouth, but I tried my best to keep my face smooth as I adjusted my hair and wiped my cheeks despite feeling like I was dying inside. I'd never felt more ashamed that I did this minute - even when I'd begged for food. This man was going to kill me.

"I need \$5000 for tuition," I enunciated clearly, pleased that I'd managed to hide the hurt.

He snorted. "Five thousand? This disaster was worth nowhere near that amount. Too much teeth, too much saliva, too much gagging." He sighed. "I hardly believe people paid you anything. This was worth \$5 max."

I should have known, of course, I should have. This has been just another attempt to break me. I shook my head. Or maybe not; he didn't know it had been my first blowjob. He couldn't imagine how hurtful he'd been.

*Why are you even trying to justify his actions?* the voice of reason screamed in the back of my mind. Because I had enjoyed it while it'd happened, very much so. Despite the roughness, despite the control he had taken from me.

I turned around silently and left the room without a look back. I would not beg him for the money I'd degraded myself enough.

Back in my room, I blinked back the tears as I cleaned my face and brushed my teeth. I hated how it hurt me to have disappointed him.

I shook my head. "Don't be stupid, Amber. That man just hates you too much to ever admit you did something that pleased him."

Entering the nursery, I looked down at Timmy's smiling face.

"At least I do right by you, don't I, baby?" I sighed, getting him out of his bed and keeping him close to my heart. Having him in my arms always helped me feel better.



I sat on the rocking chair in the corner of the room, singing softly as I rocked Timmy.

I'd never thought I could feel as ashamed and inconsequential as I did at this moment, but I'd been wrong, so wrong...

And when I thought nothing could make me feel worse, I came back after breakfast in my room and found a folder on my bed. It was a printed letter from Wisteria college, a private and very fancy institution. It contains all log-ins information for a three years online course of my choice for which the tuitions had already been paid.

I hated myself. I had sold myself for money. For the first time in my life, I really felt like the prostitute I was pretending to be.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Dear*



I folded the contract shut and slammed my hand over it.

“What the fucking shit is this?!” I asked Phil, who was sitting across from me. “They can’t just come around two days before closing and change all the terms.”

Phil nodded. “They want us to pull out.”

“You think?” I growled. “Fuck! It took us months to get to this point! How much time do they think we can waste on their dying company?”

“You know what? Offer them even less than what you came back with.”

I looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. He was as cunning as they came though. So I knew there had to be a reason for what he’d said. “Okay?”

He grinned, leaning forward. “Go twenty percent down on shares and the price of our original offer.”

“Then *they* will pull out.”

Phil nodded. “Exactly, they’ll use this low-ball offer to withdraw from our initial agreement because Maxwell made them an offer much higher than you did.”

I ran a hand down my face. Maxwell Corp - fucking cockroaches. Much smaller than Beaumont Enterprises was, but still a thorn in my side...like the girl sharing my space. I sighed. "Fucking Maxwell."

I didn't need to buy Qahwa, the dying cafe chain we were discussing, but it would offer diversity to our portfolio plus we'd spent hours with teams of experts, organizing the restructuring plan. Not getting it would not make a dent in my fortune or power, but getting it? I could turn that chain into gold.

Phil laughed. "Don't you worry, Maxwell shares will plummet tomorrow when photos of Richard Maxwell having sex with Craig Winter, the famous stockbroker, will be printed on the first page of a few newspapers. The scandal will destroy them! Cheating husband, closeted gay, and suspected insider trading." He counted on his fingers. "Maxwell's partners will freeze any ongoing agreement for the foreseeable future. Meaning that the deal with Qahwa will die."

"How long have you known?" I asked in a huff. I was so awed by the extent of his sick, twisted mind.

He shrugged, his grin widening. "A while. I just needed the right moment to use it. He'd been sniffing a bit too close from this takeover; I was ready to strike if needed."

"You're so cunning."

He bowed his head. "Thank you. Now send this and give them three hours to approve. They won't. They'll pull out. They will lose their partner in the morning and they'll come back begging. I'll go to New York for you and have them sign ten percent lower than the low-ball offer you just made."

"That will be a saving of -" I started to count.

"Forty-three million. You're welcome."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "You're one of a kind, Phil."

"I know." He nodded. "How are things going with the whore?" he asked as I started to reply to Qahwa's owner.

My typing faltered. For some reason that rubbed me the wrong way. I didn't like how he'd mentioned her with that sick light in his eyes. It also bothered me that he called her a whore. That was what she was though, plain and simple and yet...

I sighed, keeping my face as emotionless as I could. "She's staying out of my way," I replied coldly. "I'll just need to find another way to deal with her."

She'd been avoiding me for the past few days, ever since that blowjob in the library. As far as blowjobs were concerned, it has been clumsy - barely passable and not something I'd expected from such a professional, and yet, I couldn't get it out of my mind. I kept seeing her on her knees, my cock sliding in and out of her mouth. She'd let me use her mouth, fuck her face with all the pent-up aggression I'd felt, and she'd taken it with a kindness I hadn't expected or deserved. Her eyes had reflected her eagerness to please me. Why was that? And then, despite her lack of skill, I'd come harder than I ever had.

I hadn't intended to keep my promise. I'd been honest when I'd told her that that blowjob hadn't been worth much and yet, a nagging little feeling of guilt had followed me for the rest of the day, haunting my every thought, my every action, lingering at the back of my barely existing conscience.

When I'd turned on the computer, I'd been surprised by her web history. She'd seemed to truly want an education. I wasn't sure why I ended up paying for a college that was so good it didn't even make her sad, pathetic list.

I'd somehow expected her to come and thank me, maybe give me another blowjob, I was craving her mouth again despite her ineptitude. But she'd never come. I hadn't seen her at all. If it wasn't for the occasional glimpses I got of her around the house, I'd think I was living alone.

"Want me to take care of her?"

I turned to Phil as he licked his lips in a way that almost gave me the chills. I forced a laugh. "We can't afford a dead body, Phil." I sighed. "She's my nephew's mother, no matter

how much I want to deny it. Who knows, the kid might need an organ one day.”

“I’ve got to admit she is much more appealing than the other crackwhores I’ve seen in my life. I’d give her a tumble.”

I laughed at that, but I didn’t like the nagging little feeling settling in the pit of my stomach over the idea of Phil and Opal together. “Too bad you’re married, right?”

Bringing his hand up, he ran his thumb back and forth over his bottom lip. “When has that stopped me?”

It didn’t. It never did, but at least he had the decency and the intelligence to stay away from the women in the office. His private life had never interested me before, but it did now. Fuck me, it did.

I was about to answer when my phone rang and Lea’s name flashed on the screen. This was the third time she called me since this morning.

I sighed. “Could you give me a moment?” I asked Phil, answering the phone.

He nodded and left, closing the door behind him. That was something else I liked about him; he did not question me.

“Lea,” I said once Phil closed the door.

“Deano.”

“What do you need?”

“Are you done avoiding me?” she asked with a sigh. “Dodging my calls is a very childish way of dealing with things, brother.”

“I’m not avoiding you; I’m working. You know that thing that brings money and pays bills?”

She snorted. “Sure. Then give me Opal’s number and I won’t bother you again. I forgot to ask her.”

I tightened my hold on my phone. “Why do you need her number?”

“Why is that any of your concern?”

I sighed. “Listen, Lea, I don’t have time for whatever mind game you’re playing. If you need to know anything about the child, you can ask me or contact your best friend, Jeremy.”

“Ah, someone is still sour about me inviting him over, huh?” she asked with clear laughter in her voice.

“No, I genuinely don’t care.” *Liar!* “Listen, the child should be your only concern and I’ll tell you everything about him that you want to know.”

“What are you afraid of, Deano?”

*Everything.* I sighed. “Listen, Lea, I was in the middle of something important and I’m not keen on being disturbed for a pointless psychological debate. Just email me next time, okay?”

“Dean, I just -”

“Bye, Lea.” I hung up. That was probably the first time in my life that I’d hung up on my sister, but her constant meddling in my life these days was getting on my nerves.

“Phil?” I called loudly.

When the door didn’t open, I frowned. I went to open it; the corridor was empty.

Leaving the door open, I walked back to my desk and pulled up the security cameras, including the secret ones that no one knew about.

I frowned at the one showing Opal’s room. Double-clicking on it, I made it bigger and turned on the sound.

I’d looked at this camera more often than was necessary recently, telling myself I was trying to find the evidence I desperately needed to get rid of her, except...I wasn’t sure it was true anymore.

She was back against the wall, her hands clutching her torn shirt. She looked positively fearful. Phil was crowding her space menacingly.

“Are you so fucking stupid, you can’t see a good offer when it’s right in front of you?” Grabbing her face, he licked

her cheek. A growl built deep inside my chest. “Just a couple of fucks a week and you’ll have no worries. Fuck, I’ll even help you keep your kid.”

He wouldn’t do that. Phil would never go against me, but he was the best liar there was.

“No, please,” she begged, her voice quivering with fear. “I don’t *want* that. I don’t *do* that.”

Phil snorted, pushing her harder against the wall. “Please. Who are you trying to kid here? Dean told me you were the kind of cheap whore that got fucked in the ass behind the dumpsters at Arby’s.”

She turned her head as he tried to kiss her, giving me a prime look at the pain and horror on her face at my lawyer’s lies.

“Maybe so, but not anymore. Let me go or-”

He slammed her against the wall. “Or what? What are you going to do? Go cry to Dean? Who do you think he will believe? The prostitute he loathes or the upstanding lawyer who has been by his side for years? Please, you don’t stand a chance. Just for that I should just take you right now and tell him I paid you for it.”

*Fight. Goddamnit woman, fight him off!* I growled with fury looking at the monitor. Why was I this angry, this offended on her behalf? I should not care and yet...

Phil sighed. “I’ll help you keep the little bastard. Let me satisfy my filthy desires with you, which I’m sure isn’t anything you haven’t done before. I’ll shove it in your cunt, ass, mouth...Take you to swinger parties. Use you like the broken doll you are. Make you my fucking cum bucket.”

“Never!” she spat, pushing him away.

*That’s my girl! Your girl?* I thought horrified, but I couldn’t dwell on that as he’d slapped her so hard, she fell.

“Enough!” I barked, barging out of my office and toward her room. That had gone too far, much too far.

I forced my way in through the connecting door of the nursery, for once glad that the child was sick and his aromatherapy machine made it too loud for him to hear the commotion.

“What’s happening here?” I barked.

Opal was trying to get up, her ripped shirt showing her cherry-covered cotton bra.

“This bitch was trying to get me into bed,” Phil sneered, looking at Opal in disgust. “I almost had to fight her off - She is a fucking nympho.”

I turned to Opal, who looked down, her cheeks already a deep red. There was even some blood on the corner of her lovely plump mouth. I suspected that blow had opened the inside of her cheek.

“Miss Collins?” I tried, but she kept her eyes on the floor. I took a step toward her, which she mirrored with a step back. “Opal?” I tried again as gently as I could.

She sniffled. “It doesn’t matter. I need to shower,” she added quickly before disappearing into her small ensuite.

I looked at the door she’d just closed, murder on my mind. It wasn’t her I wanted to kill; it was Phil. Phil, my most trusted colleague. I turned to him, his disgusting erection was still so evident in his pants.

“Lets go,” I ordered, walking through the nursery again and straight to my office. “Take your jacket. You’re leaving.”

“What?” he chuckled, thinking I was joking.

“Take your jacket; you’re leaving,” I replied even colder now.

“What?” He frowned. “Come on, Dean. She’s just a whore who -”

I punched him, hard enough to bruise my knuckles. “We do not abuse women. We do not rape women. Not in my home, not in my presence, not in my company.”



“You’ve fucked her?” Phil asked from his spot on the floor. Reaching into his pocket, he got out a handkerchief and cleaned the blood off his split lip. “Does she have a magic pussy? First your brother, now you?” He shook his head. “You’re lost, boy.”

“I did not fuck her. I have no desire to.” *Don’t you?* “But she’s still helpless. She is still a woman and what -” I shook my head. “You have to leave. Now! Before I do something I regret.”

“After twenty-five years of me saving this company’s ass, you’re choosing her side over mine?” he asked with incredulity as he stood up and grabbed his jacket. “You better think about where your loyalty lies because -” He stopped talking.

“Because what?” I crossed my arms on my chest. “Are you threatening me, Phil? Don’t think I’ll go down alone. I’ve learned from the best.” I pointed at the door. “I’ll repeat it only once more. Leave now.”

Phil grumbled something under his breath before exiting the office. I watched him on the cameras to ensure he left.

Sighing, I picked up my phone, irritated at the woman who was costing me my best employee. *Then keep him if you want to. You’ve always known what he was like, but you’d never cared...until now. Why is that?* Lea taunted in my head. Fuck, I could hear her stupid witch-doctor nonsense when she wasn’t even here.

“Now’s the time to prove you’re worth the massive retainer I pay you every month,” I announced as soon as Elise, the owner of *Hired!* a head-hunting company I used from time to time, answered the phone.

“Mr. Beaumont?”

“Yes. I need you to discreetly get feelers out. I need a new corporate lawyer to head my legal department. I need the best of the best; experienced, calculating. Salary opened to negotiation. I need candidates tomorrow by the end of play. All that in complete anonymity.”

“Tomorrow? Sir, that’s -”

“You’re the best, aren’t you? Impress me.” I hung up, knowing that she was going to impress me.

I turned to the video camera again. Opal sat in the small armchair in her bedroom, her legs up, her head on her knees, as she looked out the window. I couldn’t see her face from this angle and that unsettled me.

I rolled my eyes. *It’s not your problem Dean, you didn’t do anything for once.* And yet, I found myself going to the kitchen to retrieve a bag of frozen peas.

I sighed when I reached her bedroom. The door was still slightly ajar.

For once I knocked, giving her a sense of privacy, she didn’t really have.

She remained in her position, but turned her head to face me. Her cheek was bright red and already swelling a little. “I swear I didn’t do anything. I didn’t proposition him. Please don’t throw me out.”

I took a step forward and stopped. She’d almost been raped and this was the first thing she said? She was really destroying all of the preconceptions I had of her.

“I know,” I replied softly.

“You do?” she asked, raising her head a little and arching her eyebrows in disbelief.

I nodded. There was no point in explaining anything else. Walking closer, I extended her the bag of peas.

“Why?” she asked, taking it tentatively.

“Because it will help with the swelling and the bruising,” I replied, awkwardly standing close to her chair. “Are you okay?”

She hissed as she rested the bag on her cheekbone. “Why are you being kind to me?”

If asking if she was okay after seeing her almost getting raped and handing her some frozen vegetables was enough for

her to call me 'kind', her standards really were non-existent.

“Because it’s never acceptable for a man to force himself on an unwilling woman. No matter who she is or what she was.”

“Ah, I see. Rape is a no but coercing is a yes?”

I knew she was talking about the blowjob. I stood up straighter. “I gave you the choice, Ms. Collins. You decided to get down on your knees. You could have walked away, no hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings?” she asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Well.” I couldn’t help but give her a half-smile. “No harder than usual.”

She nodded. “Fair enough. It would have been hard to go lower than the hate and disgust you’re already so generously bestowing on me.” She sighed. “Anyway, I’ll be okay. It’s not anything I haven’t experienced before.”

Chagrined, I couldn’t help but wonder if that was her superpower. I was a smart man, a calculating, ruthless one and yet, I almost felt compassion for her. *Almost?* Even knowing who she was, how she duped my brother, I felt it.

“Try to keep it on your cheek for the next half an hour or so.”

She nodded. “I know.”

I wondered how many times she had needed to do this before. I shook my head with a sigh. I couldn’t let her affect me. I turned around briskly but stopped just before I exited the room. “Don’t worry about Phil. He won’t come here anymore,” I added, unable to control my urge to reassure her.

*Fuck it!* I had planned to bring her here to control and destroy her and it left like she was the one doing it to me.

*Ms. Collins, what am I going to do with you?*

# CHAPTER TWELVE

*Amber*



“Mr. Beaumont is on the phone for you,” the butler announced upon entering the small library, where I was creating a few promos for Dee.

“For me?” I pointed at my chest. He hadn’t been so obviously nasty since the incident with his lawyer, but he hadn’t been pleasant either.

“Yes, Miss.” He pointed to the old-looking telephone on the console. “I will connect him now.”

After picking up the phone, I soon heard a click.

“Miss Collins?” His gravelly voice made my stomach twist and my lady parts pulse in ways they shouldn’t be allowed to. Not for him. Anyone but him.

“Yes?”

“I’m stuck in New York with my new attorney. Whilst he is good, it -” He sighed. “Anyway, I won’t be on time for Timothy’s appointment today. I’ll call Dr. Hunt to reschedule.”

“What? No!” Not that I was not grateful for him firing the lawyer for what he’d done to me, but Timmy’s health was paramount. I looked at the little boy who owned my heart. He

was sitting in his seat, playing with his teething plastic keys. “I’ll go by myself. Dean - Mr. Beaumont it’s serious.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I will. He is my son, my responsibility,” I insisted, “I’ll walk there if I have to.”

He growled at the other end of the phone. I was really good at frustrating him, but I would not budge on this. “Plus, we both know Jeremy will tell you everything anyway. So you may not trust me, but you must trust him.”

“Jeremy, is it? How cute.” His voice was acidic. I would normally attribute it to jealousy, but that would be ludicrous with Dean Beaumont.

“Timmy’s health is paramount. We must agree on that point, don’t we?”

“Fine! But you’ll take David with you. He’ll get you there and bring you back. No other stop, do you understand me? Don’t make me regret it.”

I rolled my eyes. What did he think I was going to do? To be honest, I was a bit scared to find out how untrustworthy he really thought I was. “I promise.”

He remained silent for a second before letting out a weary sigh. “Very well. I’ll call David and let him know. I shall be back later tonight.” He hung up before I could say anything.

I looked down at Timmy, who was looking up at me with curious eyes. “He’s a strange man, your uncle, isn’t he?”

Timmy cooed, extending his chubby little fist toward me.

I chuckled, reaching down for him. “I’m glad you agree. Okay, let’s go get ready to see your friend.”

I was a bit nervous to go on my own. Being driven in a fancy car to a fancy hospital felt so different from my normal life.

I walked into the hospital with Timmy secured in his expensive stroller and was directed to the fancy waiting room. Relaxing music played overhead. Leather armchairs, a fridge

full of complimentary drinks and snacks, and the most expensive-looking coffee machine decorated the room.

After helping myself to an orange juice and some amazing, luscious-looking Scottish shortbread, I sat down and waited for my turn.

This was so different from the cold, overcrowded waiting room at the free clinic. There weren't any uncomfortable, broken plastic chairs. No shouts, no blood, no sickly smell... I leaned back in my chair, somehow at peace. Even if I failed the bargain and lost my boy, he would never go back to that life of misery. In the end, that was all that mattered.

"Opal?" I turned startled toward a smiling Jeremy. He had such a nice smile, so bright and friendly. It was such a contrast to Dean's bitter smile.

I jumped up from my seat. "Sorry, Dr. Hunt. I was just lost in my thoughts."

"Nice ones I hope," he replied, gesturing toward his office.

*Bittersweet for sure.* "Yes, thank you."

"So I notice Cerberus is not with you today. That's a nice change." He chuckled. "I have to admit I enjoy your company much more than his."

I smiled even as I tensed. He was sweet and I could see that he was attracted to me, but after what had happened with the lawyer the other day, I was wary of any male interest. Was he expecting me to just spread my legs and be down for all his dark twisted fantasies because he thought I was a prostitute? Did I lose the right to be respected because of my pretended profession?

How had my sister dealt with this? Had she been expected to give sexual favors all the time?

As he sat across from me, he must have noticed my discomfort. "I'm only joking," he said, waving his hand dismissively.

"I know." *I hope.*

“So the results of the latest tests are back. The disease is progressing a little bit faster than I would have liked, but there’s no need to be alarmed,” he added quickly, having probably seen me pale.

“What does it mean?” I asked, looking at Timmy in his stroller. I rested a hand on his tummy for comfort.

“It means that we won’t be able to wait until his second birthday to repair his heart like I would have liked. We will need to do that in the next few months.”

“But he is so little, so fragile.” Suddenly I wished Dean was here with me. Level-headed, cold-hearted Dean. Somehow I knew his presence would have reassured me.

“He is.” Jeremy nodded. “But I’m the best and he’s strong. He’ll be okay. We’re going to take some blood today and I’d like to put him on another medication to try to delay the surgery just a little longer.

I nodded. “Sure, You’re the expert.”

“Also, I-” He closed the file and rubbed his cheek. “I wanted to ask you something at dinner the other night, but Dean hasn’t made that evening easy on anyone.”

I snorted. That probably was the understatement of the millennia.

“Okay?”

“I-” He let out a nervous laugh. “I know this probably is not the right setting for this, but I think that if I don’t do it now, Dean will never allow me the chance.”

“What is it?” I asked, completely lost by his change from a strong, confident doctor to a nervous man.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out for dinner one night...with me.”

“Oh...” So that was what he wanted to do - have sex with me. The dinner had to be a pretend. Jeremy Hunt was a dashing man - dark hair, blue eyes, some slight Asian features adding to the whole exotic vibe. He had to have ladies

throwing themselves at his feet. What would he want with an ex-hooker?

“I’m not doing that anymore.” *I never did.* I was disappointed in him, I’d thought he was one of the good ones, the ones that saw beyond the prostitution stigma.

“Eat?” he asked with a small smile.

I shook my head, trying very hard not to cry. “Sex for money or food or-” I waived my hand.

He leaned closer, resting his forearms on his desk. “Did I say I wanted to buy sexual favors?”

“No, but -”

He shook his head and sighed. “I just want to get to know you better in a more welcoming setting. Take you out on a date.”

“Why?” It made no sense.

“Why?” He let out a laugh. “So many reasons, really, but just on the top of my head? Because you are smart, wise, and stunningly beautiful. Because you are an amazing mother who loves her little boy very much and because the past is the past and should not define who we are or who we try to become.”

I blushed under his flow of compliments but remained silent. It was just so hard to believe.

“Has Dean ever talked to you about me? About my childhood?”

I shook my head, my mind still going a hundred miles a second.

“Ah.” Jeremy nodded appreciatively. “He is less of an ass than I’d thought.” He stood up and rounded the desk and took the seat beside mine. “You saw the trailer park at the entrance of town?”

“Yes.” He smelled good, warm, but somehow, it felt wrong...It was not Dean’s cold cologne. Lord, what was happening to me?



“That’s where I grew up,” he admitted with a sad smile. “I’ve done things that aren’t pretty.” He grimaced. “My brother was a gang member and I was on my way to join them. I did a lot of stupid things. One time, we broke into a house and my brother got hurt but the man who we’d tried to steal from, saved his life, just like that.” He shook his head. “My brother had manhandled him and yet - That man was a surgeon here and he changed my life. That was the shock I needed to get out.” He opened his shirt to show me his toned, tanned peck which was covered by a roaring tiger. “This is the tattoo I got to hide the gang mark. I walked away from that life without a look back. My past doesn’t define me. It’s not me.”

“Do you really think people can change?” I asked, trying to convince myself that Opal had changed after having Timmy, for some reason hoping that Dean could change too. That he could hate me less without knowing the truth, maybe even like me - at least enough for me to come clean.

“Yes, I do. I’m proof that people can.”

“Dean doesn’t,” I added, my voice tinged with sadness.

Jeremy sighed. “Dean is an unyielding, unforgiving man. He always has been.”

He was a nice man, a good-looking man, a successful man, and yet... I was scared to admit to myself what I was really feeling. I had to be messed up in the head to be attracted to a man who hated me.

“I’d like to go to dinner with you.” It was true. “But not right now. I need to concentrate on Timmy and his sickness.”

He nodded, undeterred. “Of course, yes, I understand.”

“And it might not be the best while I still live at the Beaumont Estate.”

“This is not a permanent arrangement?”

I shook my head. “Oh, God, no! This is just for a few months. Just to ensure everything is fine.”

He seemed confused by my weak explanation but didn’t push, which I was grateful for.

“Is there anything I need to look out for?” I asked, eager to go back on a more comfortable subject. “In Timmy, I mean, as his situation gets worse.”

“You’re already doing everything you have to do. Just make sure he is not going blue or that he starts coughing.”

“Blue?” I rested my hand on my chest as I turned toward Timmy.

“It’s not as scary as it seems,” he added quickly. “Just call us if it happens and he will be fine. We’re monitoring him closely.”

“Thank you, for everything.” I was so grateful for this man, truly.

“You’re welcome and everything will be okay.”

I gave him a grateful smile because, despite the bad news, he’d reassured me.

The worst though was knowing that, at this stage, there was nothing more I could do for Timmy. All I could do now was wait and hope.

Jeremy gave Timmy a checkup and organized a follow-up appointment for the next month. As I was ready to leave, he extended a card.

“This is my private number. Call me if anything concerns you about Timmy or if you want to talk, about anything or-” He smiled. “Or if you reconsider my dinner invitation.”

I nodded putting the card in my pocket. “I will. Thank you.” All in all, Jeremy Hunt was a catch, but no matter what, he would need to know the truth before going out with me, and I needed to sort out my confusing feelings about the unfeeling man I was sharing a living space with.

The rest of the day was quite busy. I went to the pharmacy to pick up Timmy’s new medication. Then finally started the online classes that I’d picked.

Dean came back later that evening just as I was exiting the library with the new book I’d decided to read.

He looked tired and disheveled for the first time since I'd met him. He was carrying his suit jacket on his arm. His tie was undone, his shirt opened at the collar, revealing a little bit of his toned chest covered in a light dusting of dark hair.

"You look tired," I blurted out, only to immediately wince. I expected him to lash out at me, to unleash all the weariness and frustration I could see on his face. Why had I taken this liberty?

"It has been a long day," he replied gruffly. "Jeremy told me about Timothy's result. I'm sorry."

I remained silent, pulling the book closer to my chest. Was he actually trying to be nice to me? Why?

"But you should at least take comfort in the fact that you have one of the best, if not *the* best pediatric surgeons taking care of him."

I nodded, relaxing a bit. My death grip on the book I was holding loosened slightly. "Yes. I'm grateful for this and for your concern."

"Don't read too much behind my concern, Miss Collins. Don't mistake it for any type of kinship. I can just recognize the worry of a mother for her child."

I took a tentative step toward him. "So you know how much I love him? Isn't that enough for you to grant us, me, the freedom to be with my child?"

He sighed, burying his hands in his pockets. "Love is not a magical cure nor a fix-all. Love is barely a band-aid, a poor excuse for errors and bad decisions." He shook his head. "Love is not an advantage. What a child needs is a level head that can make the right decisions based on facts and empirical concepts rather than anything as erratic and unpredictable as love."

I opened my mouth, but then closed it again. This man was more complex than I'd thought. I didn't need to be a psychologist to know he was projecting his own past. Either he'd gotten hurt in the name of love or he'd hurt someone because of it, and I wanted to find out which.

“Dr. Hunt asked me out.” I opened my eyes wide. Why in God’s name did I go and say that?

His face darkened and his jaw ticked. “I know,” he said. “I’m impressed by your honesty though.”

“Yes, but-”

“Shall I remind you of the terms of your contract?”

That had the effect of a bucket of water on me. “No, there’s no need.” I sighed. “Also, I believe the contract says clearly that I can’t have sex for money, not that I can’t go on a date or have sex for any recreational reason.” I stood straighter, jutting my chin in defiance. “You know, like a blowjob given *freely* in a library.”

He looked at me for a few seconds, his nostrils flaring, his emerald eyes even greener than usual and I knew he was about to unleash the full force of his destructive hate on me.

“Goodnight, Mr. Beaumont,” I added quickly. I walked past him as fast as I could without looking like I was running away.

Was I going to pay for this? Maybe. Has it been worth it? Absolutely.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Dear*



I sighed, leaning back in my chair. I'd never used to work this late. I was only just realizing how much I'd actually relied on Phil to do.

I didn't give my trust easily. Despite Henry, my new lawyer, being amazing at his job, being just as cunning and as smart as I wanted, I didn't trust him yet. He hadn't earned it, and that was causing me quite an excess of work for the time being.

It made me miss Phil and also dislike Opal for having pushed me to make that choice. I know it was a choice I would have had to make eventually. I'd buried my head in the sand, pretending not to notice how deviant Phil was because he'd always been so careful to not touch anyone at work, but this - What he'd said and wanted to do to Opal...

I ran my hands over my face. Just the thought of it lit a homicidal rage inside of me.

I looked at my empty glass of Bourbon, contemplating another one. I'd already drunk more than my share tonight, especially considering I was looking at important documents, but my mind seemed to have been hijacked by the woman sharing my living space.

As if on cue, my phone vibrated yet again, Helle's name flashing on the screen.

I'd thought I'd miss my regular squeeze at least a little while I was cooped up in my estate with the woman I was supposed to hate, but no, I didn't miss her, not even a little.

I rolled my neck with irritation. I really needed to get rid of Helle. Phil had left before he could arrange her departure, so I'd just left her to stew. I'd sent her some expensive jewelry to make up for my absence, but that didn't seem to be working anymore.

She had to go now even if she was kicking and screaming. I'd been more than patient with her. It didn't matter that she could do the splits as well as 80% of the Kamasutra; she wasn't worth it.

I made myself a note for tomorrow. I needed to call Carl, the concierge, and have him kick her to the curb. That would be the best way for her to understand that there wouldn't be any tomorrow for us. We were done.

"It's late." My head jerked up at the sound of Opal's voice. She was standing under the threshold of my office door. Was I having one of my erotic daydreams again? I had to admit they were happening a lot more than I was comfortable with and she was, infuriatingly, always the main protagonist.

But no, I wasn't daydreaming. She was dressed in a pair of oversized grey sweatpants and an ugly sweatshirt, which I suspected was stained with the child's vomit. Not really how she was dressed in my dreams. She was more like the cute Catholic schoolgirl then.

"Yes, indeed." I looked at the clock on my desk; it was past 9:00 p.m. I needed some food in me to help soak up the five glasses of honey bourbon I'd had. "Have Mrs. James bring me something to eat."

"Mrs. James left at 2:00 p.m. Her grandson's play is today, remember?"

"Ah, yes, right." *Nope, I didn't have a clue.* "Well, I'll just have to find something myself then."

She fidgeted under the threshold as if she wanted to add something. It was annoyingly cute.

“Yes?”

“I - ummm - You need to eat something decent. I’m going to my room now, but I cooked enough for two and I left it in the oven on low for you, so it should stay warm for a little while.”

I’d never expected her to do anything remotely nice for me. I’d never given her a reason to and yet...here she was. Sighing, I leaned back in my seat. “Is it poisoned?”

She shrugged with a small smile. “I’m no chef, so if it is, it was unintentional.”

Her smile pleased me, the banter too. Ah, I was probably drunker than I’d thought.

My phone started to vibrate again. For the first time in forever, I actually turned it off and left it on my desk. I deserved a break. I’d been working more than my share for the past few days.

I stood up. “Keep me company?” I asked, surprising the both of us. Yes, I’d definitely drank too much.

“You want me to keep you company?” She pointed at her chest.

I couldn’t blame her for the confusion; I was confusing myself.

“Yes,”

“Okay...” she trailed off warily, moving out of the way before following me silently to the kitchen.

As I took the weird-looking casserole out of the oven, she made herself a hot chocolate, adding an insane amount of mini marshmallows. This woman clearly had a sweet tooth.

Taking a seat at the small table, I looked around us. It’d been years since I’d eaten in here. It brought some quite comforting, but bittersweet memories to the surface.

*You're becoming soft, Dean,* I thought with annoyance. I should have known better than to drink the last two glasses of Bourbon. It'd always had the irritating effect of lowering my inhibitions.

“What did you do in your free time?” I asked as Opal sat across from me at the small kitchen table. She placed one foot on the chair and rested her chin on top of her knee.

“Do you mean when I wasn't whoring myself out or taking drugs?” she asked before taking a sip of her hot chocolate.

*Touché.* “Yeah, that-”

She sighed as if she was unsure about whether or not she wanted to answer. “I didn't have any ‘me’ time to be fair.” She smiled. “Working full time at the dinner, while taking care of a sick baby?” She shook her head, accidentally loosening some of her long silky hair from her messy bun. The tendrils rested on her neck. “I barely had time to sleep. But I didn't mind. Timmy makes it all worth it.”

I took a bite of her passable bake, and whilst sober Dean would have used this to destroy her and tell her everything that was wrong with her dish, slightly inebriated Dean was just fascinated by the tendrils of hair resting on her neck. My fingers tingled with the need to brush them away. I was also both impressed and surprised by her lack of bitterness at her situation. This seemed to be a different woman than the one who'd written the note I'd found in Edward's pocket.

“But before Timmy, I enjoyed reading and playing around with photoshop, creating some promo material and stuff like that.” She looked at me for a second. “What do you enjoy doing during your free time?”

“Fuck,” I admitted. Seeing the shock on her face, I couldn't help but laugh. If I didn't know any better, I would have pegged her as an innocent virgin. “No, seriously, I don't have much free time. I enjoy what I do - buying companies, making them better, and then selling them. I love that.”

“Uh, it's a little sad. Life is made for living. I would do it all if I was you.”



“What did you tell him?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking. The thought had been perturbing me day and night. I hated the idea of her with Jeremy, hated how perfect he was and how he would please her.

“Who?” she asked, confused.

“Jeremy. What did you say when he asked you out?” Lord, did it cost me to ask, but I needed to know now because it’d been driving me crazy.

“He didn’t tell you that?”

“No,” I replied gruffly. “I think he enjoyed keeping me guessing.”

“Does it even matter?” she asked. The small smile playing on her lips both irritated and enticed me. How could she cause so many contrary feelings at the same time? “Answer the question, Ms. Collins,” I ordered. I was starting to think that she enjoyed a little command. I bet it turned her on... Was she wet for me now? My dick started to swell at the thought.

“I said no.” She licked her bottom lip. Yes, she was attracted to me too.

“Tell me why.”

“Because things are complicated. Because –” She sighed, shaking her head. “Because-” She turned toward me, meeting my eyes, and I saw it. Despite the light haze of alcohol in my brain, I saw it - her confusion, her attraction...her desire.

“Fuck it,” I growled as the band around my barely contained craving snapped, letting out the predator I was under the polished veneer of a controlled businessman.

I stood up and she mirrored my movement.

Closing the distance between us, I stopped so close to her that my chest brushed against her breasts.

I looked down at her, my breath slightly labored, as my dick started tenting the front of my pants.

She looked down at the clear tell of my growing desire, then looked back up at me. Her pupils were dilated, her lips

slightly ajar, giving me a peek of the pink tongue that had been wrapped around my dick in what seemed like forever ago.

Grabbing the back of her neck, I pulled her toward me and invaded her sweet mouth as she gasped in surprise.

She tasted like the hot chocolate she'd just drank. I bit on her bottom lip, not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to make her understand that I meant business. I wanted to possess every part of her.

As I deepened the kiss again, she moaned, quickly yielding under the roughness of my lips and the commanding pace of my tongue.

Tightening my hold on her neck, I pulled her closer to me before pressing her up against the table. Trapping her between myself and the strong wood, I let go of her mouth and started to nibble on her jawline. I trailed a hand under her jumper, leaving a trail of goosebumps across her impossibly soft skin. Cupping her small perky breast, I brushed my thumb over her cotton-covered nipple, which was already erected with desire.

I pinched it softly and she rocked her hips against me with a hiss. Oh, she enjoyed the bite of pain too; this was going to be explosive.

Letting go of her neck, I pulled her shirt off her shoulder, while still nibbling on her skin. She tasted like the best dessert in the world, and she smelled like cherry blossoms.

“You smell good enough to eat,” I whispered against her skin.

She sucked on my earlobe. “Eat me then.”

I flipped her around and bent her over the table. She didn't try to stop me or fight me; she was all soft and submissive in my hands. A dream come true.

I unbuckled my belt and watched her shiver at the sound.

I smiled in anticipation. Pulling down my zipper, I freed my engorged cock. When I yanked down her grey sweatpants, I was surprised at her choice of underwear. It was a pair of cotton panties with cherries on it - something I would have

expected to see on an innocent schoolgirl, but not on the sultry woman bent over my kitchen table.

“Spread your legs.”

She did so, albeit a little hesitantly. My smile widened due to both the view of her arousal-soaked panties and her response to my commands.

Was being bossed around new to her? I found that hard to believe and yet...every gesture she made was a little uncertain, as if she was learning. But she was loving it and right now, I didn't care about anything else.

When I pulled down her panties, I could barely make out the side of her face due to the position on the table, but it looked like she was blushing. No, that couldn't be right. She had to have been bent over more times than she could count. It was probably just an effect of the lighting.

I looked down at her pussy and let out a groan. It was pink and glistening with her arousal; she was even more perfect than she was in my daydreams.

Resting a hand on her hip, I grabbed my cock firmly and rubbed its head up and down her soaked slit. She moaned wantonly each time my cock rubbed against her clit. Fuck, she was so responsive.

“Spread your legs wider,” I commanded. She did so, her feet now barely touching the ground; she rested on the balls of her feet.

And that was when I entered her in one powerful thrust.

She gasped at the invasion, tightening her hands into fists on the table, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything other than being inside her.

Tilting my head back, I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth and tightness of her cunt around my length. I'd been joking about her tightness, but she had to be the tightest woman I'd ever been with. Her channel molded my cock so tightly, it felt like a glove. I could feel her every tremor on my pulsating dick.

“Fuck.” I retreated completely from her body and then sank back into her divine heat.

Tightening my hold on her hip, I pressed my other hand against the base of her spine. Increasing my pace, I thrust into her again and again.

She gasped with every movement of my cock. Raising her hips, she tried to seek more friction against me.

I was lost in a pleasurable daze, not even thinking about much more other than making this last as long as possible.

No wonder my brother had followed her back into his addiction; her pussy was heaven.

The thought of my brother was just enough to bring me back to reality. I suddenly realized that I was fucking her bare.

My thrusts turned erratic, my dick swelling on the verge of orgasm. My primal self was telling me to come inside her, but I managed to fight it. Reluctantly, pulling out, I slid my dick between her ass cheeks and came all over it and her lower back on a grunt of pleasure.

I looked at her - breathless, bent over the table, half naked with my cum marring her skin like a branding, and I felt the savage male part of me roar in satisfaction at having her like this. At making her mine.

*Mine?* I jerked back, letting go of her as if she'd burned me.

“What have I done?” I whispered, taking a step back. “Cover yourself,” I barked as I readjusted myself.

“What’s happening?” she asked with a small voice. She winced as she stood and pulled her pants back up.

“I’m sorry. This never should have happened; it never happened.” I shook my head. I was disgusted with myself for having just lost myself in the moment, in her. I wanted to blame alcohol and whilst it had played a part, this was all on me.

“You can’t-” she started.

I raised my hand to stop her. “I can and I am. I said this never happened.” I turned around to leave, but stopped just before exiting the room. “Go on your date with Jeremy. That is not against the rules,” I added, keeping my back to her. Fuck, did I hate saying those words, but they were necessary.

I walked away briskly. After grabbing an unopened bottle of honey bourbon from my office, I did something that I had not done since my father’s funeral.

I drank myself into oblivion.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Amber*



I'd barely seen Dean since what had supposedly never happened in the kitchen and in a certain way, I was grateful. I couldn't believe I'd told him to eat me. Lord, what had happened to me? I'd been so overwhelmed by desire that my inhibitions had just vanished. Dean had left for Philly the next day and had stayed away for a week. He'd been back almost a week now and the only time I'd seen him was when Jeremy Hunt came to check on Timmy, who had started coughing.

I had refused to comply with his order to go on a date with Jeremy. It wouldn't have been fair on him nor on me.

I'd been so angry at the suggestion, I'd felt like an object, nothing more. Dean had used me and then thrown me into someone else's arms like I was a good for nothing piece of trash.

Just the thought of it brought the sting of anger and pain again.

I sighed, forcing the negative emotions down as I braided my hair. The sun was so bright today, the spring so warm.

"Happy birthday, Opal," I whispered. She would have turned twenty-seven today. It was her first birthday since she'd

died and it was difficult to realize that she was never going to get older, that she'd lost that privilege.

I'd received a text from Dee as soon as I'd woken up. If I'd been home in Philly, she would have cooked me a lovely meal and we would just have a nice time.

Here though, there would be no commemoration for her birthday, because Dean couldn't know the truth, not that he would have cared, he was efficiently avoiding me.

Sighing, I decided to take Timmy to the gardens, where we could enjoy the warmth and the sun. I loved the gardens. Despite the lack of flowers, it was still peaceful and beautiful there. I'd never had a garden, always living in smelly, overcrowded grey buildings.

I dressed Timmy warmly, maybe even a little too much, but I was always so scared he would catch a cold. After grabbing a checkered blanket, I settled him in his baby carrier. Walking into the kitchen,

I took a long whiff of Mrs. James' cooking. The smell of oregano and basil made my stomach rumble despite the fact that I'd had breakfast only an hour ago.

I looked at her with a little pang in my chest. Was this what it would have been like to have a mother?

She turned toward me with a huge smile, a wooden spoon covered in sauce in her hand.

"Oh Lord, aren't you two adorable?" She beamed, resting her free hand on her chest. "You're matching!"

I looked down at Timmy's and my outfit and laughed. I had not done it on purpose, but it was true. My white dress was covered in cherries; it was the same for Timmy's overalls.

"Ah, we do."

"Mother and son," Mrs. James agreed with a nod.

I looked down at Timmy again and lovingly brushed my forefinger over his peachy cheek. *Son*. Yes, he was my son in all the ways that counted, except on paper, which

unfortunately was the only real way that mattered - especially against a ruthless man like Dean Beaumont.

“This smells divine.” I wanted to change the subject. Thinking of losing Timmy and all the deceptions I’d created in an attempt to keep him was taking a toll on me.

“You said you’d had a French stew a long time ago and you thought it was divine. I suspect it was beef bourguignon, so I’m making it for dinner.”

My heart squeezed in my chest. I looked up, blinking back tears. If only she knew how much that meant to me, especially today. It was such a Dee thing to do and Mrs. James had made this house so warm and welcoming to me. I secretly pretended she was my mother. How sad was that?

“I can’t wait,” I replied emotionally. “Well, I’m taking Timmy by the pond for a while,” I added quickly, turning toward the door so she could not see how crazy I was, crying because she was cooking something for me.

“Okay. I’ll have lunch brought to you there.”

“No, it’s okay. You don’t have to.”

She laughed. “I know I don’t, but I want to. It’s so warm today and nice. Enjoy it while you can.”

I knew she’d meant that the weather was so fickle in the spring that it could drop twenty degrees overnight, but I couldn’t help but hear the secret meaning - one way or another, my days here were numbered. And whilst I should be looking forward to it, to leaving this cold, empty, unfeeling house, I knew I’d miss it dearly.

I settled the blanket under a tree by the pond and sat down before setting Timmy on the blanket.

I kicked off my shoes and wiggled my toes, which were currently painted in red. I enjoyed the warm breeze on my bare legs and feet.

After giving Timmy his teething keys, I watched him chew for a couple of minutes before concentrating on my surroundings.



I enjoyed watching the light, soothing ripples the breeze caused on the surface of the pond. The cherry blossoms above me moved softly, filling the air with its lovely smell.

Mrs. James had told me that Dean never went into the gardens, never enjoyed the treasure he had. I guess it was true what they said: You don't know what you have until you lose it.

*Or if you've never had it.*

I closed my eyes and tilted my head up, enjoying the sun on my face as I inhaled deeply. The unique scent of cherry blossoms, which could only be described as having very faint and sheer lilac and rose qualities accented with a creamy vanilla and soft, almond-like aroma, filled my lungs.

I was pleased that Mrs. James was doing that French beef for me. It would help associate that amazing food with something other than what the original meal reminded me of.

The first time I'd had beef bourguignon was a couple of months after I'd moved in with Opal. I was only eleven, but even at that age, I hadn't been completely naive, not with the life I'd already led.

She'd taken me to a big house, saying that I didn't have to say or do anything, just watch. I had to look because she'd been paid extra for her baby sister to watch and that I owed her for taking me away.

A man with a mask had opened the door and grinned down at me, extending a thick envelope to my sister.

He'd spoken with an accent, which I'd realized much later was French. He'd complimented my sister for the spectator she'd brought.

We'd walked into a big dining room decorated with dark woods. The man had then taken my hand and made me sit in front of a plate filled with the best smelling stew I'd ever smelled.

“Eat and look child. Keep your eyes on your sister at all times. Do you understand?” he'd asked.

“Yes,” I’d whispered, not really knowing what I would be looking at.

My sister had smiled before sniffing some white powder the man had given her.

Then a couple of other masked men had entered the room and all three of them had undressed my sister and then themselves. They’d filled every hole she had without much consideration for her.

I’d hated watching, but every time I’d looked down, either the man or my sister would shout at me to keep watching. So I had. And every passing moment, I’d lost a bit more of my innocence, especially once the man who’d opened the door joined in. His eyes had stayed on me, unwavering. I’d understood despite my young age that he wished that it was me he was using and abusing... not her.

I shivered at the horrible memory as a shadow loomed over me.

I opened my eyes to see Dean looking at me. He was dressed in an impeccable dark-blue three-piece suit, light-blue tie, and shiny Oxford shoes. It was such a weird contrast to the wooden picnic basket in his hand and the blanket on his arm.

“Yes?” I asked with uncertainty. Him being here couldn’t have been an accident. He never came into the gardens and he was avoiding me like the plague. I shouldn’t have been happy to see him standing there and yet, my stomach flipped with excitement.

“Mrs. James thought you might enjoy a picnic. She asked if I could bring it out to you.” His eyes trailed down my legs to my bare feet. My skin heated under his slow gaze.

“Your housekeeper asked *you* to do this?” I raised an eyebrow with incredulity. I highly doubted anyone could make him do something he didn’t want to do.

“Yes. She’s terrifying. Don’t tell her I said that,” he added with a wide smile, which for once was free of any coldness.

I couldn’t help but stare at him for a few seconds. This carefree persona was like a mirage. I was not sure if I was

truly witnessing it or if it was only what my mind wanted to see.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I folded my legs and pointed at the spot I’d just freed. “I’m sure there’s enough for two in this huge basket. Why don’t you join me?” I wanted to see more of this unknown side of Dean Beaumont. I patted the bag by my side. “I’ve got everything for Timmy here.”

He looked away, rubbing his neck, suddenly looking uncomfortable, which was also not something I was used to. “I have a lot of work - a conference call in a couple of hours that I need to prepare for so I don’t have to go into the city again.”

“Oh.” I was pleased that he didn’t want to leave, but that made me feel stupid. He had been nothing more than a dick to me, wanting to take away the only good thing I had in my life. Why did I want him close? Had what I’d experienced as a child messed me up?

“Can’t you just take a break?” I gestured around the garden. “Just drop your tie for a few minutes and enjoy. Are you ever letting yourself go? Letting yourself become undone?”

His green eyes darkened, and I knew exactly what he was thinking about. He had done so that night in the kitchen only to regret it so deeply immediately after.

I shook my head, trying to erase the arousal slowly awakening in my body at the thought of that night. I pressed my thighs together and his eyes jumped to my crotch. “Just enjoy it for a few minutes. Take your shoes off and feel the tickle of the grass under your feet, the warm air against your skin,” I added, wiggling my toes for emphasis.

He looked at my feet. I thought he was going to say no and leave, but to my surprise, he nodded.

“Okay.” Sighing, he dropped the basket beside me and removed his Oxford shoes and black socks. He rolled his pants legs up and wiggled his toes on the grass. “Happy?”

*No*, I thought. I’d hoped he had webbed feet or hobbit feet or anything that would make him less perfect or intimidating,

but no, he had nice strong feet... Of course he did.

“Are you?” I asked, putting Timmy on my lap to give him a snack.

After removing his tie and suit jacket, Dean sat across from me. He opened the basket and looked in. “We’ve got cheese, crackers, and grapes.”

“Oh, I love cheese!” Mrs. James was just so considerate to me. I finished feeding Timmy and settled him back on the blanket. I looked at him for a few seconds as he blinked softly, already starting to fall asleep.

I turned back to Dean, who extended me a cracker with some cheese.

“How does it feel to relax for a minute?” I asked, taking the cracker.

“Who said I’m relaxing?” he replied, but he looked less stern and it was making him even more beautiful.

I shrugged. “Your phone, which is usually attached to your hand, is missing and so are the perpetual lines between your brows.”

“You’ve been detailing me, Ms. Collins,” he said, the teasing in his voice bringing the butterflies back to my stomach with a vengeance.

“Not more than you’ve been detailing me, Mr. Beaumont,” I tried as a bluff. I was not convinced that he was as aware of me as I was of him and yet, a little part of me hoped that he was.

He laughed. “Touché.” Reaching for one of my feet, he rested it on his lap and massaged it gently.

I froze, shocked by his actions. He was touching me for something other than sex and degradation. I couldn’t really comprehend such gentleness from such a ruthless man.

He trailed his hand up my leg and stopped at my knee.

“I tried to forget,” he admitted, looking down at his hand on my leg. “I tried, but I couldn’t.”

I remained completely still. I was scared that should I move, he would remove his strong hand from my skin and I didn't want that. I loved the trail of fire his touch left on my skin.

"I still want you." He looked heavenward. "Lord, forgive me, but I still do." He turned toward me. "I want to have you again, tonight."

I sighed. I wanted nothing more than to have him in me again, but the aftermath had been horrendous, and I didn't think I could take it again.

I shook my head. "For you to regret it again? And pretend it never happened? No, thank you." I tried to remove my leg from his lap, but he tightened his hold on it.

"I know it happened. Of course, I do. And I know you do too!" His eyes trailed up, stopping at my crotch. "Can you still feel me in you? How I filled you up?" His eyes darkened as he moved his fingers to the hem of my dress. "I can still hear your gasp as I entered you. Have you ever made that noise before?"

"Never," I admitted truthfully. *Not in the three times I'd had sex with my high school boyfriend*, I added to myself. I had felt Dean in me for a few days after. He was much bigger than Alex and he had not been gentle or particularly considerate. Probably because he'd thought that I had been a professional, that getting fucked by strangers had been a daily occurrence. He hadn't understood the bite of pain and the subsequent soreness sex with him had caused.

I had enjoyed submitting to his command and wicked desires; just the idea of doing it again made me wet, but it was the aftermath I couldn't accept.

"I want you, fuck me, I do." His voice was deeper. He licked his lips. "Let me fuck you again."

"Dean," I let out on a sigh. Reluctantly removing my leg from him, I folded both of them under me. I realized that this was the first time I'd used his first name when addressing him directly.

“No.” He shook his head. “Don’t say anything.” He stood up with more grace than a man his size warranted. “Just think about it, and tonight, I’ll come to your room. When I turn the handle, if it opens, it will mean you want me too.”

I looked at him as he picked his shoes up and walked lazily back to the house.

As he disappeared inside, I was certain I was going to lock the door tonight.

*Be smart, Amber. Don’t let him use you again. Just lock the damned door.*

And yet, I found myself, just a few hours later, standing in front of my locked door, dressed only in a small tank top and boy shorts. My brain had taken the back seat, leaving my heart and lady parts to do the talking.

*If you don’t let him in, you’ll regret it,* my pussy whined. *He made you feel good.* Sighing, I touched the lock but didn’t turn it.

*And he was nice to you today. Maybe he likes us now, maybe he is forgiving us for whatever he thinks we did?* my heart added.

I unlocked the door, my heart jumping at the sound. Turning off the light, I opened the curtains, allowing the full moon to light up my room.

I was lying under the cover, all keyed up, listening to every little noise and praying that Timmy wouldn’t wake up until much later.

Tossing and turning, I kept second-guessing my choice to let him in, to let him use me again. Suddenly, all doubts flew out the window when I heard my door open softly. Dean walked in.

“You changed your mind,” he said, the relief clear in his voice as he started removing his clothes.

“Yeah,” I croaked with apprehension. As I waited for him to undress, I cursed the poor lighting. I would have loved to see his powerful body in full light.

When he reached the bed and pulled back the covers, I stopped breathing. He made a sound in the back of his throat before leaning over me without another sound. Pulling my tank top up, he took one of my nipples in his mouth.

I arched my back with a moan as he bit me lightly. He worshipped my breasts in quick succession, the light scratch of his beard making this all the more delicious.

I'd never felt so good in my life. It almost made me forget everything that was happening between us and the consequences of having sex with Dean Beaumont. Once was a mistake, but twice....

I took a sharp breath as his hand slid into my boy shorts, straight to my wet heat.

He growled in pure male satisfaction, my nipple still in his mouth, at finding me already so ready for him.

Trailing his lips up to the column of my neck, his middle finger slid into me while his thumb alternated between circling my clit and applying pressure. I spread my legs further apart, giving him better access to my pussy.

He bit my neck as he added a second finger. As he pumped in and out of me, I mewled shamelessly. My orgasm built at the base of my spine and then exploded, blinding me for a second as I screamed his name.

He flipped me around, pulled my hips up, my boy shorts up, and entered me in a strong, powerful thrust.

I gasped into my pillow at the bite of pain. No matter how wet I was, he was a big man. I'd only had sex a handful of times. His roughness stung...but I was also shamefully enjoying it.

Tightening his hold on my hips, he pumped into me.

I wanted to see him come undone, this powerful, stoic man. I wanted to see what my body did to him, the power my body had over him.

I tried to twist around and look at him.

“No,” he growled. Grabbing my neck, he pushed my face down. “Turn around. I can’t look at your face,” he added, slamming into me even harder as if he was punishing me for attempting to look at him.

Hearing that the idea of me disgusted him was the most painful thing. I went limp, letting him finish, becoming the fuck doll he clearly thought I was.

I tried to dissociate, tried to think of anything else as he rutted in me. He grunted with every thrust. I felt used and abused - as if I was being raped. What this how Opal had felt? Why she had become so unfeeling?

I just wanted him to be done, and I never wanted to do this again.

He finally came on a roar and I thanked the heavens for it.

When he leaned against my back and I felt his lips against my neck, I couldn’t help my gag reflex.

Bucking my hips, I threw him off me and rushed to the bathroom. I was just in time to empty my stomach into the toilet.

“Are you okay?” he asked, having followed me into the bathroom.

I quickly glanced his way. He was zipping his pants and walking toward me. I vomited again and he reached for my hair.

Swatting his hand away, “Don’t touch me. Please go.” I said, my voice breaking.

“Have - have you taken any drugs?” he asked tentatively

I let out a sob. Just when I thought he couldn’t hurt me any more than he already had... How much more could I take from him? No more. I was done now. I’d reached my limit.

I took a deep breath; now was not the time to break down. “Just turn around a minute, please.”

He frowned with confusion but did as I asked.



Grabbing one of the testing pots from under the bathroom sink, I peed in it. I stood up on shaky legs as the evidence of my fuck doll status made its way down my legs. Wrapping a towel around myself, I extended the sample pot to him. "Here. Take this, test what you want. Please just go."

"But you're sick -"

I shook my head. "I'm not your problem. I want you gone - now." I sat on the toilet, not even caring that I was almost naked. "Please, Mr. Beaumont."

He jerked back as if he hadn't expected me to call him Mr. Beaumont. But that was all he was, all he could be. I better never forget that ever again.

"Very well. If that's what you want." But he remained in the bathroom, shirtless, his hands in his pockets.

He had a fantastic chest, wide and tanned, with abs and a dark tail of hair disappearing into his pants. I couldn't enjoy it though. No, I wanted him gone more than anything in the world.

I nodded. "Yes, I do." I looked away. "Leave."

I waited for a couple of minutes before turning back to look at the door. When I didn't see him there, I sighed in relief. Dropping my towel, I brushed my fingertips across the red marks his strong hands left on my skin.

I let out another sob. Jumping in the shower, I tried to brush away my humiliation along with his smell.

*'It's used or be used in this world, Amber. I use these men before they can use me. Always remember that, sister. Men want your pussy, nothing more. They'll do anything to put their dick in you. They'll lie and deceive. Let them do it, but be the smart one and fuck them as much as they fuck you.'* Opal had told me that one night when she'd come home with a man's wallet and watch.

I cried silently under the hot water. I hated how right she had been. I knew how Dean saw me - as just a warm body here to satisfy his basic urges. But never again. I could never feel this low again, never feel so used. I would not survive it.

I needed to stay me, for Timmy. I could not become Opal. He needed my heart and conscience.

I would not let Dean Beaumont break me in the ways Opal had been broken. He was poisonous to me. Raising my hand to my neck, I touched the bite mark he'd left there. His venom was running through me, but no more.

I was Amber Collins and I'd stay Amber Collins even if that meant never letting Dean Beaumont close to me again. He will never use me again.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Dear*



“Please, could you tell Ms. Collins that the car to the hospital will be ready in the next few minutes?”

The butler bowed. “Yes, sir, I will let her know.”

Sitting back in my chair with a sigh, I brushed my thumb back and forth across my lips.

I felt an unusual excitement at being alone with her in the car, if only for a few minutes. I’d been trying to understand why she’d been treating me like a plague-ridden bastard since that night in her room. I wasn’t sure why she’d sent me away the way she had. I’d made sure she had come before fucking her. I’d never really had that consideration before, with her or anyone for that matter, and yet, she’d freaked out on me and was making it her life mission to avoid me.

I’d wondered the next day why I hadn’t seen her. Weirdly enough, I’d even started to worry about her. Why I was worried about the woman who I was convinced had pushed my brother to the grave, was beyond me, but I did.

I had lingered around her bedroom that day, waiting for her to come out. I hadn’t left until Mrs. James had found me and given me a strange look. After that, almost all of my attempted

run-ins had failed miserably. I'd tried Opal's door again that night, and three nights after that, hoping it would be open and that she would let me have her again, but it was always locked. She'd not gone back to the library to study either. She'd been smart and used the credit card I had given her to buy a laptop so she could study from the confines of her room. Once again, I'd realized her frugal nature. She could have bought the most expensive computer in the world, but she'd spent very little, buying the most basic, bottom of the line option.

And once the tests had come back negative for both drugs and pregnancy, I'd felt relieved. I should have been irritated that her drug test had come back negative. I had been at the start, but these last few weeks, I'd been relieved rather than irritated and that baffled me.

I looked at the crumpled note on my desk, the one that had been in Edward's pocket when they'd found his body.

*'Have your brother give you money quickly or I'll have to get rid of the baby,'* it said in a handwriting I assumed was Opal's, and I hated her for that, so much more than I ever hated anyone. Edward, despite his self-destructive nature, had adored children and wanted to be a father. I'd refused his plea for money. He had cheated me so many times before, I had refused to fall for it again. So, I'd given him \$50, telling him that had to be enough for a few doses. He'd bought a few doses and had taken them all at once.

If only I had -

"Sir?"

I shook my head, grateful for the interruption. "Yes?"

"Ms. Collins said young Timothy is ready for you to pick up whenever it is convenient."

I frowned, sitting straighter. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure, sir," he said hesitantly and I understood how uncomfortable he was.

I stood up with a sigh, but I was secretly excited about seeing her. She couldn't avoid me any more, could she? "Very

well. I'll go see her.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said full of gratitude before disappearing down the corridor.

I stopped in front of the glass panel beside the bookcase and looked at my reflection, straightening my tie and making sure my hair was still perfect.

What was this tiny woman doing to me?

When I made it to Timothy's room, he was dressed and ready to go, already seated in the car seat with the diaper bag beside him.

“What did you mean?” I asked a bit colder than I'd intended when I saw her dressed in a pair of leggings and an oversized tee-shirt. She was clearly not dressed to go out.

She stayed on the other end of the room, close to the connecting door to her bedroom as if she was trying to stay far away from me in case she needed to bolt.

*Did she think I was going to maul her?*

“I think it would be best if you went with Timothy on your own, Mr. Beaumont,” she said calmly. But she wrung her hands together in front of her, a clear sign of her nervousness.

I knew how much she loved the boy and I didn't miss that for the first time, she'd called him Timothy. Despite my loathing of his silly nickname, for some reason, I hated that she didn't use it.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, trying to remain calm despite my feeling of anger and an unjustified sense of betrayal.

“I've thought about it and if you wish to raise him, you will need to do all of this without me.” She crossed her arms on her chest, looking at the child with longing. “I would much rather you started while I'm still on the premises.”

I took a step toward her, not caring about the distance she was trying to impose. “So you're expecting to fail? Are you on drugs again?”

She looked up at me, her brown eyes unwavering from my face, the epitome of cool. “No, I’m not on drugs, but I fear I may give up.”

The betrayal I already felt was fueled even more, overtaking my reason. I snorted. “Talk about unwavering motherly love.”

She winced. I knew I’d hit a nerve, but she stood her ground. “He’s ready to go. You’ll find my notes in the side pocket in case Dr. Hunt asks you any questions.”

“You know, in any normal situation, I would have a nanny with me. Forcing me to do this by myself is unfair.”

She nodded. “You’re right.”

I did my best not to smile. I had her there and just to get revenge, I’d have the driver take the long way home so she’d have to suffer my presence even longer.

“That’s why I had Mrs. James call the agency you’d used previously to get you help for the day.” She looked at the boat-shaped clock on the wall. “She is probably already waiting by the car.”

I was not only angry now, I was furious...and also a little impressed.

“I won’t tell you what the results say,” I spat childishly. How dare she dismiss *me*? Avoid *me*?

She sighed in defeat. “I know. It’s okay because contrary to you, I trust you’ll do the best for Timothy. He is your legacy after all.”

I ground my teeth, pursing my lips with barely contained anger. She had to stop calling him Timothy. She *had* to.

“I won’t forget this,” I barked as I picked up the car seat.

She nodded. “I understand. Many things are hard to forget.” And then she gave me her back, walking into her room and closing the connecting door between us.

I took a step toward it, considering breaking it down and demanding she apologizes for her lack of respect by getting on

her knees. Fuck, did I like her on her knees...

I growled before closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, trying to reign in my anger and my twitching cock. This was certainly not the time to get an erection.

I walked down the hall, my hand clenched tightly around the car seat handle. When I met the middle-aged nanny by the door, I hated her on sight.

“Good morning, sir. I’m Anna. The agency s-”

“Let’s go,” I interrupted, extending the car seat to her.

“I- Ummm- Yes, of course.” She took the seat from me.

I walked out to the awaiting car. No, the anger was not fading. I could barely contain it.

Sitting in the car, I looked at my emails as the driver helped the woman fasten the car seat in place.

We’d just started to drive when Timmy started crying.

*Timmy.* It struck me like a bolt of lightning. For the first time, I’d thought of him as Timmy.

I tried to ignore his cries as I continued to work, but I was starting to get a migraine at the back of my skull. I turned toward the nameless nanny. “The child’s been crying for ten minutes. He never cries. Are you actually qualified?”

“I - Yes, yes, sir,” she stuttered as she tried to distract him.

“Then do something!”

She played with him, but it felt like she was only making it worse.

When we finally reached the hospital, I exited the car and rounded to the other side, extending my arms toward the nanny. “Give me the boy.”

I rested him against my chest, one arm under Timothy’s buttocks and the other holding his neck. “Listen, Timothy, this needs to stop,” I stated with a strong voice.

He leaned back a little, his cries finally stopping, and blinked at me. His eyes were the exact same green as mine.

He brought his chubby hand up to grab at my beard, but it was trimmed too short for him to catch. He gave me a little shriek.

And suddenly, looking at him as he smiled, I felt the bond, the love I didn't want nor know I could feel. He was my blood, a little piece of Edward. He was my family.

He cooed, grabbing at my chin, and I couldn't help but chuckle. "You like the beard, don't you, big boy?" I nodded. "Don't worry, Beaumont men get epic beards. I'll show you how to take care of it." I tightened my hold on him and looked up at the nanny. "You're not needed anymore."

I turned around and walked into the hospital with the little boy, who was now smiling in my arms.

"Where's Opal?" Jeremy asked, looking around just as I reached his office.

"You only have me today. Sorry to disappoint."

At least he didn't pretend, he looked dejected.

Taking Timothy from my arms, he started to examine him.

"I got all the numbers from Opal. She is very thorough," he said as soon as he was done listening to Timothy's heart.

"She is. She loves her son," I said as the nurse came and took Timothy away for a blood test.

"I'm glad you see that," Jeremy replied as he stood in the corner, scribbling in his file.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, getting annoyed. "You don't need to defend your little girlfriend. You're the doctor in this situation, not the friend. I don't need your opinion." I shook my head, getting out the note she'd put in the bag.

"She's not my girlfriend," he said on a breath that sounded a lot like regret as he rested the file on his desk. "She is not willing to go on a date with me."

I felt a strange relief at that comment as jealousy had started to rear its ugly head since I'd told her to do it. I hated



that relief; it meant things I didn't want.

"Anyway, she gave me a list of information for you." I opened the paper and frowned. This was not the handwriting I'd expected...at all.

"What? Is there something wrong?" Jeremy asked, standing behind me to read. "No, these numbers are not horrible." He leaned closer. "What is that word?"

"Quickly," I said in a daze. The Q and Y were not the same as the note she'd written to Edward. Actually, nothing in her handwriting reminded me of her note. Was it possible that she hadn't written it?

I shook my head. Would that change anything? She was still the prostitute who had dragged Edward back into the pit of drugs after he'd been clean for six months! He'd never gone that long before. I'd started to hope again, began thinking that I could get my little brother back, only to lose him to drugs again. That loss had taken away the little bit of humanity I'd had left.

"Dean?"

I turned toward Jeremy, who was now sitting at his desk in front of his computer.

"What did you say?"

"I said that I think we still need to move the surgery forward. I thought we could wait until after he turned one, but the numbers, despite being okay, are still decreasing more rapidly than I'd like given the new medication. I think he should have the surgery in eight weeks."

I nodded, brushing my thumb over the note again. In two months, Opal's time at my house would be almost over... unless she left sooner. For once, that thought didn't fill me with glee, but rather with an apprehension that felt too close to fear.

"Sure, eight weeks is fine."

He turned toward his computer. "I'll give Opal a call and explain the next steps."

I glared at him. “No. Thank you for your offer, but I am pretty sure I can explain it to her myself. She can always call you. I’m sure she has your number,” I added, hating the bite of jealousy in my tone.

“She does,” he confirmed. “She has all my numbers.”

*I got the message, Dr. Hunt; you want Opal Collins.* I sighed. “Is there anything else we need to do today?”

Jeremy shook his head. “No. Anita should be back with Timothy in the next few minutes. She’s doing another ultrasound to make sure the heart valves haven’t been damaged any further.”

Once I had Timothy back, I held him closer than I’d used to. I felt the bond now, the love for this sick little boy, and it was terrifying. I’d thought I was fixed in my ways, that nothing could affect me any longer. Lord, had I been wrong.

I strapped Timothy into the car. “You’ve been brave, my boy. The nurse said you didn’t even cry.” I instinctively kissed his forehead, surprising myself by the tender gesture. That was not something I was accustomed to giving or receiving. “Take the long way home,” I told the driver as I settled in beside my nephew.

I needed a bit of time before facing Opal.

Picking up my phone, I dialed a number I’d been reluctant to call.

“Deano?” The surprise in Lea’s voice was clear. I couldn’t blame her. I never called her.

“Do you think she’s to blame? For his death?” I asked. I’d been so certain and yet, now I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know anymore.

“No. I can tell you with absolute certainty that that woman had no play in our brother’s death.”

“He was better.”

“No, Deano, he wasn’t.” She sighed. “I know you still refuse to believe it, but our brother was sick, just as our mother was sick.”

“But she - “

“She ‘nothing,’ Dean. Our brother had refused to accept he was bipolar. He’d refused any and all treatment I’d tried to get him to take. I’m not to blame. She’s not to blame. *You’re* not to blame.”

“I’ve never said I was,” I replied defensively.

She let out a humorless laugh. “You don’t have to. It is plain as day, but I’ve known better than try to convince you otherwise. You’re so full of guilt, but maybe now you’re more receptive to hearing it.”

I sighed, looking at Timothy. What would happen if I stopped blaming her? Stop hating her?

*Are you hating her now?* the little voice in my head piped in.

“Speaking about Opal...”

“Uh-huh...” I’d started the conversation by calling; I couldn’t stop it now.

“We have the Beaumont hundred-year party in ten days. Is she allowed to come or is she to be locked in her tower like a dirty little secret?”

I rolled my eyes. Opal was my dirty little secret in so many ways. “Who do you think I am?”

“I don’t think you want me to answer that.” Her tone was teasing, but firm and I was not sure I wanted to hear her clinical assessment.

“She can come if she wants to, but I highly doubt she’ll want to.” I was having a taste of my own medicine and I didn’t like it.

“Dean, what did you do?”

I shook my head. We were coming up to the gates now. I didn’t have time for this. “What do you want from Opal?”

“Ask her to come with me for a spa day before the gala.”

I winced. I hated the idea of Opal spending some time with my sister, of telling my sister all the shameful things I'd done.

I sighed. Oh, what the hell. I was pretty sure she wouldn't want to go. "You know what, I'll give you her phone number. Do as you wish."

"You are willingly giving me a way to contact her?"

I shrugged before realizing she could not see me. "Why not? You don't want to?"

"Yes, I do! Tell her I'll call her later."

I gave Lea Opal's number just as we parked in front of the house. Mrs. James came down the stairs to meet us.

"I can take little Timothy back to his room if you wish, sir," she said in her usual calm soothing tone, but I knew better. She was trying to help Opal avoid me.

Nice try.

I tightened my hold on the handle of the baby carrier and shook my head.

"No, thank you. I need to have a word with Ms. Collins".

I took Timothy back upstairs, a bit nervous, hoping that she would be a little more receptive.

I walked into the nursery, set the seat on the floor, and knocked on the connecting door.

When she opened it, I noticed the laptop and schoolbooks opened all over her bed.

"Studying?" I asked, actually impressed at her attempt to better her life.

She nodded as she ducked under my arm to reach Timothy.

I turned around and watched her taking him out of his seat. She rocked him gently.

"Jeremy is bringing forward the surgery. He thinks we should do it in two months. I agreed."

She nodded, brushing her lips against Timothy's forehead. "Of course, yes. I understand." She smiled sadly at him and I knew she was worried.

I took a step toward her. "Jeremy Hunt is the best there is, Opal," I said, trying to reassure her. "I would never put the life of my nephew, my heir, in any hands other than the best."

She finally met my eyes and the gratefulness there took my breath away. "I know that. Thank you, Mr. Beaumont, truly."

Now she was making me uncomfortable. This was not necessary. This was the least I could do. She didn't have to feel grateful.

"Lea also wants to talk to you about something. I took the liberty of giving her your number."

"Okay." She walked to the fridge, her high ponytail moving with each movement. "I like Lea. She's nice," as she prepared Timothy a bottle.

"Ah, there is a Beaumont you like."

"I liked Edward too," she replied softly. I received the message loud and clear. She was not a fan of me.

"Anyway, I'll leave you to it. Have a good day, Opal."

She nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Beaumont...and thank you for telling me about Timmy's condition. I appreciate it."

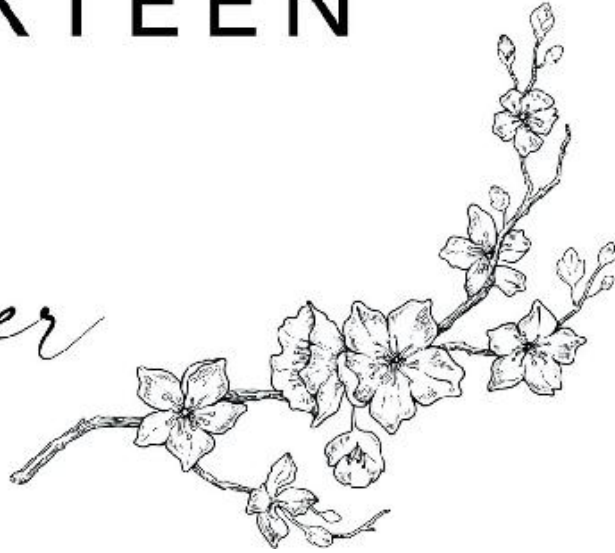
I stopped at the door. Turning around, I watched her feed Timothy, her back at me.

This scene did something to me, to my stomach, my soul, my heart. A peaceful warmth settled in me that I didn't want to analyze or understand because I knew that one way or another, regardless of whether I won this bet or not, she'd leave, and then what?

*Can you actually win anymore, Dean Beaumont?* It started to feel like any outcome that involved her leaving would be a loss.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Amber*



I looked at my calendar on the wall. I couldn't believe I only had six weeks left here with Timmy and that we would be able to go back to Philly soon. A part of me would miss this place and the angry man living in it.

Rejecting him and forcing a distance had been harder than I'd thought, but every time I thought about forgiving him, I remembered how he'd treated me, how all those men had treated Opal. I would not let him do the same to me.

I looked out of the window of my room and noticed all the vans and people rushing around to prepare for the gala happening here tonight. It felt so foreign to me, being here for a gala and watching everyone running around as they rushed to make the old ballroom into a reception hall. I'd spied on them yesterday as they'd started to set up. It had looked so majestic already. I couldn't comprehend how a party could take two days to set up, but Mrs. James had told me that that was not rare at all.

I looked at my phone before getting dressed in leggings and a tee-shirt.

Lea had called me, asking if I wanted to spend a girl day out with her before attending the gala. I liked her. I wanted

Timmy to have a link to Eddy's family and I doubted that that connection would be made through Dean's cold, dead heart.

Despite having accepted Lea's offer, I'd been reconsidering it for the past week. What did I have in common with this highly intelligent, overly qualified rich woman? I was going to feel so inadequate with my high school degree and wallet full of food stamps.

I sighed, shaking my head. And what about tonight's fancy party? I turned to look at the little black dress I'd worn at the dinner party a couple of months ago. That was my dress for tonight and after the dinner party fiasco... I didn't belong here. Why on earth had I said yes?

I grabbed my phone to text her that I'd changed my mind, but my phone vibrated as a text from Lea came through. She'd texted to tell me she was waiting for me in the car.

I sighed. It was too late now to bail on her.

I went to the nursery and gave Timmy a kiss.

"You'll be nice for Mrs. James, won't you, sweet boy?" I smiled, stroking his soft peach-colored cheek. "I'll be back soon. I love you to the moon and back."

Heading down the corridor, I rushed past Dean's office. I didn't think I would be strong enough if he tried any harder, which would end up with me hating myself and him a little more.

"I'd expected you to cancel on me," Lea chimed with good humor as I opened the passenger door.

"I almost did," I admitted as I climbed in. I wasn't sure what it was about this woman that made it impossible for me to lie to her.

She laughed loudly and I detailed her. She really was the polar opposite of her brother. She was sporting her hair in a high ponytail and she was dressed in a simple pair of jeans, trainers, and a plain green tee-shirt. She looked so much more like someone from my neighborhood than someone from Dean's, but she was a psychiatrist. Had she dressed like this on purpose? Whatever her reason why, I felt grateful for it.

“I commend you for your honesty,” she added, laughter still in her voice.

I looked away. Honesty had used to be my strong suit.

“You’ll see. Today is going to be fun. Full pampering before the party. Have you been to a spa before?”

“No, but my friend, Dee, did my nails every once in a while.”

She nodded. “You’ll love it.”

We drove in comfortable silence before stopping in front of a huge white building. A man came to open my door.

“I’ve planned the whole day.” Lea locked her arm with mine as we walked in. Stopping by reception, we grabbed a welcoming bag each before heading for the lockers.

The bags contained a plush robe, flip flops, and a bracelet with a key for the locker.

“I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve never done anything like this.”

“You need to be fully naked under your robe,” Lea said as we entered the changing room. I blushed furiously at the idea of being naked in a group.

Noticing my discomfort, Lea pointed at the individual changing rooms.

“Don’t worry. Nobody will see you. It’s just better for the full body massage.”

I nodded gratefully and went to the changing room to slip on the robe. Despite it being so long it stopped past my knees, I was still very conscious of the fact that I was naked under it. That I would be naked walking around strangers.

“We’ll be starting our full-body massages and facials with waxing, if that’s okay?” Lea asked as she sat on a leather chair in the waiting room. She gestured to the seat beside her. After sitting down, I started to relax under the strange blue light and soothing music.



A middle-aged woman called my name. I turned to Lea.

“You go,” she said. “It will be my turn any minute. We’ll meet back here in two hours.” She smiled. “Enjoy it and relax. Lord knows you need it for sharing a space with my savage brother.”

I wanted to laugh at her joke, but I couldn’t. It was true that Dean was a savage in all aspects, but Lord save me, some of that savagery, I’d enjoyed.

At the start of the massage, I was very tense and awkward. I was not used to being touched by other people, but after a few minutes, I started to relax. By the time the woman was done with the full massage and another woman took over for the eyebrow waxing and facial, I was the most relaxed I’d ever been. I left behind my relationship with Dean, Timmy’s sick heart...everything.

They said that money couldn’t buy happiness, but right at this moment, I wasn’t sure.

When I met Lea after the treatments, I was as relaxed as I’d ever been. I didn’t even care about the evening gala.

“Ready for lunch?” she asked, looking just as relaxed as I was.

“Yes, I’m starving.”

After being seated at a table, we ordered an afternoon tea to share. She ordered a mimosa, while I chose an orange juice.

“So how does it feel?” Lea asked, leaning back in her chair.

I let out a small sigh. “Amazing.”

She nodded. “Good. I wanted today to be a sort of apology for my brother.”

I waved my hand dismissively. I was too relaxed to twist the truth.

“I know how seemingly heartless Dean can be.”

“Seemingly?” I couldn’t help but ask.

She chuckled before sighing. "I would like to say our home was loveless, that we didn't learn how to love, but that's not true."

I leaned forward, dying to know more about Dean, to understand him, to forgive him...and myself.

"Our father loved our mother to the border of insanity. It was all-consuming - a human in love with a goddess."

The waiter appeared with our food, but even the amazing-looking little sandwiches didn't manage to distract me.

"He worshipped the ground she walked on, and she loved him just as deeply in her own way, despite her shortcomings." She took a bite of her sandwich. "He bought the house for her. You should have seen the garden; it was majestic. He'd created it for her - every single tree, every flower was an ode to her."

"It's beautiful. What a proof of love."

She nodded. "Yes."

I thought of the plain deserted garden it now was. "What happened then? Why is Dean so-"

"Unfeeling?" She finished for me.

I nodded with a blush. I really felt like prying, but I couldn't help it. I needed to know him.

"Our mother killed herself when Dean was eleven. He found her in the bathtub."

I gasped, resting my hand over my mouth, envisioning poor little Dean Beaumont finding his mother. I blinked back tears at the thought of how I'd rejected his small, yet real attempt to connect.

"Our father -" She shook her head. "He'd pretty much died when she had - at least mentally. He barely survived without her. Dean had to step up much sooner than any little boy should have. He fought so hard to keep our family together."

"That's really sad."

She nodded. “Yes, it is. And I know Dean’s been hard on you -”

That was a nice way of putting it. Cruel was far more like it.

“But you need to know that he’s harder on himself than anyone else. He carries an amount of unjustified guilt that no one should carry.”

“Why would he?” I was truly confused. “Your mother had died when he was a child and he has made it clear that I’m to blame for Eddie’s death.”

She cocked her head to the side as if she was analyzing me. “Our mother was bipolar, untreated obviously. Our father gave in to all her whims - highs and lows. I didn’t understand at the time, of course, I didn’t, but she was a textbook case.” She smiled sadly. “I suspect Eddie was too.”

It was my turn to nod. That made sense. “He was a sensitive soul, your brother. He was kind and despite his shortcomings, he did care. He’d even given me a present for graduation.”

“Dean is not unkind. He has the ability to love just as strongly; he is just scared of letting himself go.”

I wasn’t sure why she was pleading Dean’s case so strongly, but it didn’t matter. How could I go back to hating a little boy that had found his mother’s body? A little boy who had grown up much faster than he was supposed to.

“Okay, lets stop with all the sadness. Today is supposed to be a happy day.”

“Where to?” I asked, forcing a smile, but my thoughts were already on all those nights Dean had tried to open my door. I’d watched the handle dip down slowly. My body had reacted to that every night. My pussy had pulsed and my nipples had hardened, but I’d kept it locked. But maybe I shouldn’t have. Maybe I should have let him use me as an outlet. It had not been bad when he’d used me. I’d enjoyed it until the end, until hearing his cruel, belittling words.

“Opal?”

I blinked and looked at Lea who was standing beside me.

“Sorry, what?”

“Where did you go?” she asked with concern.

“Nowhere interesting.” I stood up. “What did you say?”

“I said it’s time for our mani-pedi and make-up session.”

“Oh!” Now I felt a surge of excitement. “I’ve never had my make-up done before.”

“It’s going to be fun.” She extended her arm for me to take. “Lets go.”

We sat across each other in a dimly lit room. A rainforest tapestry hung on the wall and a rainforest soundtrack played above. It was completely relaxing.

“You know,” she said as the woman started to paint my fingernails red. “You’ll have to tell him the truth eventually.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking up. I was unable to see her face though as a woman was standing in front of her, doing her make-up.

“That you’re not Opal,” she said with such an even tone that it sounded like she was making casual conversation rather than dropping the biggest secret I’ve ever had.

“I - I -” I stuttered. “How?” I finally asked. I couldn’t insult her further.

“I’m a psychotherapist and you have none of the normal addicts tells. You have never been an addict. I’m guessing you’ve never even taken any drugs.” She sighed. “You’re also much too reserved and shy to be a sex worker. A simple compliment makes you blush.”

The woman doing my nails looked at me curiously before starting to work on my nails again.

“But I’ve seen how fiercely you love that child. He is like your son and he looks a little like you. Who are you?”

I closed my eyes as silent tears started to fall down my cheeks. I was going to lose my boy. “I’m Amber, Opal’s

younger sister.” Despite my state of despair, it felt good to come clean. Lea liked me. Maybe she could help me see him when Dean took him away.

“Where’s Opal?” she asked.

I took a deep breath. “She’s dead. She died of infection a couple of weeks after giving birth.”

“I’m sorry, Amber.”

I was glad I could not see her. If I could see in her eyes the compassion I heard in her voice, I would break down.

“Why did Dean think you were Opal?” she asked.

“I - I’m not sure. But he did and I panicked. Opal’s name was not really Collins. We don’t have the same father, but she’d used that name. I -” I sighed, looking down at the woman working on my nails.

“I won’t tell him.”

“Why?”

“Because I understand why you’re doing it and because I like you. But you have to tell him.”

I closed my eyes. “But what if he takes Timmy from me?”

“Do you know why my brother is horrible to you?”

I didn’t reply. I figured it was because he blamed me for his brother’s death, as he has repeated a million times.

“He hates that he doesn’t hate you. He loathes that he cares.” She chuckled. “I saw it that night, the jealousy. It’s so evident and you’re both so clueless. I always thought Dean needed a strong-willed woman to beat him into shape, but I might have been wrong. Maybe he needs someone soft and gentle - someone that will make him more careful and appeal to his fierce protectiveness... Someone like you... And more specifically, you.”

I wanted to deny it, to say it was ridiculous, but the idea of Dean being jealous... Of Dean wanting me... My stomach felt like it was hosting a million butterflies. I just wasn’t sure I could survive a man like him.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“I know you don’t and he doesn’t either.” When the make-up woman moved from my face, I looked at Lea. Her hair was styled in nice waves over her shoulders and her make-up was very discreet, only enhancing her natural beauty. She smiled at me. “I just hope he will figure it out before it’s too late.”

I simply nodded because I was not certain what she meant.

I turned toward the mirror and couldn’t believe that the beautiful woman looking back at me was actually me.

“You made me beautiful,” I whispered to the woman responsible. She bowed with a smile.

Lea came to stand behind me. “No, she didn’t. She made you sophisticated, yes, but not beautiful. You were beautiful before, Amber. You are and always will be beautiful.”

Turning toward her, I pulled her into a hug. “Thank you for this beautiful day and for not being mad at me for lying to Dean.”

She rubbed my back. “Of course I’m not mad. You were scared and fear makes you do things you never thought you would do, and now there’s even more at stake.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, pulling out of her hug.

“I see the way you look at him.” She sighed. “But this day is not done, my lovely girl. Now it’s time to go find a dress that will bring my brother to his knees.

I shook my head. “Oh, no, no. I have a dress. It’s the one I wore at dinner and Timmy -”

She rested her forefinger on my lips. “No. You will have a beautiful dress and you will shine just like you deserve to.” She winked at me. “Mrs. James and Dean are with Timmy. The kid is fine, but give them a call if you want.”

Lea’s excitement for the evening was spreading to me. I was so relaxed but one thought followed me all day, on every stop we made.

*What would Dean Beaumont think when he sees me tonight?*

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Dear*



I was getting restless. Forced to make idle conversation with the people congratulating me for the achievement, all I could do was nod as I scanned the room, looking for Lea and Opal.

Lea had texted me a couple of hours ago, warning me that they would probably be late, but the party had started almost an hour ago.

I was not comfortable with Opal being with Lea and telling her all the things I've said and done.

I turned toward the door again. As a vision in red walked into the room, all the air left my lungs. I didn't notice if Lea was there too. To be honest, I didn't notice anything or anyone.

All I could see was Opal, dressed in a silky red off-shoulder, pin-up pencil dress, which molded her body like a second skin.

I was mesmerized. Instantly dropping the conversation I was having with one of the board members, I left to meet her at the doors.

She was like a beacon, calling me, and I was much too entranced to even pretend that I was unaffected.



I stopped in front of her, closer than was dictated by the decorum, but I didn't care.

"Did you have a good day?" I asked, leaning down.

She smelled good, but not like her, and that bothered me. I was addicted to the way she usually smelled - like cherry blossoms.

She looked up at me and blushed. I was even more pleased to see that she was not planning on running away from me.

"I had a very good day, thank you. How was yours?"

I looked into her eyes. There wasn't any of the contempt and anger that had appeared after that night in her bedroom.

"What did she tell you?" I asked, throwing a little irritated look toward Lea, who was pretending to be engrossed in a conversation with an older shareholder.

"Nothing I didn't want to know," she admitted evasively. She looked around. "This party is absolutely stunning."

"And yet, so pale in comparison to you."

She looked startled at the compliment and once again I couldn't blame her. I'd never done anything like this, but now that I knew she hadn't written the note, I'd accepted that she was an obsession that I wasn't about to forget, no matter how horrible I was to her.

"You look dashing in your tuxedo," she replied.

I had to smile. Despite everything, she had to reciprocate, be nice. This woman was infuriatingly nice.

I extended my elbow to her. "Now is the time to make my insufferable speech. Would you be my date for the evening?"

She blushed again but took my arm. "Yes, I would."

I took her to the front of the stage, where I made the expected speech about the pride I had in my heritage, the success we'd already had, and the many successes to come. When my eyes traveled around the audience, they always ended back on her. Pride filled her eyes as she rested her hands on her chest. She was looking at me as if I mattered and that

ignited a little warmth in my cold heart. As I continued the speech, I met my sister's all-knowing eyes, which were full of mirth. She expected me to unravel, to come undone, but I wouldn't do it, not for her, not for anyone.

After thanking everyone that mattered, I gestured for the DJ to start the music. My part was done for the evening; now I could relax a bit and try to enjoy a party that cost tens of thousands of dollars.

"Would you care to dance?" I asked Opal as couples started to move onto the dance floor.

"I'm not the best or most confident dancer," she conceded, even as she followed me onto the dance floor.

"Don't worry, Ms. Collins. I'm great at leading. You just need to yield," I whispered in her ear, making her shiver.

We both knew how much she enjoyed submitting to me.

As we started to dance, I rested my hand a bit lower than was required, so my fingertips brushed the curve of her shapely ass. I also pulled her closer to me than necessary, enjoying how her body reacted to mine even when she didn't want it to.

I leaned down, almost against my will, and brushed my nose against her silky hair.

At the sound of a familiar voice, I looked up and tensed. Helle was here and making her way through the sea of people.

What the fuck was she doing here in a golden evening dress, her pale blonde hair in an integrated hairdo as if she was supposed to be here?

"Dean, what are you doing with her?" she barked, stopping beside us.

"Helle," I warned softly. "What are you doing here?"

She turned toward Opal. "You must be the whore? Opal, isn't it? I'm Helle, Dean's girlfriend."

It was official; the woman had lost her damn mind.

I tried to grip Opal's hip, to lock her by my side, but she took a step back. "Opal belongs here. She's wanted here. You're not. Leave. Now"

Helle laughed. "You can't be serious?"

She looked at Opal with her mouth tipped down in disgust before turning toward me again. "Come on, darling. You called her a useless meat sack - barely a step up from a blowup doll. You don't seriously want to spend time with her."

I saw Opal flinch and even though I'd said those words, I wanted to kill Helle for repeating them.

I grabbed Helle's arm and turned toward Opal. "Would you excuse me?"

She nodded, wrapping her arms around herself in self-comfort; she was retreating again. I just hoped I could fix it - again.

Pulling Helle out of the room as discreetly as I could, I led her down the corridor and pulled her into the small service room that served as a security post for the night.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing here?" I barked, letting go of her arm.

She turned around, wincing as she rubbed at her arm, but I didn't care. If she had been a man, I would have punched her unconscious.

"I came to ask you to reconsider, Dean, darling. We're so good together," she purred, taking a step toward me.

I took a step back. "Please, you're no better or worse than any of the models I'd fucked before you and will fuck in the future." I sneered. "We're done. We were done before we'd even started. You were always temporary, and that pussy of yours is not that special."

I turned to the guard in the room, who was doing his best to look at the screens and ignore the little scene happening right behind him.

"How the fuck did she make it in?" I barked at him, ignoring her huff of indignation.

“Sir, I- I’m not sure.” He was all flustered, not great for security. “She was let in the front gate. I-”

“Call him!” I ordered, pointing at the screen that showed the security post by the front door.

“Right away, sir.” He pressed his earpiece. “3278 - 3278. You’ve let in an unsub tonight.” He turned toward me, his face flushed. “Name?”

“Helle...” I trailed off, looking at her.

She was now bright red with indignation. “You don’t even know my name?”

I snorted. “It was never your name I was after.”

Her previous glare turned murderous as she turned toward the security guard. “Larsen, Helle Larsen.”

The guard reported the information and sighed after a few seconds. I knew I was not going to like what he was about to tell me.

“Miss Larsen is on the list, sir.” The relief was evident in his voice.

Impossible! I grabbed the clipboard on the desk and skimmed the list, but yes, as the guard had said, her name was on the list. ‘Helle Larsen.’

“How?” I asked her with incredulity.

“Maybe you wanted me here before you went crazy and decided to bang your dead brother’s leftovers,” she spat, victory shining in her blue eyes.

I wanted to strangle the woman. “I never wanted you for more than sex, Helle whatever-your-name-is” I sighed, turning toward the guard. “Have security escort her off the premises. I’m done with her.”

“You will regret it, Dean Beaumont. Mark my words, you’ll pay for this.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Are *you* -” I pointed at her chest - “threatening *me*?” I pointed at myself.

She stood straighter, pursing her lips.

I shook my head. “You’re not equipped to play in the big league, Helle. You’re insignificant. Barely a bug with a gold-plated pussy. Leave now and never *ever* talk to me or anyone close to me again or I swear, your modeling career will be dead within a week. Don’t forget that Beaumont Enterprises owns a lot of diversified companies, including the main fashion magazines. Walk away while you still have a career.”

If looks could kill, I would be dead right now. She passed me stiffly and I knew her self-preservation was enough to ensure I’d never see her again.

I walked into the corridor and took a deep breath, trying to calm myself before returning to the party to see how much damage Helle had caused.

“She’s not here anymore.”

I turned around to see Lea with her jacket on, ready to leave.

“Going home so soon?”

She laughed. “I’ve got a wife waiting for me and I’ve been here long enough to show my allegiance to the Beaumont name.”

“Where is she?”

Lea jerked her head toward the stairs. “In Timmy’s room, I presume. The kid’s her anchor.”

I nodded looking at the ballroom again.

“Those people don’t need you, Deano. You’ve done your part. The faces of your company can handle it all now.” She pointed to the stairs. “But she needs you. She is more fragile than you think; she is so much more than you know. Go upstairs, Deano, and fix the damages.”

“You’re saying that as if I care.”

She buttoned her jacket with a small smile on her lips. “You’re way past caring, Deano. Way, *way* past.” She came toward me and kissed my cheek. “Have a good night,” she

added before twirling around and leaving me dumbfounded in the great hall.

I rolled my eyes, but instead of going into the ballroom as etiquette dictated, I went upstairs to the dimly lit nursery.

She was there, bouncing Timothy on her chest as she hummed a soft tune.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Opal stopped mid-bounce and then turned around slowly. I was aggravated by the way her shoulders tensed just at the sound of my voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied but I’d seen how she’d looked downstairs. It mattered.

I sighed, rubbing my bearded cheek. “It does. She used to be my -” I twisted my mouth to think. Opal wasn’t a fan of degrading terms for women. “Casual fling,” I finished, quite pleased with the terminology I’d picked.

Nodding, she started bouncing Timothy again.

I noticed her high heels were discarded in a corner and so I looked down at her dainty little feet. Her nails were painted red. Her feet were just like her, graceful and delicate.

I let my eyes trail up her shapely legs, narrow waist, and perky breasts. They’d filled up in the few months she’d been here. Eating her fill had given her curves I didn’t suspect she could have.

“Helle has the ability to bend the truth the way it fits her.”

She turned around, Timothy now asleep peacefully against her chest. Lucky little bastard.

“So what she said was untrue?” she tried tentatively. There was a little bit of hope in her voice - hope I was about to crush.

I sighed, looking down at my shiny black Derby shoes. How I wished I could tell her yes.

I looked up, meeting her eyes. Despite all the things I’ve already said and done to her, she still looked disappointed, as

if she'd actually expected better of me. When she looked away, guilt gnawed its way into my heart - another first.

Placing a sleeping Timmy back in his crib, she nodded.

“You were just a faceless sin before, Opal.” I wasn't sure why I was trying to justify myself, but I needed her to understand. “For me, you were the woman who wrote this.” I extended the wrinkled piece of paper that had been found in my brother's pocket. A note I'd opened and read so many times, it was barely in one piece.

She came closer to me and took it from my hand, a small gesture, and yet, it meant a lot; she was willing to give me a chance to explain. This woman was much too forgiving; that was my saving grace.

She looked down and paled before looking back up at me with wide eyes.

“I never wrote this,” she let out on a breath, her hands shaking.

I shook my head. “Yes, I know. I saw the note you wrote to Jeremy. The handwriting doesn't match.” I extended my hand toward her and she placed the note in it, shaking ever so slightly. “But I will find out who did.”

“What's the point, Mr. Beaumont? It will not bring him back.”

“Please call me Dean. I hate it when you call me Mr. Beaumont.”

“Dean.”

Just the way she breathed my name made my dick twitch in anticipation. This woman was going to bring me down with a smile on my face. I could hardly blame my brother for his addiction to her.

Suddenly, the guilt at my attraction to my brother's love reappeared, but I pushed it back down. I would drown in my guilt and self-loathing tomorrow, but tonight I wanted to show her I forgave and forgot - at least as much as I could.

After putting the note in my pocket, I extended my hand toward her again. “Come with me.” I put just a little authority in my voice. I knew how responsive she was to commands and as her pupils dilated, I knew my gamble had paid off.

“Where are we going?” she asked, sliding her soft hand in mine, before looking around for her shoes.

“You’ll see.” I pulled her toward me gently. “You don’t need your shoes, come on.”

She followed me, grabbing the baby monitor on the way out. Despite the sexually charged tension between us, Timothy was always on her mind. I admired her commitment as a mother.

She followed me down the corridor silently until we reached my room.

She looked around with a sharp intake of breath. I knew this room was impressive, even by my standards. It was easily three times the size of hers, with a full row of windows giving a full view of the garden.

She looked around, her gaze stopping on the king-sized bed in the middle of the room, a bed that had never seen a woman. This had always been my private place. I’d never even brought a woman onto this estate before. And the few indiscretions I’d had as a young man with pretty and eager-to-please house staff had never happened in the sanctity of my room. But I wanted Opal here, where I’d had so many erotic dreams of her coming undone in the middle of my bed.

“Your room is unbelievable.” She marveled at it all before turning around to look at me.

“Just like you are,” I replied. Closing the distance between us, I sealed my lips over hers before she’d even had a chance to say a word.

The kiss was hot and demanding. She opened her mouth as soon as I pulled on her bottom lip with my teeth.

I pulled her up, one arm under her ass, one in her hair.



She wrapped her legs around my waist and I could feel the heat of her core against my already throbbing erection.

She couldn't fake that, this powerful responsiveness to my ministrations.

I slid my hand under her dress and caressed her bare ass. For once she was not wearing her innocent cotton panties. No, today she was wearing a thong.

I growled against her mouth as I walked to my bed, Opal still wrapped around me.

I sat her on down and reluctantly disengaged myself from her inviting arms and legs.

“Lift your arms.” I smiled as she did so immediately. She was a godsend.

I removed her dress and was faced with a vision that almost made me come in my pants. She was not wearing a bra, just the sexiest lacy thong I'd ever seen in my life.

Her lips were already swollen from my violent kiss. Her hairdo was undone, her brown hair falling in waves down her shoulders. She looked like a goddess who could bring any man to his knees - myself included.

It took superhuman strength to take another couple of steps back, but I wanted to see her fully as I undressed, to show her what she did to me.

I discarded my jacket first, quickly followed by my bow tie and shirt.

She took a quick intake of breath at my naked chest and I felt a surge of male pride at that.

“Lay on the bed,” I ordered as I kicked off my shoes and removed my belt.

She stretched out on the bed, never breaking eye contact. As I stepped out of my pants and boxers, the way she licked her lips almost made my dick burst.

I kept my belt in my hand as I approached the bed; there was no fear in her eyes, only desire.

I crawled up her body as her breath caught in her throat.

I trailed my nose up her body softly, making her shiver.

“Grab the headboard,” I commanded in her ear before biting the earlobe.

She hissed but grabbed the board.

“Good girl.” I smiled. “Now lets have fun.” I tied her hands to the bed, then made my way down her flat stomach, alternating between kisses and little licks.

I hooked my fingers into the sides of her thong and pulled it down, revealing the treasure I’d been so obsessed with. The tight pussy that fitted me like a glove.

“Spread for me,” I said, kneeling on the floor.

She hesitated. “Why?”

“Because I haven’t had dessert yet.” And fuck, how many times have I imagined how she’d taste? Would she taste as sweet as she smelled? “Now open your legs,” I commanded.

And she did, slowly revealing the extent of her arousal. My girl was soaked.

I wrapped my arms around her thighs to prevent her from closing them and then buried my face between her legs.

When I licked her slit, she gasped as if it was the first time a man had ever licked her. Her taste was just as sweet as I’d hoped it would be.

Growling, I started to eat her out like a starved man. I alternated between thrusting into her with my tongue and sucking on her clit, biting it softly every so often.

“Oh my God, Dean!” She thrashed and arched her back, seeking her release, but I couldn’t let her come now. No, I wanted her to come around my cock. “Oh, this is - this is -” Breathless, she pulled on her bindings. She tightened her legs around my face as I thrust my tongue into her. I felt her thighs starting to quiver, announcing her imminent orgasm, so I pulled away and she let out a frustrated cry.

“Don’t worry, you’re going to come,” I reassured her, licking my way up her body. I settled my hips between her inviting legs and brushed my cock back and forth against her folds as I grabbed one of her rosy nipples in my mouth and sucked on it.

“Dean, I want you,” she let out on a breath.

I let go of her nipple and kissed her hard, letting her taste herself on my tongue

I wanted her to taste how I affected her.

Raising my hips, I entered her slowly, keeping my eyes on her face, keeping any of the remaining guilt at bay. I deserved this, the way she made me feel, the way I was at peace when my body entered hers.

Her eyes rolled back and her mouth opened a little as I was fully seated inside her.

“I want to touch you, please,” she begged.

I shook my head. I loved having her at my mercy. “Later,” I grunted as I pulled out completely. With one sitting thrust, I entered her again; her pussy wrapped around me so tightly that I could feel her pulsing in a similar rhythm to her heart.

She gasped as I increased the pace. Raising her hips, she met my every thrust, chasing her pleasure just as I was chasing mine.

My pace started to turn more erratic. I knew I was going to come soon, but I wanted her to come too this time.

I slid my hand down and rubbed my thumbpad against her clit.

“Come for me, let go,” I whispered. When I bit her neck, she orgasmed, screaming my name. She tightened so hard around me, I saw God as I came harder than I’d ever had before. I filled her with my cum and I didn’t even care about the consequences of what we’d just done.

I wanted to do it again and again.

I undid the belt around her wrists before falling heavily on top of her, my softening dick still inside her.

I rested my face against her neck, breathing her in while trying to catch my breath.

To my surprise, she rested one of her hands in my hair and another on my back, rubbing it gently.

She turned her face and kissed my cheek, causing my heart to constrict inside my chest. I was not used to such unbridled kindness, but I loved it more than I thought I would.

Reluctantly, I rolled off of her. I pulled her to my side and she snuggled against me, resting one of her legs between mine and wrapping one arm around my torso.

I reached for the blanket at the bottom of the bed and pulled it around our naked bodies. I was too tired and satisfied to move, and based on how relaxed she was wrapped around me, she felt the same.

She sighed with contentment as I reached up to turn off the light.

Laying there, I waited for contempt, anger, or even guilt to come, but there was nothing. I only felt contentment and peace.

I looked at her shadowy profile as her breathing deepened and she slid deeper into sleep.

I traced the line of her nose with my fingertip. “Would you stay? Without threat, without anything to lose or gain, would you stay here with me?” I whispered.

She sighed and snuggled closer to me, burying her face in my neck. I took it as her subconscious answer. A loud, *‘I’ll stay with you.’*

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Amber*



Startled awake, it took a couple of seconds for me to realize I was in Dean's bed.

With a stretch of my sore muscles, I groaned. Last night, it had felt like Dean Beaumont was making love to me every time we came together. It had still been commanding and hard, but I hadn't minded the bite of pain at the initial intrusion; I'd welcomed it. And it had been followed by an explosion of pleasure I'd never experienced before, not even from my own fingers.

Closing my eyes, I trailed my hands down the blanket to the inside of my thigh. His close-clipped beard had left my legs sensitive to the touch. Last night had been the first time anyone had gone down on me, and it was the most amazing thing I'd ever experienced. I wanted him to do it again and again. I wanted to lay open on the table and let him feast. Did the beard make it better or not? I smiled. Maybe I needed to ask him to shave it and try again.

Sighing, I finally opened my eyes. I turned my head to Dean's empty spot and jerked upright when my eyes connected with the alarm clock.

It was past 9:00 a.m.! *Timmy!*

I jumped out of bed, only to immediately stop and wince. Last night seemed to have been a little rougher than I'd realized.

After wriggling into my dress, I didn't even bother trying to find my underwear. I simply rushed towards the nursery.

I blushed as I found Mrs. James changing Timmy's diaper.

I looked down at my bare feet and crooked dress. It was not hard to guess what I'd done.

But there was no judgment in her eyes, only an unexpected glee. Was she happy about Dean and me?

"How is he?" I asked, walking toward them, trying to forget any discomfort I could feel.

Timmy was a little paler than usual and very quiet. He was usually very happy when he saw me in the morning, but today he just looked at me with tired eyes.

"He is okay," Mrs. James reassured me. "But he didn't have much of an appetite this morning," she conceded.

I nodded. "Yes, he looks a bit under the weather." I took a deep calming breath. "I can't wait for the surgery to be done and my little boy to be safe."

Mrs. James smiled at me. "He's a strong little boy; he'll be fine." She looked at me with a cheeky little smile. "Why don't you go take a shower and change. I'll stay with the little angel until you're back."

Nodding, I took a couple of steps before she stopped me.

"Also, Mr. Beaumont said to tell you that he has been called into the office to deal with an emergency, but he will try to come back as soon as possible. He also left you a note in your room."

I detailed her. Why was she radiating with so much joy over this?

"You're not judging?"

She chuckled, waving her hand dismissively. "On the contrary. I'm elated. Mr. Beaumont is not a bad man; he is just

so...lonely.” She let out a sigh. “He laughed with me today. He whistled. Mr. Beaumont never whistles. I have to admit, happiness suits him. I’m just sad it took more than twelve years for me to witness it again.”

I looked away and blushed. Knowing that little me had the ability to make the all-powerful Dean Beaumont happy did things to my stomach.

Showering quickly, I then changed into a plain tee-shirt and jeans before reaching for the note on my nightstand.

*Opal,*

*Unfortunately, I was called away. I will do my utter best to be back as soon as I can.*

*I asked Mrs. James to look after Timmy for you. When I come back, we shall talk.*

*Sincerely,*

*D*

I blushed at the memory. Dean had taken me a total of three times last night and I suspected my body was going to need to recover for a while.

I had to smile at the formality of his note; had he ever written something coming from the heart? I doubted it.

I brushed my fingers over the name ‘Timmy.’ He was coming around. He’d changed, but yes, I agreed we needed to talk. I had to tell him the truth because it was too big of a secret to start a relationship on, especially given the note he’d shown me yesterday. Opal’s note.

It broke my heart to realize that my sister had probably done all of the horrible things Dean thought she did.

I was worried. Jeremy had told me that Dean wasn’t a forgiving man and I’d seen that firsthand, but if Mrs. James was right, if his love-making last night was any testament, he liked me too.

I walked back into the nursery just as Mrs. James was putting Timmy back inside his crib.

Walking over to him, I frowned at his rapid breathing. It has been a while since that happened.

“Would you like me to prepare you something to eat?”

I looked at Mrs. James. My stomach growled loudly, but I shook my head. “No, I really don’t like how tired he is and how rapid his breathing is. I think I’ll stay here and monitor him for a while. I’ll call Dr. Hunt if it doesn’t settle in an hour or so.”

“Very well. I’ll bring you something to eat.”

“Oh, no, no!” I raised my hand to stop her. “You’ve got enough to do and I’ve already stolen a few hours from your schedule.”

“It was a pleasure, truly. This baby is amazing. I will bring something,” she added with a tone of finality.

I smiled gratefully at her before going to retrieve my laptop in my bedroom. I would take my classes in the nursery.

Opening my computer, I glanced back at Timmy as I waited for my emails to load. I hoped he was okay. I also hoped that Dean was the man I thought he was and would forgive my lie, as well as let Timmy stay with me.

Sighing, I looked back at the screen. I had an email from someone called ‘truth seeker.’

Opening it, I read, *‘I thought you ought to know who you are trusting your future to.’*

There were a few files attached at the bottom. The first one was an email from Dean to his creepy lawyer. I shivered again at the thought of that horrible man.

*Phil,*

*This needs to stop. I want her gone. We need to step it up. Her drug of choice is heroin. Make it happen.*

I frowned at the email. What did it all mean?

The second file was an audio recording. It was a conversation between Dean and his lawyer.



*“Are you sure he did it?”*

*“Dean, I told you he did. I know the guy.”*

*“Do you, Phil? How reliable can a dealer be? Her test came back clean. I looked in her room and the drugs weren’t there.”*

*“I’ve used him for many clients. He knows how much he’ll lose if he screws me. He said he gave her three doses of his best heroin.”*

As Dean sighed, I blinked back tears of pain. I couldn’t believe the extent of his cruelty, how rotten he was inside. It made me reconsider everything I thought about him, everything I wanted to do with him, everything I thought we could build.

I looked up and screamed, seeing Timmy’s face blue. I jumped on my feet, shattering the laptop on the floor with the movement.

I shouted for help before pressing the emergency button that was both calling Jeremy directly and let the driver know we needed the car now.

“Opal?” Jeremy asked.

“He’s barely breathing! He’s blue,” I gasped, grabbing Timmy.

“Do you remember what we said?” His voice was soothing. “We knew it might happen.”

“Yes,” I let out. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. “I’m on my way.”

I rubbed Timmy’s chest with my knuckles as I went down the stairs. Mrs. James was waiting downstairs, the door opened, and I could see the driver was already waiting for us with the back door of the car already opened.

“I’ll call Mr. Beaumont!” she shouted as I rushed to the car.

I couldn’t care less about Dean Beaumont right at this moment.

We made it to the hospital in a record time. Had I had any minutes to spare, I would have thanked the driver properly, but Dean and a couple of nurses were already waiting for me by the entrance.

A nurse rushed forward to take Timmy. “Follow code blue protocol. Put him on the respirator and prep him in ward three. I’ll be right there.”

As I watched Timmy leave with the nurses, I started to shake. My rush of adrenaline was being replaced by the strongest pain and fear I’d ever experienced.

Standing in front of me, Jeremy rested his hands on my shoulders. He moved his head, trying to lock his eyes with mine.

“You did well, Opal,” he reassured me, squeezing my shoulders, trying to bring me back to the here and now.

“I-” I met his concerned eyes. “I thought he was dying.”

Jeremy shook his head. “He is not dying. It’s going to be fine. We knew this might happen, remember?”

I nodded, somehow numb.

He gave me a quick hug before nudging me inside and toward the elevators.

“Where’s Dean?” Jeremy asked.

“In Philly, but now on his way here, I presume.” I didn’t want to think about Dean. I was feeling enough right now. I didn’t need to add anger and betrayal to my fear.

“I’m going to get prepped now. Come with me. I’ll have one of the nurses take your blood and plasma.”

We stepped inside the elevator. “It’s always better if it’s one of the parents who-”

I jerked, grabbing his hand.

He looked down at my hand with a frown.

“I’m not -” I let out in a panic. *Has my lie hurt Timmy?*

“You’re not what?”

I shook my head. “His mother. I’m not his mother. Dean came and I panicked. Opal died, and-” I took a deep, shaky breath. “I’m her sister and she gave me custody legally. I just -” I let out a sob. “If he dies because of me, I-”

“Hey, it’s fine!” he hurried as the door opened onto the lower floor. “You’re still related. Your blood is fine; just go with the nurse. I’ll come to find you in the waiting room when it’s done.”

I nodded gratefully. “You don’t seem that surprised,” I added.

“I’m not. Things actually make so much sense now.” He took a deep breath and gave me a sad smile. “But you know I can’t keep this a secret, right?”

“I gave Dean full access to the medical files. He’ll know anyway.” I shook my head. “Can you just wait until I know Timmy is okay before telling him. Please?”

Jeremy sighed and nodded. “Of course. I’ll see you later.”

I went through the motions, too worried about what was happening in the operating room to worry about anything else. I could only imagine Timmy’s little body on the operating table, his tiny heart being worked on.

Sitting in the waiting room, I closed my eyes. The image of Timmy’s blue face stared back at me. I believed it would be ingrained in my brain for an entire lifetime.

The door opened and Dean walked in, breathless and a little disheveled. It was strange to see the great Dean Beaumont in any type of disarray. He was always so cool and composed. Well, except when he was fucking me.

“How is he?” he asked immediately.

I blinked back tears. “We got here on time. Jere- Dr. Hunt is quite optimistic. He said he’d be fine.”

Dean let out a sigh of relief. I saw the tension leave his body at once.

*He really cares, but is that just because Timmy is his heir? I now know how calculating Dean could be.*

“Jeremy is the best there is,” he said. “Timmy is in good hands.”

What did he want by calling him ‘Timmy?’ Was he trying to butter me up for another booty call?

“You know, you don’t have to call him Timmy for me. Timothy works just fine. It’s already a step up from ‘the child.’”

“Opal?” He frowned, taking the seat beside me. “Is everything alright? Did you find my note?”

I nodded. “I did.”

“I’m just-”

I stood up. “Dr. Hunt said it would take at least a couple of hours. I didn’t get a chance to eat or have a coffee, so I’ll be back.”

I went downstairs and grabbed a cappuccino, as well as a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel. Even the food here showed it was a fancy place. It was a vast step up from the watered-down coffee I’d gotten from the machine at the hospital in Philly.

I took a few minutes to call Dee and update her on Timmy’s situation and my impending doom.

“He might not mind,” Dee encouraged. “And even if he does, you know you’ve got a home with me.”

“I know, Dee. That means the world to me.” Dee was my family, more than Opal had ever been.

When I finally went back to the waiting room, I was relieved to see that a couple of other people had arrived. I sat on the seat closest to the door and did my best to avoid Dean’s eyes.

The minutes seemed to last hours. Every time I looked at the clock, only a few minutes had passed. I kept seeing Timmy’s little blue face, kept thinking that I was going to lose him. Either he didn’t come back or Dean was going to take him away. But at least with the latter, he would live, get the best of everything.

What could I give him? Really? I sighed. *Love doesn't feed you.*

I looked up, finally meeting Dean's curious eyes. Maybe Timmy would be better with him, after all.

My eyes trailed down to his phone in his hand. *Well, if he could stop working for a minute.*

Noticing my gaze on his phone, he quickly looked at it and then put it in his pocket.

"Opal, this is not what -"

At that moment, Jeremy entered the room and the smile on his face was enough to tell me the truth. My boy was going to be okay.

"Everything went well," he said. "We were able to repair the two holes and replace the valve today, avoiding the need for another surgery."

I rested a trembling hand on my lips as my eyes filled up with tears. No further surgery when the doctors in Philly had been speaking about a minimum of three?

"Thank you!" I jumped up from my seat, wanting to hug him, but stopped at the feel of Dean's eyes on us.

Jeremy nodded, crossing his arms on his chest. "You're welcome. Also, your blood and plasma were perfect for him, which is not always the case when dealing with an uncle or aunt, so well done there. It helped him a lot."

I froze. I hadn't expected Dean to find out the truth like this.

"Opal?" Dean asked from beside me. "What is he talking about?" It was not a question; it was an order.

I shook my head before looking up at him. I owed him at least my name.

He frowned down at me, his eyes filled with confusion, but also apprehension about what was coming.

"Amber, my name's Amber." Despite the despair I felt over the likelihood of losing Timmy now, I still felt relieved. I

didn't have to hide who I was anymore. I turned to Jeremy. "Can I see him, please? It might be the last time."

He gave me a sad smile. "Of course, but only through the glass." He opened the door and gestured me outside.

I was not sure if he was doing it on purpose, but he walked in between Dean and I down the corridor, and despite the distance, I could still feel Dean's glare on the back of my neck.

"Stairs or elevator?"

Spending time encased in a metal box with an angry Dean Beaumont? Not right now. I could still feel his glare on the back of my neck.

"Stairs, please," I said as Dean said, "Elevator."

Jeremy looked at me and opened the stairs door with a sigh. He'd been taking my side a lot, something I was grateful for yet again.

We went up two flights of stairs while Jeremy gave us a quick overview of the surgery.

"What you see might look scary," he said to me as we walked into the pediatric wing. "But it looks much more impressive than it actually is. I promise." He stopped in front of a big glass window.

I couldn't help but gasp as I rested my hand against the cold glass. My little boy was lying in a sort of plastic incubator with tubes everywhere, hooking him up to a big machine.

I wanted to seek comfort in Dean's arms because, despite everything, I'd used to feel safe when he touched me, when I was wrapped in his arms. But he was not comforting anymore; he was all wrong.

"Are you sure?" I asked barely louder than a whisper, while keeping my eyes on Timmy. "He's going to be okay?"

"Yes." He rested his hand on my shoulder and I swore I could feel Dean's aggressive presence physically touching me. "You'll see. Tomorrow most of these will be gone. This is

mostly preventive - just in case. I can assure you, the surgery went even better than I'd thought it would."

I nodded. "Okay." I just wanted to stay here, looking at him for as long as I could because I didn't know how much longer I had with him.

Now that Dean knew the truth, I had no hope, not after having discovered just how far he was willing to go in order to steal Timmy from me.

"Dean, can I please have a moment with you?" Jeremy asked and I was almost certain it was for my benefit.

"No, not right now," he replied, his voice so much lower and darker than I'd ever heard it.

I chanced a glance his way, only to recoil from all the accusations in his emerald eyes. Yes, there would be hell to pay.

"Just a few minutes, Dean. It's important."

Dean sighed. "One minute," he replied before following Jeremy down the corridor and into a room on the right.

I sighed, finally able to breathe without Dean looming over me. I was sure that Jeremy would use this time to explain the whole situation and maybe also plead my case.

Jeremy was that type of man, but I knew I didn't have much hope. Dean was unforgiving and I didn't think I could forgive him either for what he'd done.

I stroke the glass with the gentle caress I wanted to give my baby boy. "I'll be leaving you for a while," I whispered, my voice breaking as I finally let my tears out. "But I'll be back, my sweet boy. I'll find a way to get you back, I swear."

I took a deep breath, threw Timmy one last longing look, and left briskly.

I needed to go back to the house and pack my bags before he threw me out with nothing to my name.

I could sell all the fancy clothes he'd bought me. I was sure it would be enough to get a lawyer, nothing as fancy as

Dean Beaumont could afford, obviously, but maybe one decent enough to help me get visitation rights, at least for now.

Yes, that was what I was going to do. I was going to fight the almighty Dean Beaumont because, at this stage, I had nothing left to lose.



# CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Dean*



My mind was reeling as I tried to concentrate on Jeremy's run-down of Timothy's exact condition. All I could think about was Amber.... Amber what? Amber Collins?

How had I missed her in this story?

*Because you didn't care, Dean. You were looking for a prostitute drug addict you could crush. Nothing else mattered.*

Despite the betrayal of her lie, I felt a little relief knowing that she wasn't Opal. Being with my brother's last love would have been a hard weight to bear. I needed to know who she was.

"Just be nice to her."

That brought me back to the boring conversation.

I straightened on my seat. "What did you say?"

"Amber, be nice to her."

I arched an eyebrow with incredulity. "Just remind me, when did it become your business?"

He sighed. "She is a nice person."

"When did you find out?"

“For sure? Today. But I’d always suspected and I’m sure you did too.”

I should have, of course, I should’ve, but I’d been too blinded by my misplaced anger and desire for revenge.

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t notice she was not a prostitute; we weren’t all raised by one.”

Jeremy shook his head, making me feel like a giant dick. Part of me wanted to apologize - and I never wanted to apologize - but I wouldn’t. I’d been aggravated with him since he’d met Opal - or Amber or whatever her name was. He has wanted her from the start and it’s been rubbing me the wrong way.

I stood up. “Will Timothy be okay?”

Jeremy nodded.

I straightened my jacket. “I’m grateful for what you’ve done for my family, but what happens between us is none of your business. Are we clear? That woman -” I pointed at the door in the direction we’d left Amber - “is not yours. Not yours to protect, not yours to defend.”

“I see. Is she yours then? Does she know that?” he asked just as I reached the door.

I swirled around, pointing an accusing finger at him. “Back. Off. Hunt. What I do or say to her isn’t your concern.” I took a deep breath.

“We need to discuss Timothy’s ongoing treatment,” he added quickly.

I narrowed my eyes. Was he trying to stall me? Why? “Timothy will be here for some time still; we can discuss this later. Don’t you think Op- Amber should be a part of this?”

He cocked his head to the side. “I don’t know; you tell me.”

I sighed. I didn’t have time for these games. “We’ll be back later to discuss Timothy’s treatment.”

I walked down the corridor, only to find it empty. I looked around; it was not like her to leave Timothy if she could help it. She loved that child more than anything in the world.

Walking over to the glass, I looked at Timothy, he has been fighting for his life since the moment he was born. Our boy had the heart of a warrior.

“Our boy?” I whispered, resting my hand on the glass window. But it was true. These past few weeks, I’ve been seeing him as such and consequently Opal as mine.

Where was she? If it was so overwhelming for me to see such an innocent little child fighting for his life. She would not have left him. It was not like her.

But at the same time, the cold shoulder she’d given me today had been out of character as well. I’d done everything right this time. I made sure she came every time I’d taken her last night. I’d left her a note. I’d thought I’d shown her she mattered, the only way I really knew how.

Was she being distant because she knew I was about to find out the truth? That was obviously something we’d need to discuss. Lies and deception had no place in our lives.

*Unless you’re the one doing it, isn’t that right, brother?* Lea had the ability to aggravate me even when she wasn’t here.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I hoped it was Amber, but it wasn’t.

“Mrs. James, is everything alright?” Mrs. James never called, so it had to be important.

“I’m not sure, sir. As you are probably aware, Ms. Opal is back, but she seems to be packing her belongings.”

My heart dropped as a feeling of dread took over. It was a new, unfamiliar feeling. That woman and child really knew how to wake up new parts of me, and I wasn’t sure if I was grateful for that or not.

“Just -” What could I say really? Lock her in her room? Yes, that was bound to go well. “I’ll be there in fifteen

minutes. Please stall her if you need to.”

“I’ll try my best, sir.”

I’d actually managed to make it home in twelve minutes. Owning a Porsche did have its advantages.

Mrs. James met me by the door and pointed upstairs.

She looked very upset. “Is young Timothy okay?”

“Yes, he is,” I replied softly, seeing the concern on my housekeeper’s face. I was trying my best to keep my irritation at bay.

After taking the stairs two at a time, I stopped in front of Amber’s bedroom. Her suitcase was already packed and waiting by the door. She was now folding the enticing red dress she’d worn last night in a duffle bag.

“Where are you going?” I asked, standing in the doorway to stop any escape attempt.

She froze for a second, her hands letting go of the dress. Had she thought I wasn’t going to follow her? “Away, before you kick me out.” She didn’t even look up. Her voice was empty, defeated. I actually got her where I wanted her to be, broken. Well, I used to want her broken but not anymore.

“I’m not -” I sighed. I needed answers now. I could always try to justify what I did to her later. *Can you?*

“Look at me,” I commanded and she did, almost immediately. She was always so good at that.

“Who are you?” I asked, taking a step forward.

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself for comfort. “Amber, Amber Collins, Opal’s younger sister.”

I nodded. “I should have known. It was so evident.”

Anger flared in her eyes. “Why? Because of the lame sex and blowjob?”

I pale at the realization of her words. I’d never even considered that part of the issue. I’d thought she was an over-experienced prostitute. Memories of how I’d treated her, of

how I'd degraded her came back with a vengeance. I winced as a wave of disgust filled me.

"I - was not your first, was I?" I asked with dread. No, I couldn't be her first. She hadn't bled. She hadn't felt like a virgin. No, but she hadn't felt like a prostitute either, had she? I remembered how much I'd marveled at her tightness around my cock.

She shook her head, but the way she looked away and broke eye contact, didn't settle well with me. She was hiding something else.

"Tell me. I deserve to know."

She sighed. "What do you want to hear?"

"The truth. That'd be a nice change."

She nodded. "Second. My high school boyfriend, we've learned as we went, so sorry if I didn't meet your expectations. We only had sex a grand total of three times." She snorted. "However, the blowjob *was* my first, so I think I deserve an A for effort."

*Fuck me!* I was stunned by the revelation and how bitter she sounded. Something had changed between last night and today, but I wasn't sure what.

"How -" I took a deep breath as shame and dread settled in my stomach. I was almost scared to ask my question. "How old are you?" She looked so young, but I'd never imagined she actually was.

"I'm legal."

"Not what I asked." Still a fucking relief.

"Twenty-one."

"Twenty-one..." I huffed. Talk about getting kicked in the crotch!

We had a thirteen-year gap. Thirteen years! That was basically a lifetime of experience. She was so inexperienced in everything, in intimacy, in relationships...in sex. My stomach dropped. I had always been so rough with her, degrading, even

mean during sex. I'd used it as a not-so-passive-aggressive way of punishing her for making me feel so much desire, so much want. I'd punished her for just being her, because I couldn't get enough of her.

I shook my head. I had missed all the signs.

Now I realized that all the times her fists had clenched or she'd gasped, had been due more to pain than pleasure. *God, what have I done?*

"But-" I took another step into her room and took a deep breath. I was finally close enough to smell her enticing perfume. Would I ever look at the cherry trees in the Garden the same way? "You...you wanted it, right? The sex?" I asked hesitantly. For the first time since I was a teenager, I wasn't sure what to do or say.

She looked at me for a few seconds; it seemed like an eternity. *Please say yes*, I begged, already feeling the cold sweat beading on the back of my neck.

She sighed, sitting down heavily on her bed. "I did," she replied, but she looked away and I hated that. Her eyes were like an open book.

I tried to sit beside her on the bed, but she shook her head.

I nodded and sat at the other end instead. "You know, it's not supposed to be like that. Sex is not that rough - at least not always. It's enjoyable for both parties. I-" I was at loss for words.

Why was I even trying to defend my actions? She was the one who'd lied to me. She was the one who'd let me believe she was an experienced hooker.

"I didn't hate it," she finally replied with a small shrug.

In any other circumstances, that would have been an insult, but right now, it was music to my ears.

"You should have told me," I accused as some of the guilt finally eased, replaced by the pain of betrayal.

She snorted. “Please, we both know you would have taken Timmy from me without a second thought.”

I looked down at my hands silently. I would not insult us both by denying it. If I’d known the truth at the time, yes, I would have taken him.

She jumped up from her spot on the bed and started to pace the room. “In the end, it shouldn’t have mattered if I was Opal or not. She didn’t deserve to be treated like that either.” She stopped in front of me. “Did you ever stop for one second to wonder why she was who she was? We’d lost our mother when Opal was only eleven and I was four. My father forced her to assume a motherly role, which no eleven-year-old should have to do. A year later, she got her period and my father decided it was time for her to assume my mother’s role completely and satisfy him sexually.”

Nausea hit me again. As my self-hatred increased, I made a vow to myself. If that man was still alive, and I’d track him down and kill him.

After taking a deep, shaky breath, she resumed her pacing. “When it was my turn to get my periods, my father started to look at me differently. Opal was only seventeen by then but she had collected evidence of his abuse, which she used to take me away, just the two of us.”

Her eyes filled up with tears. I hated seeing her suffer. How peculiar. “She was good to me. The drugs and prostitution - they weren’t reasons for you to do what you did. Some things I can forgive, but-” She shook her head.

“But?” I asked, hating that I was taking the bait. But I hated even more the dread settling in the pit of my stomach at the idea of her not forgiving me.

“Did you hire a dealer to tempt me?”

I jerked back, then stood up. I hadn’t seen that one coming. I’d done that out of anger after seeing her with Jeremy. It was something that I was not particularly proud of.

“Have you?”

“Who told you that?” I needed to know who I had to kill.

“So you’re not denying?” She shook her head. “You went out of your way trying to get a recovering addict to fall off the rail, all this just to take a child you don’t even care for? A child I’m sure you know I love more than life. “

“I care about Timothy. He is my nephew and it’s more complicated than that. It was-”

“Yes or no.”

“Yes.”

Her eyes filled up with tears, cutting me like a knife to the lungs.

“Stay.” I couldn’t believe I’d uttered these words. “Stay with me, here. I know you want to.” At least, I hope she did.

She shook her head and resumed packing. “No, I can’t. No matter what you thought of Opal, you did something despicable, and I’m not sure I can forgive you for it.”

“I won’t beg you to stay,” I said with anger. I’d come very close to it just now but no, I would never beg anyone and never a woman. I’d seen how my father had begged my mother. He’d gone to his knees and kissed her feet when she’d been on one of her psychotic trips. I would never become my father. Nobody could hold my happiness in their hands.

She gave me a weary smile. “I don’t want you to. It’s not in your nature.” There was no heat behind her words, only a great sadness. “No man is an island except for Dean Beaumont.” She let out a tearless sob as she zipped her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “Just show Timmy love, even if you have to fake it. Let him know that it’s okay to cry, to be imperfect, to try.” Tears fell down her beautiful face as she reached for the suitcase. She walked to the door. “Tell him that it’s okay to do everything right and still fail, that life is made up of as much love as there is pain, maybe even more. And tell him, please-” She let out another sob that hit me right in the black hole in the middle of my chest. “Tell him that I love him more than anything in the world. And you were right, I don’t know if she got pregnant on purpose. She might have. My



sister was not as innocent in all this as I've wanted to believe."

"It doesn't matter now," I admitted with defeat. "It never should have mattered."

"No, because her plan or whatever it had been, has brought an amazing child into this world, one who was born with everything stacked against him. He had to fight for his life from his first breath, but he is here - a little warrior, smart like a button, and with so much love to give."

"You love him." I never realized just how much until now. She was ready to leave him behind in order to ensure he had the best life has to offer.

"More than life."

"You take Timmy."

She stopped. "I - can't offer him the life you can. He deserves better than me."

I shook my head. After everything, this was where we were at. I had changed, even though I hadn't wanted to. I realized now that he needed love more than anything.

"You win." I raised my hands in surrender.

"What?" She frowned.

I detailed her face. I was going to miss this woman. This innocent, much-too-young woman.

"Stay here for now. I'll go back to Philly, and make the proper arrangements. Your six months are up. I will uphold my part," I added, passing her and exiting the room.

"Why?" she asked.

I stopped and turned around. "Does it matter?" I replied, burying my hands in my pants pockets.

She turned to face me, chewing on her bottom lip. "No, I guess not, but I'd like to know just the same."

I sighed. "Because you didn't deserve all the things I did to you. Because you can give the boy so much more than I can

and because I know you're kind enough to let me see him whenever I wish." That was the truth, at least close to it. How could I admit that I hated to be the reason she cried, the reason she hurt? That the only thing I wanted from her was her smiles, her tenderness, her... I gave myself a mental slap. There was no point ruminating now. I'd lost her.

"Of course, whenever." Of course, she would agree. She was an angel this woman.

I nodded. "Very well. I'll leave now. Have Jeremy give you the treatment plan."

"I'm sorry," she said as I turned to leave.

"Why?" I asked, not turning around. I was in pain; I didn't want her to see it. I didn't want her to know she owned a part of me.

"For lying, for your loss." Her voice was so gentle, so kind. A soothing balm on my broken soul.

"I'm sorry too."

"Why?" she asked.

"For everything," I replied and left without giving her a chance to stop me again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

*Amber*



Dean kept his word and left almost immediately. I almost felt bad about it, but then I remembered he had an apartment in Philly anyway. He'd never really come here before me. His life had been there.

I was relieved he'd allowed me to keep Timmy without a fight though. I was realistic enough to know it was a fight I would not have won.

I stayed in the manor for an extra two weeks, until Jeremy declared that Timmy was good to go and referred me to the best pediatrician in town.

Timmy got better so fast, it was hard to believe, but I could see the progress every day. His coloring was different, he had more energy, and he was turning into the infant he was always supposed to be.

Despite having spent most of my life in Philly, it felt so different being back.

I was now living in one of Philly's best areas, in a two-bedroom apartment paid for by Beaumont Enterprises.

It was nice, safe, and spacious - so much more than I could have ever hoped for. It was also

furnished with all the luxuries I could have ever dreamed of. Every week, \$1500 appeared in my bank account like he'd promised. I got everything he said I would. The only thing he'd yet to fulfill was to come and visit.

It has been almost three weeks since I've seen him. I'd prepared myself for seeing him again. Thinking he'd come because Timmy mattered to him... at least, as much as anyone could truly matter to Dean Beaumont. But he never visited, just sent emails asking for updates on Timmy's progress. What I hated the most was the pinch of disappointment his absence caused.

I shouldn't be feeling anything more than relief and yet, Philly didn't really feel like home anymore. Despite school and Timmy and Dee, I missed the estate, Mrs. James, and God help me, I missed Dean Beaumont.

After finishing my last assignment, I sighed and closed my laptop. Summer was in full force now. I looked out of the balcony at Schuylkill River. I should go outside with Timmy and enjoy the sun and warmth for as long as I could. Turning toward him, I watched him crawl toward his teddy bear.

I laughed, pushing the darkness away. "Did Paddington escape you again?"

He stopped in his mission and turned to look at me, his eyes a painful reminder of the cold man that I had come to care for despite it all.

"What do you say, we go feed the ducks?"

He shrieked, tapping his chubby hand against the rug, making me laugh. This kid loved ducks. I could also grab a sandwich from the Mexican van. My mouth watered at the thought of the greasy, full of flavor goodness.

I nodded. "Okay, let's go." I put him in his stroller, picked up the travel bag and left the apartment.

Timmy was already babbling like crazy when we reached the lobby. He loved going out because he knew it meant either feeding the ducks or going to see Dee, his next favorite person in the world.

“Good afternoon, Jim. We’re going to take a stroll by the river. We’ll be back in a couple of hours,” I told the concierge behind the desk.

I wasn’t sure why I always told him where we were going and for how long. A part of me wanted to think it was for safety, but I couldn’t deny that it might also be because I wanted him to know just in case Dean showed up. The Beaumont building wasn’t even six blocks away, so I kept thinking that one day, he would just take the fifteen minutes’ walk or five minutes’ drive, but - I looked down at Timmy. Maybe I had overestimated Dean’s growing attachment to his nephew.

I’d just exited the building when I heard someone call my name.

As I turned toward the call, a genuine smile spread across my face. Lea waved her hand, walking toward me.

“Lea, hi!”

She immediately pulled me into a hug and I stiffened a little before returning it. It was still very strange for me, this level of care and friendship from a woman I barely knew, but she’d shown me only kindness since the moment I’d met her. The only other person to have done that was Dee.

Lea had always been so nice and understanding with me, probably because of her career choice. Maybe she understood me more than I thought she did.

“Susan is giving a seminar today at the University, so I thought I’d come along and spend some time with you and my favorite nephew.” Crouching in front of the stroller, she reached for one of Timmy’s hands. “How’s the most beautiful boy in the whole world?”

“He is great. He’s now the infant he was always meant to be.”

She nodded, the love in her eyes unmistakable. I was so glad Timmy had her in his life. She would be able to help him as he grew up. To help him overcome the weight of how his life came to be.

“Am I catching you at a bad time?” she asked, finally standing up. “I should have called.”

“No, it’s alright. I’m happy you came.” It was true. Dee had been quite busy these past few days and she didn’t really like it when Timmy and I went to see her. The area was too dangerous. Before I’d had no choice, but now that I did, she didn’t want me there at all.

I missed having an adult conversation and especially with Lea. She was astute and non-judgmental.

“I’m taking Timmy to feed the ducks and to grab some food at the van. Want to join?”

“Duck feeding and greasy street food?!” She snorted. “It’s a given!”

I laughed as we started to walk down the mostly quiet street to the park. Despite it being summer, it was a weekday and past the standard lunchtime for workers.

As we walked, I couldn’t help but notice again the striking differences between Lea and her brothers. Edward, despite being one of the kindest, most sensitive souls I’d ever met, had been broken beyond repair. And Dean, despite his air of authority and dismissive attitude, was probably even more broken than his brother had been. I suspected the iceman he was, hadn’t been something he’d been born into, but rather, it was something he had become out of necessity.

Lea seemed so normal, so functional, so...untouched by all of the darkness that seemed to follow her brothers around.

“How’s Susan?” I asked as we entered the park and settled at my favorite table. It was an equal distance between the vans and the river and shaded by a large cedar tree.

“She’s good, although a bit disappointed she won’t see Timmy today.”

“She can always join us later.” I liked Susan. I’d met her when she’d come with Lea to visit Timmy at the hospital. Despite an aura of seriousness surrounding her, she was actually quite warm. Plus, she’d adored Timmy straight away, which made her a keeper in my books.

I'd wondered why I had not met her before, but I'd realized quite quickly that it was because she wasn't a fan of Dean.

"No, unfortunately, she can't." She leaned back in her chair. "There's a dinner after the seminar that we have to attend." She looked at Timmy, who was engrossed in his ducks

watching. "But I was thinking maybe you and Timmy could come spend the weekend at our house? We're only thirty minutes upstate and we have a pool and everything." She shrugged. "You could relax for a couple of days and let us fuss and spoil our golden child. What do you think?"

I laughed and nodded. "That sounds like a dream. I'm in."

"Good, Susan will be happy." She looked at the vans. "So what are we getting? My treat!"

I stood up, shaking my head. "Nonsense. You just invited me over for a weekend. Let me treat you." I jerked my head toward the stroller. "What do you want?"

"I don't know, surprise me. I'm not that familiar with street food, I have to admit."

"No problem. I'll get us something good."

I got us some tostadas, with fries and a few churros for dessert.

When I came back, she had Timmy on her knees and he was beaming at her.

"You know, I know he's Eddie's son, but..." She trailed off, tilting her head to the side.

"He looks a lot like Dean," I confirmed her unspoken thought. I'd started to notice that too, more and more, but I wasn't sure if it was real or if I was only seeing what I wanted to see because I missed the man.

"Does Dean think so too?" she asked, still keeping her eyes on Timmy's face.

I shrugged. "I don't think he knows. Babies change a lot at his age and Dean hasn't seen him in over three weeks."

“He hasn’t...” She frowned, clearly displeased by that fact. She shook her head before looking down at the food. “Damn, you’ve spoiled us.”

I shrugged. “It will go down without a problem, trust me.” I was grateful for the change of subject.

As we started eating, Timmy kept trying to grab our food.

“I think he’s hungry too. His appetite has increased greatly since his recovery.” I was so pleased with that too. Pulling my chair back, “I’ll give him his applesauce.”

She shook her head. “Nope, finish your food. I want to feed him.”

I nodded.

“Is Jeremy taking good care of my nephew?” she asked, adjusting Timmy on her knees.

I rested my sandwich back on the table and wiped my hands, for some reason uncomfortable at the subject of Jeremy Hunt even though I had no reason to be so. “No, he referred me to a pediatrician here. He is a surgeon. It’s also better to have someone close and-” I shrugged.

“And?” she asked, but I knew from her tone that she knew where I’d been going with that.

“He asked me out...Jeremy,” I admitted, reaching for a French fry on my plate.

She nodded as she fed Timmy his applesauce. “I’ve known Jeremy for years; he is a good man.”

I looked away, watching a young couple walking hand in hand. “Yes, he is,” I admitted. And yet, his kind smiles, sweet words, and boyish charms didn’t do anything for me.

No, for me it was only severe lines, cold emerald eyes, and a commanding voice that made my heart flutter.

I sighed. Why was I like this?

“You know, for what it’s worth, liking Dean is okay too.”

Startled, I turned toward her.



She shrugged.

“Dean is commanding, cold, unfeeling...” I shook my head.

She shook hers too. “He’s not -” She let out a snort. “He is most of those things, but not unfeeling, never unfeeling...quite the contrary actually. He’s tried very hard to stop feeling, but he can’t and it terrifies him.” She reached for my hand. “I don’t know what he did to you and I’m sure it’s bad, but whatever he did, it was out of desperation and fear, that I’m sure.”

“Fear?”

She nodded. “Fear of the feelings you woke up in him, and as you know, fear makes you do things that are out of character.”

I frowned at her assessment. I didn’t know where she was going with this. Dean Beaumont was not a frightened man.

Lea put Timmy back in his stroller and turned toward me.

“Are you a liar, Amber?” “

“What?” I was taken aback by the question. “No, of course not.”

“I didn’t think so. And yet, look how far into deception you went just out of fear of losing Timmy.”

“That’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it?” She cocked her head to the side. “Why is that?”

“Because - because” I looked at Timmy. “Because Timmy is a human being.”

She nodded. “Yes, but fear is fear, isn’t it? Can you actually put a scale on fear? Some are more irrational than others, true, but when you feel it, it doesn’t matter does it?” She sat back down and adjusted her sunglasses. I felt like I was having an outdoor therapy session. “You can be scared of height and I could be scared of killer clowns.”

“That’s scary,” I admitted.

She chuckled. “I know. Watching *IT* with Susan has been one of my biggest mistakes.” She waved her hand dismissively. “But that’s not the point. One fear is clearly much more irrational than the other and yet, for the person suffering from it, it feels just the same.”

I looked at her for a couple of seconds as she ate her sandwich.

I shook my head. “Are you always this wise?” I wasn’t sure I liked her argumentation and her ability to make me see things differently.

Wiping her hands on a napkin, she let out a dramatic sigh. “Yes, I am. It’s a cross I have to bear.”

Timmy shrieked, making grabbing motions at the ducks. Then he tapped his little fists on the plastic table inside his stroller.

“Ah, I think he’s had enough of us chatting. He wants the ducks now.” I stood up and started putting our empty plates in the trash can. Grabbing the bag of churros, Lea rested them against her chest. “Dude, I’m finishing these! I’m never allowed carbs and fats at home. Oh, and if you could forget we ate all this when you next see Susan, that would be super.”

“Ate what?” I asked with a wink

She laughed and nodded. “You and I, we’re going to be best friends.”

I hoped so. Lea was an amazing woman, who I knew would be good for Timmy and I.

I got the dry bread out of Timmy’s bag, Timmy shrieked again, wiggling in his seat.

Lea snorted. “Yep, he’s really like Dean. Demanding and impatient.”

I blushed under the sun. Demanding Dean...I’d enjoyed demanding Dean immensely. I’d enjoyed submitting to him even more than I’d thought was possible.

“Wow, girl, not sure why you’re blushing so hard, but I don’t think I want to know. Nope, definitely not.”

She chuckled. I liked how she didn't judge me despite knowing my sexual preference. Lea Beaumont was a godsend.

"Do you mind?" she asked pointed at the stroller.

"No, please do," I waved the zip bag. "I'm on bread duties anyway."

We walked silently for a few minutes along the riverbank before stopping at a small cluster of ducks beside the wooden bridge.

"Are you telling me I need to forgive him?" I asked, our previous conversation still reeling in my mind.

"No, I would never. You should never do anything you don't truly believe is right for you."

I threw a few pieces of bread at the ducks, slowly bringing them closer.

"All I'm saying is that just put things into perspective. I just don't want you to make a wrong judgment of character. Dean is not easy to love, that's certain, but I suspect that everything he did was out of desperation and self-preservation."

She looked at me as I threw more bread. I wasn't sure what I could say.

"But with Dean, never do anything you are not certain you want to do. Part of his fear is also due to our mother's fickle nature. If you want to forgive him, do, but if you're not certain, then don't do anything until you are because uncertainty will cause more damage than you think." The love for her brother was unmistakable in her voice.

"I do care for him," I admitted. That was an understatement. What I felt for him was much more than care and I was a little ashamed of that fact given all of the humiliation and horror he'd caused.

"I know you do. It's evident because no matter how infuriating my brother is, he is just as able to bring greatness as he is to bring darkness. He feels very powerfully, my brother, both the good and the bad."

“He’s forgotten about us.” I finally admitted what I’ve been suspecting. That he’s gone on with his life, that I was just a bleep on his radar, nothing more despite the fact that he’d asked me to stay. What if he had asked again? Would I have stayed?

She let out a humorless laugh. “I suspect it’s quite the contrary, actually. I suspect he’s missing you both.”

I shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but it did. I wanted him to miss me too, to want me too...to regret me too. *Stupid, silly, naive girl*, the voice in my head taunted, a voice quite similar to the man I hated missing.

Dean Beaumont missing me? I shook my head. That was just a stupid, stupid thought. The man was an island. An island full of bitterness and anger.

But the horror of it all? I longed for that Island.

“Time will tell,” I replied, trying to calm the butterflies in my stomach.

She nodded. “I presume it will.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

*Dean*



I wasn't sure why I'd gone back to the estate. I had no business being here and yet here I was.

Turning in my leather chair, I looked out of the window to the gardens Amber had loved so much. I sighed, looking down at the tumbler of bourbon I was holding.

The house felt so cold, so empty with an ominous sense of loneliness. Not something I'd ever felt here before, but that was before her... Amber, a ray of sunshine pouring through despite the greyness of her life. Despite the pain I'd caused her, she shone through. She didn't let life or me smother her light and for that I was grateful.

"You look like a poor SOB."

I rolled my eyes. "Is that the clinical term?" I asked, turning around to look at my sister, secretly grateful that she'd interrupted my thoughts.

"It should be." She sat down as if she owned the place and, in many ways, she did.

"Still haven't learned how to knock I see."

She shrugged. "What can I say, Deano? It's my rebellious streak."

I snorted. “You overused that card when you were a teenager.”

She winked. “And you stood up for me when it mattered.”

“How could I not? The fact that my little sister was gay didn’t change who she was or her value in my eyes.” I’d stood by her side and smothered all the criticisms that the well-thinking bigots from our extended circle may have voiced concerning Lea’s sexual preferences.

She was wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a cheap tee-shirt. With her hair up in a high ponytail and her face bare of make-up, she didn’t look her age at all and she certainly didn’t look like the eminent psychiatrist she was. No wonder I’d made the same mistake with Amber; I was used to women looking younger than they were. *Are you trying to excuse your actions?*

“I saw Amber in Philly.”

I froze, had I just spoken her name out loud? No, of course not. My sister was just that infuriatingly good. Fucking mind ninja. I nodded, intending to change the subject, but at the last second, I found I couldn’t help myself. “How is she?”

“You’d know if you visited.”

*Here she goes.* I cracked my neck and finished my glass in one go. “Don’t start, Lea. I’m busy and he’s just a baby.”

“Busy doing what?” She gestured around my office and glaringly empty desk. “Sulking like a five-year-old?” She shook her head. “I never took you for an avoider, Deano. Another issue to add to your list.”

“I’m not avoiding her.”

When she smirked, I realized my slip up. She’s never said I was avoiding *her*.

I stood up briskly and walked to the bar. “I won’t become our father. I won’t be a lovesick fool!”

“There’s nothing wrong with being deeply in love.” She moved to stand on the other side of the bar. “Is that why you were a monster to her? Because you knew she had the

potential to break you? Well let me tell you the truth, brother, she already did - with her gentleness and her heart, she did it. She unraveled you and you were too stupid to see it.”

“I don’t love her,” I said stubbornly even as my stomach dropped with the force of my own lie.

“Yes, you do!” she cried out with exasperation. “I watched you trap yourself in your work after dad died. You’ve let it swallow you until you turned into this terrifying corporate king in a self-imposed, unfeeling prison. And it broke my heart, Deano. It really did. But this woman, she woke it all up, the good and the bad, the passion, the jealousy, the love, the need...She breathed life into you, Dean. Don’t waste this second chance at living.”

After rubbing my face wearily, I took a sip of my drink.

“Why are you hiding here, Deano? Are you scared that being too close to her in Philly will be an issue? That all it will take is one night in an alcohol daze and you’ll go to her and admit it?”

I glared at her as I walked back to my seat. Ignoring me, she helped herself to a cola bottle from the mini-fridge. Her accusation was partially true, but it was more than that. This manor was the only place that carried memories of her, and the masochist part of me fed on them.

“You’re just too terrified to let her love you too. Tell me why? Don’t you think you deserve to be loved?”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

She sighed. “You deserve someone like her, Dean, and she is not mom.”

“It’s not-”

She raised her hand to stop me from talking. “Amber is a hundred percent real, no matter the lies she told you. You can’t just let her in a little bit. It’s all or nothing with women like her.” She rounded the desk and stopped in front of me. “She doesn’t accept that she loves you because she doesn’t think she’s enough. But she’s exactly what you need, exactly what you want.” She rested her hand over my galloping heart. “Let

yourself fall, Dean. Let yourself be vulnerable. Let yourself love and be loved.”

I rested my hand on top of hers. “What if it’s not enough? What if my shortcomings are too great?”

“They aren’t.”

“What if they are,” I insisted.

“You’re miserable and she is too. You owe it to her and yourself to at least try. Amber is probably the most forgiving, sweetest, and softest woman I know. If she can’t do it, nobody can. You showed her most of your monster, but she stayed. She managed to fall for you through all the darkness. Show her the greatness, the passion that I know is in you Deano, and she’ll be yours.”

“I’ll think about it. “

She smiled. “You do that,” she announced as if she knew she’d won... And admittedly, she had.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked just as she was about to leave like she came, like an infuriatingly pushy Love fairy.

“Why?” She turned around, resting her back against the door. “Because I want you to be happy, because I think it’s time for the Beaumont men to break the cycle, because I think that’s what you need.” She shrugged. “Take your pick. Also, you’ll totally owe me and have to call your first-born after me.”

I laughed a little at that. Leave it to Lea to find the humor in my fall. “What if it’s a boy?” I asked, playing along.

“Leo is a very nice name.” She wiggled her fingers at me, waving goodbye. “See you soon, brother. Don’t miss this shot.”

And as suddenly as she’d come, she was gone.

I shook my head. Resting my elbows on the desk, I rubbed my face wearily.

I missed Amber, of course, I did, but the guilt of all the things I’d said and done to her weighed on me. If I were her, I



would never forgive me.

*She is not you Dean, that's the point. She is everything you're not. Something to be grateful for.*

I growled, looking heavenward. "Please, Ms. Collins, don't break my newly functioning heart."

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I felt like a fool. I'd been waiting in front of her apartment building for over an hour now. I knew I could enter; the building was mine, but I didn't feel like doing that, not when I wanted her to trust me.

I 'd rung a couple of times, while smiling at the camera, trying to show her I was not here to hurt her again, but my calls remained unanswered. I'd thought for a second that maybe she was avoiding me too, but she was not petty my Amber; she didn't work like that.

I looked up the street and my heart skipped a bit when I saw her turn the corner. She was dressed in quite a simple dress, which stopped just above her knees. It was yellow, so fitting of her luminous nature. She had her hair up in a bun and she was wearing black ballet shoes, showing how endearingly short she was.

She hadn't noticed me yet, I could watch her at my leisure from the shadow of the porch. She wasn't even half-way here, but I swear I could smell her. I took a deep breath. How was it that just her scent brought me a sense of peace?

I was truly fucked but weirdly enough, I didn't mind.

When she finally noticed me, her pace faltered. She stood straighter; her neck tensed. I hated that I 'd put her on her guard. What if Lea was wrong?

"Mr. Beaumont?" She looked around.

I frowned. Why was she looking around?

"Expecting someone?" I asked as I felt a pinch of jealousy at the idea of a suitor being on his way. It would be a shame to

have to kill him.

“No, I- I was looking for your car. Have you been waiting long?” She rushed up the stairs and gestured for me to come inside. “I’m sorry. Timmy is at the nursery. The pediatrician said he needed contact with other children to help with his development and-” She looked down at her watch. “She is very experienced, you know. She is a nurse. I mean, he is supposed to be there for another hour, but-”

I rested my hand on her neck to stop her rambling.

She shivered under my touch, her pupils dilating. I was pleased with the way she reacted to me. “It’s fine, Amber. I need to speak to you actually.”

“Oh!” She was so adorable when she was surprised. “Do you want to come up?”

I chuckled. “Yes. I think that would be better unless you want your doorman to hear my declaration of love.”

She dropped her handbag as she turned into a statue.

Crouching down, I grabbed her bag off the floor. She remained frozen. I would have laughed at her shock if I didn’t have my own heart in my throat.

“Amber?” I let my fingers trail down the back of her arm to her elbow.

She jerked back. “Yes, let’s go.”

We walked into the elevator followed by the curious eyes of the doorman. Of course he was protective of her. How could he not be?

“You know, it’s unkind to play with people like that,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself.

How I wished I was the one she sought comfort from.

“Who said I was playing?” I asked taking a side step to stand closer to her.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, she got out. She walked to her apartment silently, almost robotically.

Opening the door, she gestured me in.

“What are you saying?” she asked with uncertainty as she closed the door behind us.

“I miss you. Come home with me.”

She sighed and took a deep breath as she leaned against the door. “I left the manor four weeks ago. You never called, just sent a couple of impersonal emails.”

I nodded, taking a couple of steps closer to her.

“I know. I’m sorry. I thought you wanted some space and I was confused. But mostly miserable.” I took another step forward. “It’s taken me a moment too long to realize what I think I’ve always known.” I brushed her cheek with the back of my hand, pleased when she didn’t move away. “The idea of letting anyone close to me is terrifying for reasons I can never explain. But the truth is that I can’t imagine my big house without you in it.” I paused letting her process what I was saying.

I moved another step closer. Her body heat slowly enveloped me.

“I want you to come home because I love you, Amber. Because I can’t imagine that house without you in it. Because I want you. Because I need you. Because ...”

For once, my extensive vocabulary and intelligence failed me. There simply weren’t any words to describe how I truly felt.

“Amber, I think you’re it for me.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “I hope I’m not.”

“I think you are. Amber, give me a chance.”

She bit her bottom lip, clearly undecided. “I need time.”

I sighed in relief; at least it was not a no.

I nodded, burying my hands in my pockets and taking a step back to give her a little more space. “Let me propose a bargain.”

She gave me a small smile. “You’re really into those, aren’t you?”

I shrugged with a little smile of my own. “I’m a businessman.”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Give me six months.”

“You’ve got a thing with six months as well.”

I shrugged. “Come home for six months. Let me show you that I can love you just as fiercely as I hated you, that I can protect you as well as I’d hurt you. Let me show you that you’re the one for me. Amber, you’re my life.”

“What if it doesn’t work? I’ll be risking everything on a promise.”

Fuck, that hurt. I couldn’t deny it.

“It’s called a leap of faith. I know you’ve done that before; do it again.”

She looked at me silently, crossing her arms on her chest.

I knew she could see the hurt in my eyes, but she was trying to stay strong. “I’ll let you go, for real this time. I’ll buy you a nice house with the deed in your name. I’ll even bless whatever relationship you might want with Jeremy the bore.”

“He is not a bore,” she defended.

I couldn’t help but glare, jealousy rearing its ugly head.

“And your friend, Dee, is it?”

“Yes?” she trailed off wearily, apprehension in her eyes. She was scared I was going to threaten her once more. And could I really blame her?

“If you accept, I’ll get her a beauty salon. State-of-the-art - everything. I’ll be an investor for only, like what? Twenty-five percent of the profit.”

“Ten,” she replied firmly.

I couldn’t contain my smile. *Gotcha!* She was so selfless, of course, she’d fight for someone other than herself. “You got

yourself a deal. So what do you say?"

She sighed, uncrossing her arms. A little tendril of brown hair had escaped her bun and was laying against the side of her neck. My fingers twitched with the need to put it back behind her ear, to just touch her.

"Okay, and what if it does? What if I decide to stay?" she said, locking eyes with me.

I smiled. Reaching into my pocket, I brushed the small square velvet box that laid there.

I'd gone to the jewelry store earlier this week to buy her a few charms for my mother's bracelet, tokens for what I hoped our relationship would become. But then, I'd turned around and saw it, the ring. It had been made for her. It was a Mervis Diamonds' \$100,000 cherry blossom engagement ring and it was hers.

It was in my pocket, but I couldn't pull it out now. She was not ready.

"If you decide to stay?" I couldn't help but reach for the strand of hair now. Putting it behind her ear, I let my fingers trail down the column of her neck. Fuck, I loved her skin, her softness, her smell that was so uniquely her, and her taste.

She nodded, unconsciously leaning into my touch.

"If you decide to stay, I'll make sure you will never regret that choice. So what do you say? Are you taking this leap of faith?"

She looked away, still worrying her bottom lip. She was deciding if it was worth it. I couldn't blame her if she said no. I'd messed up badly and a lot. Truth be told, if the situation was reversed I was certain I would not give her the solicitude I was requesting.

But, as my heart squeezed painfully, I mentally begged her to have a little shred of compassion left for me, a little bit of trust so she could make the jump.

"Okay," she replied softly.

"Okay?" I repeated, unsure if I'd heard her correctly.

She nodded.

“Oh, thank fuck!” I huffed with relief, pulling her into a hug.

When she froze in my arms, I knew I should let her go, but I couldn't, not yet.

I took a deep breath, taking her all in. She wouldn't regret giving me one last chance. I would hold on to her for as long as I could.

*You, Amber Collins, are mine to keep.*

# CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

*Amber*



Coming back to the estate, strangely felt like coming home. I'd only spent five months there, and yet, I felt more at home here than I did in Philly.

I was happy to go back to my small room despite Dean's insistence on moving me into one that was more luxurious and closer to his own. Being too close to him was dangerous for me, especially since he'd been nothing other than the perfect man since I'd moved back.

For the first week, I'd kept expecting him to revert to the angry Dean, but when that hadn't happened, I'd started to relax and enjoy his presence.

He was making an effort to have lunch and dinner with me every night. Then, after I put Timmy to bed, he would join me in the small library, where we would read in companionable silence. I liked it; it was nice, but it was hard for me not to expect the other shoe to drop.

On Timmy's first birthday, I found his crib empty except for a simple note.

'I'm with Uncle Dean, learning to be a man. Come find us in his room.' I rolled my eyes.

Not bothering to change out of my pajamas short and tank top, I padded barefoot to his side of the house. His bedroom door was open and I could hear Timmy laughing.

I smiled, resting my hand on my heart. I loved my little boy's laugh.

"Hello?" I said, walking into the empty room.

"Ahhhh." Timmy babbled at the sound of my voice.

Dean laughed. His laughs have become more and more common - yet another sound I was addicted to. I always wanted him to laugh.

"Ah, look who's up? We're in the bathroom," he called.

I stopped dead at the vision before my eyes. The man was not playing fair.

He was bare-chested and wearing only a pair of grey sweatpants. I hadn't even known he owned sweatpants, but Lord have mercy, it was an amazing view. I let my eyes take in his toned chest to a light dusting of dark hair on his pecks, the well-defined abs, and the happy trail leading to a part of him I missed more than I cared to admit.

"Eyes up here, Miss Collins."

I immediately looked up and met his amused eyes in the mirror.

"You're hardly playing fair," I admitted.

He winked. "All is fair in love and war."

"And what is this? Love or war?" I asked, hating that he managed to look this hot even with shaving cream on his face. How fair was that?

He cocked his head to the side. "A bit of both, I suppose. I'm in a war to win your love."

Timmy called me again and I turned toward him, happy with the distraction. He was secured in his seat on the counter.

"What are you guys doing?" I asked, walking toward Timmy and leaning down to kiss his little feet, which always



made him laugh like crazy.

“Well, Timmy is one today and it’s my job to show him how to be a man.” He grinned, grabbing his razor from the counter and gently shaving the top of his cheek. He stopped at his usual beard line. “Today I’m showing him how to shave.”

I chuckled, brushing my forefinger across Timmy’s sweet, soft, chubby cheek. “I think you have a few years with this one.”

“It’s never too early to learn. We Beaumont men are all male.”

“Oh, I know!” I exclaimed before blushing furiously at the implication of my words.

He turned toward me, his eyes trailing up my bare legs. “I know you do, but I want to make new memories.”

I knew he regretted what had happened between us. He felt guilty, but in the grand scheme of things, I didn’t think there was a reason for him to. I’d pretended to be my sister. I’d seen firsthand what my sister had been through and I knew that the kind of degradation Dean had put me through would not even have been a blip on my sister’s radar. I raised my hand to comfort him but thought better of it given his state of nakedness.

He grabbed my hand and ran his thumb across the inside of my wrist, touching the house charm he had given me the day I’d moved back in. ‘A charm for each milestone,’ he had said.

He rested my hand on his chest, over his rapidly beating heart, and then placed his hand on top of mine. We stayed like that for the next few seconds, staring into each other’s eyes. The heat of his skin warmed me from the inside out.

Timmy babbled again, bringing me back to reality. Dean reluctantly removed his hand from mine. Sighing, I lifted my hand off his chest, but not before running my fingers down his abs. I was only human, after all.

“I need to get the birthday boy ready for his big fiesta.” I booped Timmy’s nose with my index finger. “We can’t have the guest of honor in his ducky onesie, can we?”

“It gives him some style, I think. A kiss before you go?” he asked me teasingly.

He’s been asking me for a kiss every day since I’d moved back in. I’ve told him ‘no’ for fourteen days in a row...I didn’t feel like saying ‘no’ today.

“I don’t remember today being your birthday.”

“No, you’re correct, but you’ll definitely make me feel like it is.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

He smiled his predatory smile, the one that promised the kind of pain I actually liked.

He pulled me toward him, close enough for me to feel the growing erection in his pants.

“What can I say?” He brushed his nose against mine. “You’ve got this effect on me, no matter what you do or what you wear.”

Cupping my cheeks, he leaned down and kissed me gently, tenderly. Not something I was used to. I’d never been cherished; I’d never been cared for.

I let out a tearless sob.

He moved his head a little. “Did the kiss upset you?” he asked, brushing my cheekbone with his thumb.

“No actually, quite the contrary. It was the best kiss; it made me feel loved.”

“That’s because you are loved.”

My stomach flipped. How was I even supposed to protect myself from him? I’ve never stood a chance.

Sighing, I took a step back. “I’ll go get us ready. I’ll see you later.”

“Just a minute.” He walked into the bedroom and retrieved a little square box. I opened it to find a pair of lips.

“This is a charm for our first real kiss, the first one that matters.”

I gave him a small smile, extending my wrist to him. “Help me?”

He took off my bracelet and kissed my wrist before putting the charm on.

“How many of them did you get?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out, Ms. Collins.”

I shook my head with a small smile. “Fine, keep your secret. I will see you in a bit.”

“I can’t wait,” he replied with a cheeky grin that looked amazing on him.

After setting Timmy down in his playpen, I took a quick shower. Once dry, I let my hair flow down my back and got dressed in the white dress covered with cherries that I knew Dean loved.

Then I got Timmy ready for the day, dressing him in the cutest little birthday outfit, a three-piece navy short set with braces and a bow. I tried styling his hair like Dean.

It was strange how he looked just like Dean like this; they could be father and son.

My heart squeezed at the memory of them in the bathroom this morning, as well as all the other times I’ve seen them together. Dean obviously loved Timmy immensely and, despite only being one, it was clear that Timmy already adored Dean too.

We’d planned a brunch in the sunroom today with close friends and family. Dean hadn’t been overly happy when I’d wanted to invite Jeremy. I wouldn’t ever tell him, but I found his jealousy endearing. It showed me how worried he was about losing me, and that made me feel cherished.

“How about we go see if your birthday party is ready? What do you say, sweet boy?”

“Gah!”

I pulled him up from his playpen and settled him on my hip. "I'll take that as a yes."

The sunroom was beautiful with a sea and duck decor. A wooden high chair had been set at the head of the table with a one-shaped balloon attached to its back.

"Isn't that beautiful?" I asked, swirling around looking. I stopped, my attention caught by the gift table, which was already piled with gifts.

"What's all this?"

Mrs. James laughed. "Presents from the staff. We're just so happy to have you and Timothy here. You are breathing a new life into this house, the two of you."

I looked down at Timmy and kissed his nose. "He's one of a kind."

"And so are you, Miss Collins, so are you," she added as she arranged the little plastic ducks on the table.

I wasn't sure if we were supposed to keep on feeding Timmy's obsession with ducks. But when I'd voiced this concern to Dean, he had waved his hand.

*'Of course, we should! It makes him happy and who knows, our boy might end up as the world's most famous avian vet. Then he'll have us to thank,'* he'd replied with a scoff.

*Our boy.* If only he knew how much I loved it when he called Timmy that.

"Miss? Your guests are coming," the butler announced.

"Perfect. I will go meet them in the hall. Could you please inform Mr. Beaumont?"

He bowed and left the room.

I turned toward Mrs. James.

"You go, Miss," she said. "Everything is ready and I'll tell the chef guests are starting to arrive."

"Thanks again, Mrs. James."

"My pleasure."

I walked into the hall to find Dee and Raoul looking around in awe.

When Dee turned around at the sound of my shoes on the marble floor, Timmy started to babble in excitement overseeing one of his favorite people.

“Look who’s here Timmy? Aunty Dee and Uncle Raoul.”

“Oh my God,” Dee marveled as we stopped in front of her. “You look well,” she said to me, giving me a half hug. “And you.” She stole Timmy from my arms and hugged him tightly. “You look like the little man you are.”

I hugged Raoul.

He pinched my cheek. “Country life suits you, m’hija. I like this look on you.”

Dee grinned up at me. “He is a dashing little boy.”

“He’s got good genes,” I said. His uncle looked like a gift from the gods.

“Uh-huh.” Dee looked behind me and I didn’t even need to turn around to know who was there. I could feel his eyes on my skin. “And how are things?” she asked. I knew what she meant. She hadn’t been convinced I was making the right choice when I’d decided to give him another chance.

“Better than I could have ever hoped for.”

Dean came to stand behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders, making me shiver.

“Dee, Raoul - I’ve heard so much about you. I’m so pleased to meet Amber’s family. Thank you for coming.”

Raoul nodded with a smile. He was a man of little words, but that was perfect as Dee probably talked enough for both of them.

“Yes, likewise.” Dee arched a brow. “You seem to be good for my girl.”

“I’m certainly endeavoring to.” He quickly kissed the top of my head.

“Please, let’s go to the sunroom; my sister just texted to say she’ll be here in the next few minutes.”

Raoul extended a small bag to me. “A present for the little prince.”

I gave him another hug, feeling emotional. Dean had been right; they were my family.

We’d just sat down at the table when Lea, Susan, and Jeremy walked in.

Lea and Susan gushed over the star of the day. Jeremy waved at me before sitting next to Dee, who was treating him like a star for what he’d done for Timmy.

I looked at Dean who was standing beside the gift table and looking at us all with a small smile.

I waited for him to meet my eyes before gesturing to the seat beside me.

He beamed and the fact that I could so easily bring him joy, made me happy.

After sitting down, he leaned toward me. “If you only knew what this dress does for me,” he whispered, his hot breath making me shiver.

“I do know,” I admitted, meeting his eyes with a flirty smile of my own.

He reared back; his eyebrows arched in surprise.

“Oh, Ms. Collins, I think we need to discuss this,” he added with a small smirk.

It was at that moment that Lea came over and rested her hands on Dean’s shoulders. She leaned down to whisper in his ear, but just loud enough for me to hear as well.

“How does it feel, brother, to let yourself be happy, to let yourself love?” she asked.

He glanced my way. “Better than I could have ever imagined.”

Lea nodded and winked at me. “It’s so cathartic with the right woman.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said, keeping his eyes on me and making me blush. “Talking about the right woman, I’m happy Susan is here.”

Lea let go of her brother and straightened. “She likes you better now,” she admitted. “She thinks you’re less of an ass.”

Dean laughed. “I’ll take it.”

The party was pleasant. It was so good to have Dee and Raoul here with Lea, Dean, and Susan. It was like two families meeting for the first time, and it was lovely and warm.

Dean caressed my knee under the table every so often. It was not a sexual gesture, it was a loving one, and I loved it.

Just as we finished our dessert, Timmy started to get fussy.

“I think the birthday boy needs his nappy nap,” I said.

“Who doesn’t?” Raoul added in jest.

I was about to stand up when Dean rested his hand on top of mine.

“No, please, stay here.” He smiled at Dee. “You don’t see your friends often. Just let me deal with the birthday boy.”

I nodded, once more pleasantly surprised by his thoughtful side.

He picked up Timmy from his high chair. “Come on, big boy. Let’s go take a nap.” He turned toward the table. “In case I don’t see you before you leave, thanks again for coming. It means a lot to us.”

We watched him leave in silence, each of us with different degrees of surprise on our face.

“He’s changed a lot,” Susan commented once he’d exited the room.

I shrugged, I didn’t think he’d changed, I was sure he’d always had that gentleness in him.

“Love will do that to a man,” Dee confirmed. “The right person will warm even the coldest heart.”

“I like you,” Lea told Dee, pointing at her with a fork full of cake. “I’m guessing you were the voice who kept our Amber sane in this crazy world.”

Dee beamed at her. “And I’m happy my sweet girl has found a good and loving family and a sister as wise as you.”

They both smiled at each other and I could see forming, right before my eyes, one of the most unlikely friendships possible.

Jeremy had surgery early the next morning so because he had come with Lea and Susan, the three of them left as soon as Lea finished her second piece of cake under Susan’s amused eyes.

“You look happy.” Dee nodded her approval as soon as it was only the three of us.

“I am.”

“The man’s smitten,” she continued, her all-seeing eyes on me.

“He is not the only one.”

She reached for my face and cupped my cheek. “I am so happy it is working out, my sweet girl. You deserve the best.”

I could only nod, a lump of tears forming in my throat at all the love she gave me.

After Dee and Raoul left, I started to worry about Dean’s failure to return.

I went to the nursery and the scene before me, made the last of my reticence melt away.

My two boys were asleep - Timmy in his crib and Dean in the rocking chair with a copy of *Where is Mr. Duck* on his lap.

“Thanks for today,” I said softly, removing the book from his lap and putting it back on the bookshelf.



He sighed, turning his head toward me.

“It was normal. This is teamwork,” He replied, rocking gently in the chair.

“How am I supposed to resist you?” I whispered, running my hand across his cheek.

“Don’t,” he said, his voice still a bit rough from sleep. “Be mine.”

I smiled with a shake of my head before disappearing into my own room. If only he knew the truth. I was already his.

# CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

*Dear*



As I finished writing my last email, I leaned back on my seat. I just couldn't wait to get out of this office and join Amber in the small library or the kitchen or wherever she was in the house. I didn't care as long as she was with me.

Ah, what has that woman changed me into? A lovesick fool, and I was horrified to notice that I didn't even care.

Before her, work had been my escape. I'd spent so many hours hiding behind my desk, in my office, and in boardrooms, making money. It was a universe I could control, one where I was comfortable.

But now, whilst I still loved my job and making my company money, I couldn't wait until my tasks were done so I could find her just to talk, make her smile, and maybe, when I was very lucky, steal a kiss or two. Kiss stealing had become easier and easier ever since Timmy's birthday, three weeks ago. And the kisses, which had started out as chaste and sweet, had become more demanding on both sides. I was really starting to hope that she was going to stay with me.

A quick knock at my door brought me back to reality.

"Come in."

She opened the door and despite her being dressed in a conservative purple wrap dress, my pulse quickened.

She smiled at me, her fingers fidgeting at her sides. My girl was nervous and that piqued my interest in the best way.

“I’ve put Timmy to bed.”

I glanced at the clock. Eight at night. Fuck, it was later than I’d thought.

“Sorry for missing bedtime.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. Mister was in a mood tonight. He didn’t like any of the books I read him.”

I chuckled. That boy might be Edward’s, but he was going to be a mini-me, something that I couldn’t help but be proud of. “He wants what he wants.”

“Indeed.”

When she chewed on her bottom lip,

I groaned internally. I had to tell her she needed to stop doing that. Seeing her plump lip between her white teeth sent a message to my cock that I could barely control.

“What can I do for you?” I gestured for her to come in. “Please come in, close the door.”

She took a step in and closed the door behind her. “I don’t want to bother you if you’re busy.”

“You never bother me,” I admitted truthfully. “Interrupt me whenever you like.”

Nodding, she walked closer to my desk. She seemed so nervous that it was making *me* nervous.

I pushed my chair back from the desk and swiveled toward her.

She stood in front of me, just far enough to be out of reach.

I looked down at her feet and frowned at the stilettos she was wearing. That was so unlike her; she was a ballet or

barefoot kind of girl.

“I’ve been here almost two months now,” she said with a sigh, “and I don’t think this bargain is going to work for me anymore.”

The pain I felt at her words was overwhelming. I opened my mouth, only to close it again as nausea hit me at the idea of losing her.

“I don’t need more time, Dean Beaumont. I love you.”

The pressure on my heart eased immediately. “What?” I asked breathlessly.

“I don’t need more time to think. What you did was horrible, but I’ve seen so much good in you, so much love, and I don’t want to be without you, Dean. I love you.”

I blinked in a daze. I had won? I had her? I was about to reach for the box in my drawer when she reached for the knot on her dress and let it fall to the floor.

She was standing in front of me in a red lace lingerie set, leaving nothing to the imagination. She was a vision, a goddess, my good girl who loved being bad. My salvation.

“Am I daydreaming again?”

She shook her head. “No, but do you dream about this often?”

“More often than you’d think.”

She gave me a half-smile, trying to shake away her nervousness. She was trying to be brave, my girl. If only she knew how brave she already was. She was probably one of the strongest people I knew. She hadn’t let the life she’d led nor the way I’d treated her smother the kindness and love inside of her.

She knelt on the floor in front of me and spread my thighs before sliding in between them.

“What are you doing?” I asked as my dick thickened at what I hoped was coming.

She reached for my belt and undid it. “I’m having a do-over. I’ve studied a few techniques.”

A pinch of guilt mixed with my overwhelming desire. “You don’t have anything to make up for. I was cruel. I’ve never come as hard as I did that day.” And that was nothing but the truth.

“I still want to do this.” She unbuttoned my pants and then unzipped them, giving more breathing space to my now hard as steel cock.

Getting my cock out, she swirled her tongue over the tip, making me hiss.

I closed my eyes, resting my head on the back of the chair.

She trailed her tongue up my length a few times, slowly, lavishly as if we had all the time in the world. Wrapping her tongue around the tip of my cock, she made me feel like I was about to blow my load. I used to be able to control myself, but not in her hands, never in her hands.

Running my fingers through her silky hair, I said, “I love you so much.” She finally wrapped her mouth around me. Applying pressure with her tongue, she went down my cock slowly.

My hips bucked up almost involuntarily; she moaned, wanting me to take control. She loved it when I did. It made her wet.

And I loved it when my girl submitted. The thought made me even harder - if it was even possible.

Tightening my hand in her hair, I pressed her head down. I didn’t push hard enough to force myself down her throat, but just enough to show her what I wanted.

Moaning again, she went down as I directed. The more she bobbed her head, the more she increased her suction. I was lost in her warm mouth, but I didn’t want to come like this. No, I wanted her to come with me.

“Enough,” I growled, pulling her off my cock.

She stayed on her knees, looking up to me, her lips plumped from all the hard sucking. She was even more beautiful than usual when she was submitting.

“Was it bad?” she asked with uncertainty.

“Bad?” I scoffed. “No, it was too good. Baby, I want to come inside you with your tight little pussy squeezing all the come out of me.”

She rubbed her thighs together.

“You love it when I talk dirty to you, don’t you?”

She nodded, the flush of her cheeks matching her red lingerie.

I stood up, my dick still standing straight as I closed my laptop and put it on the floor before swiping my desk clean with my forearm.

She let out a gasp of surprise.

“My turn now,” I replied, pulling her up off the floor and sitting her on the edge of my desk.

When I parted her thighs, I clearly saw her arousal on her underwear. Settling between her legs, my erection pressed against the wet heat of her panties.

I gave her a passionate kiss, biting her bottom lip until she granted me entrance. Then I conquered her with my tongue.

Breaking the kiss, I trailed my lips across her jawline. “Say it again,” I ordered in between kisses.

“I love you,” she let out a moan as I sucked on her neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I rested a hand on her back. “Lay down.”

As she did as I ordered, I trailed my hand down her flat stomach to the edge of her panties. I had to fight my basic instinct to take her, to possess her.

Leaning over her, I pushed aside her bra, revealing her beautiful perky breasts and hard rosy nipples.

I sucked one into my mouth, making her arch against me. Her pleasure mattered even more than mine now. She was paramount.

Pulling back, I did the same to her other breast before licking and kissing my way down to where I really wanted to be.

“Dean, please,” she begged as I kissed her core through her panties.

“Please what, Ms. Collins?”

“Just take me, Dean. Please, I need you in me.”

“Patience, my love,” I whispered as I hooked my fingers in her panties, pulling them down.

Bringing my mouth back up to her now bare pussy, I licked her slit, making her mewl shamelessly. “I love your taste. I could eat you out for hours,” I added before burying my face between her thighs. I entered her with my tongue, mimicking the thrust I would soon be doing with my cock.

She was now calling my name over and over, grabbing at my hair, both pulling and pushing, so lost in her own ecstasy. I wasn't sure she even knew what I was doing anymore.

I kept on eating her, thrusting my tongue into her over and over again as her legs started to quiver around my face. When I pressed my thumb firmly against her clit, she came on the loudest scream possible. I took all of my self-control to not bang on my chest like a proud savage.

My woman had had such an earth-shattering orgasm; she was shaking all over.

Placing my cock at her entrance, I slowly pushed into her, loving how her body wrapped around me like a glove.

“Babe, I can't be loving or delicate now. I feel like I might burst,” I admitted truthfully once I was fully seated inside her heavenly heat.

“Don't, don't be considerate. Just fuck me. I want you to fuck me,” she said. Licking her lips, she reached up and pinched her nipples.

I pulled out completely and entered her again in one powerful thrust. She arched in such blissful abandon, she ended up sitting on the desk.

“These are mine too,” I growled, slapping the hands off her breasts.

Grabbing her hip, I started to thrust hard and fast. With my other hand, I kneaded her left breast and pinch her nipple.

She met me thrust for thrust. The only sounds in the room were her moans, my growls, and the slap of my balls against her ass.

This fuck was completely animalistic. I swore to myself that I’d make love to her later in my bed, but right now I needed to let out all the sexual frustration and need I had for my girl.

I came so hard, my legs buckled. I enjoyed filling her with my cum.

Leaning down, still keeping my softening cock inside her, I pecked her lips. “That was the best sex ever.” Wrapping her arms around me, she gently caressed my back. “It was. I don’t think I’ll be able to walk again.”

I smiled, kissing her cheek. “I’d like to say I’m sorry, but...”

She chuckled. “I know. You’re happy to have a big dick and to have fucked me into oblivion.”

Reluctantly leaving her body, I offered her a hand to help her up. “Maybe we can take this to my room? Or can I say *our* room now?”

She nodded with a small smile as she readjusted her bra. “Yes, our room,” she confirmed as she reached for her panties on the floor.

I waited for her to slide her dress back before handing her a little square blue box.

“Oh, is it a new charm?” she asked, taking the box from me. “What could fit this moment? A small penis?” She chuckled at her own joke, but her laughter died as soon as she



opened the box. The stunning engagement ring I'd purchased for her all those weeks ago was finally glistening back at her.

"Dean?" she asked, turning around just as I got down on one knee.

She rested a trembling hand against her lips.

"I love you, Amber Collins. You are everything I've never dared to dream of. You bring light to my darkness, softness to my roughness, bravery to my fear. You are my world, my heart. When you were gone, I missed you so viscerally that it made me crazy." I rested my hand over my heart.

"Be my wife. Let's raise our boy and have more babies together. Let's keep showing the world that despite our circumstances, despite the odds, we have made it. Be my wife, my confidant, my salvation. Because Amber, I breathe for you, I live for you. Marry me, please."

She sobbed again. "Of course, yes. I love you! You and I, always Dean Beaumont."

Standing up, I took the ring from her. As I slid the ring on her finger, my hand shook with exhilaration.

Pulling her into a hug, I kissed the top of her head. My world was literally in my arms.

"How are we ever going to tell people our engagement story?" she asked against my chest.

I chuckled, hugging her even tighter. "You're right. Telling our children that I proposed after fucking you senseless might not be the most tasteful story."

She snuggled in my arms, burying her face against my neck. "Uh-huh"

"I don't care. We can just tell them I was the luckiest bastard in the world as despite all my shortcomings, you still decided to be mine." I smiled. "What do you say we practice making all those babies?"

She pulled back a little, meeting my eyes. "Already, old man?"

I growled. “With you? Always.”

And I couldn't wait to start our always and forever. With her by my side, I couldn't wait to see what the future held.

# EPILOGUE

*Dear*



*3 years later*

My wife entered my office in Philly dressed in her hot pencil dress and high heels that always made my body react, no matter the location. You would have thought that after three years together and more than two years of marriage, my desire for her would have lessened but it was the opposite, the more we explored, the more I was addicted and now that she graduated with her marketing degree I was planning to take her somewhere for a week – anywhere, I didn't care as I planned to keep her in bed the whole time.

“What do you need?” I asked as she extended a file to me. She was working as a marketing associate, I offered her the director position but she didn't want it, she wanted to learn and earn the spot. She was like that my Amber, all integrity.

“Elizabeth told me to bring the new campaign to you and she thinks because it was my idea they used, I should be the one giving it to you.”

“Does she?” I leaned back on my chair, resting my arms on the arms of my chair. “I know how brilliant you are, I'm sure

it's astonishing.”

“What is it?” I asked. I could see the excitement radiating from her.

She showed me a little blue box from the charms store I've been using for the past few years.

Her bracelet was fitting nicely and I loved how she wore our story on her wrist. “I bought myself a charm. I hope you don't mind.”

“Is that for what you let me do to you last night? I agree that was one for history but I'm not sure you can find an ass shape charm.

She rolled her eyes but blushed at the memory. “No, it has nothing to do with last night” She replied, adjusting her posture.

I smirked. I was sure she could still feel me inside her ass.

“Okay?” I tapped my forefinger against my lips. “Is that a charm for your graduation?”

She shook her head. “Nope, miss again. Plus, I'm sure you already bought one for the secret graduation party I don't know anything about.”

I shook my head. “Fine, I give up.”

She extended the box to me. “Have a look”

I opened it and frowned for a second trying to figure what it was supposed to be.

My eyes widened at the realization and I looked up briskly.

“Is that...”

“A rattle?” She nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“Does it mean?”

She nodded resting her hand on her stomach, her eyes filling with tears.

We have not really tried to make that baby, she'd stopped the pills a couple of months ago, she was about to graduate and we thought we should just give it a go.

I stood up and walked around my desk, my own eyes burning with unshed tears.

I rested my hand on top of hers and kissed her forehead.

“Our baby.” I sighed, rubbing her hand that was still on her stomach. “Timmy will be pleased with a sibling.”

Timmy was an amazing child, he was even brighter than I could have imagined. He filled me with huge fatherly pride.

Amber and I adopted Timmy officially, it seemed logical, we loved him as our son.

We’d also decided about telling him the truth when he would be old enough to understand.

“He will.” She confirmed. “He’d been asking for a little brother or sister for the past year.”

“Well,” I cocked my head to the side with a half-smile. “He also asked if his sibling could be a duck.” His love for the aviary was still not gone.

She laughed. “True.”

“Thank you, my love.” I took the hand resting on her stomach and kissed it. “Thank you for making me happy and giving me so much. You gave me love, you gave me hope, you gave me a family....a purpose.” I hugged her. “I don’t deserve you.”

She kissed my neck. “You do deserve me. You deserve it all because you are making me so happy and loved in ways I could have never dreamed of.”

I closed my eyes and let her body heat seep and I felt her stomach against mine and our child growing in her.

Lea had been right, trusting Amber, letting her in had been the best thing I’d ever done.

Because Amber and I? It was always and forever.

# EPILOGUE 2

*Amber*



*Fourteen years later*

“Amy Lea Beaumont, what are you doing?!” I hissed at my thirteen-year-old daughter, who was popping her gum. “Now is not the time.”

Amy sat down heavily. Pouting, she turned toward Dean. She had her father’s eyes and she was a real daddy’s girl. She also had him wrapped around her little finger.

“Don’t look at me. Your mother’s right. This is your brother’s graduation, so just behave. Look at Eddie.”

Amy glared at Eddie, who was sitting on the other side of me, dressed in a gray suit. I swear, our son was eight going on fifty.

Eddie smirked at her and I rolled my eyes. Our baby was a shit stirrer too.

Turning back to Dean, I met his laughing eyes over Amy’s head. My husband, with his greying temples and laughing lines, had turned into the epitome of a silver fox.

Even now, after seventeen years, I had a hard time keeping my hands off him. And I knew I just needed to give him a certain look to wake up his cock.

As they started to call the students' names, I turned toward the stage. I watched as the students got their degree one by one. Finally, it was our son's turn. Afterward, Timmy returned to the stage as Valedictorian.

His speech was just like him - wise, spirited, inspiring, and a little humorous.

He smiled at us. "I want to take a minute to thank my mother and father. Thank you for loving me and supporting me. Thank you for always being here for me. Thank you for showing me days in and days out that true love exists. Thank you for being the best parents."

Timmy had grown up to be a young man that was close to perfect. We'd told him the truth when he was fifteen and he'd taken it well. He'd said, genetics didn't matter; we were his parents.

Watching the ceremony was bittersweet. In a few weeks, Timmy would be moving to the west coast to attend the University of California in Davis. He wanted to become a veterinarian and theirs was the best program for doing so. I was happy for him, but I was also sad to lose my baby.

Dean had also been a little bit saddened by Timmy's decision. He'd hoped our child would take over Beaumont Enterprises, but he also wanted all of our children to follow their dreams.

Plus, we were pretty certain that Eddie would follow after his father. He was a businessman at heart, which was funny given he was the spitting image of his father.

At the end of the ceremony, we met Dee, Lea, and Susan by the exit.

"Aunt Dee, I'm so happy you came." Timmy leaned down to give her a hug. He was a tall young man - even taller than Dean, who towered at 6'2".

“Like I would have ever missed this.” She patted his cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

We chatted for a while before Timmy left to join his friends for the graduation party.

Taking my hand, Dream intertwined our fingers together. “So I didn’t tell you yet, but Lea and Susan are going to take Amy and Eddie for the night.”

“Are they?” I asked with a small smile.

“Uh huh.”

“And what is on your mind, Mr. Beaumont? What would you like?”

“You naked on your knees, you naked on my desk, you naked on the kitchen table.”

I looked up, licking my lips. “Basically me naked?”

“You naked, always.” He leaned down, kissing me softly. “What do you say?”

“Yes, Mr. Beaumont. Whatever you want, Mr. Beaumont.”

His eyes darkened. He turned toward Amy and Eddie. “Kids, you’re staying with your aunts tonight. Bye,” he added, rushing us toward the car.

“Dean,” I laughed. “We have time.”

“No, we don’t; we’ve got about twenty-four hours and with everything I want to do to you?” He snorted. “It will barely be enough.”

My stomach filled with butterflies like it had so many years ago. I’ve never stopped desiring him, never stopped loving and playing with him. I enjoyed yielding to his strength.

Dean Beaumont was so much more than my husband. He was my lover, my happiness.

We’ve had the best seventeen years together; I couldn’t wait for the next seventeen.



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R.G

# ABOUT R.G. ANGEL

I'm a trained lawyer, world traveler, coffee addict, cheese aficionado, avid book reviewer and blogger.

I consider myself as an 'Eclectic romantic' as I love to devour every type of romance and I want to write romance in every sub-genre I can think of.

When I'm not busy doing all my lawyerly mayhem, and because I'm living in rainy (yet beautiful) Britain, I mostly enjoy indoor activities such as reading, watching TV, playing with my crazy puppies and writing stories I hope will make you dream and will bring you as much joy as I had writing them.

If you want to know any of the latest news join my reader group [R.G.'s Angels](#) on Facebook or subscribe to my [newsletter](#)!

Keep calm and read on!

R.G. Angel

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