



The Grumpy
BILLIONAIRE
Baby Daddy

JENNI GRAY

The Grumpy Billionaire Baby Daddy

Jenni Gray

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JENNI GRAY BOOKS:

FREE BOOK

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Fiona

As we pull up in front of our new apartment, my heart skips a beat with excitement. It's a fresh start, a new chapter filled with possibilities, and I can feel the thrill coursing through my veins. We've had our fair share of challenges, but this moment is the epitome of hope, as sweet as cherry wine. I plan to relish every single moment of it.

I take a moment to fully take in the grandeur of the apartment complex in front of us. It's a stunning four-story building with pristine white edges and its windows, standing tall against the sky. The building itself is painted a rich, dark green hue, but it's not as dark as the lush green of the trees that surround the front of the apartment. I can't help but feel a swell of pride in my chest. I've never lived in such a breathtakingly beautiful apartment, and it's a feeling that fills me with a sense of awe.

The anticipation of what awaits inside is palpable. I can't wait to step through those doors and make this new space our own. It's a new beginning, a blank canvas on which we can paint our dreams.

“Fiona, are you going to come to help us with these boxes, or will you just stand there?”

“Right, sorry, Mom.”

I shuffle toward the boxes on the floor beside the car. Eleanor, my friend, is already walking into the building as I pick up two boxes.

“Hey! Wait up!” I call from behind, picking up my pace.

Our flat is on the first floor. I catch up with Eleanor in the elevator, panting.

“Why are you panting like you’re in the Olympics?”

I roll my eyes and keep my gaze on my reflection in the elevator mirror.

“Hey, I was thinking. We should totally go out and celebrate after everything is in. What do you say?”

“Eleanor, you’ll find every excuse to party.”

I nod with “Uhhh, excuse me? Life isn’t supposed to be boring.”

I roll my eyes again. Eleanor’s been my best friend since elementary school. It’s difficult to believe she was the smartest in class because she always had the most fun. I admired how she managed to balance academics and life. It wasn’t something I did well. She didn’t look like the typical nerd with glasses and braces. In fact, she was also the most popular girl in high school. She had the prettiest face and the blondest hair. Every boy wanted her. I wanted to be her. Yes, me too.

The elevator gets to the first floor in a wink, and we step out into a serene lobby. The apartment is the last on the left. Eleanor takes the lead, I follow right behind. When we reach the front door, the realization dawns on us - none of us have the key. Just as we exchange puzzled glances, a man appears with three boxes precariously balanced in one arm, and a key firmly gripped in his other hand. With a triumphant smile, he unlocks the door to our new abode, and my eyes widen in awe as I step inside. The apartment is a blank canvas, a place where we can create new memories and make it our own. The sunlight streams through the windows, casting

glow on the walls. The rooms are spacious and inviting, with the promise of countless adventures to come.

The opulent hardwood flooring gleams under my feet, and the walls are a muted yet sophisticated shade of brown. As I survey the expansive living room, a profound sense of relief washes over me. Our previous abode is in sharp comparison to this magnificent space, with its lackluster flooring and dingy walls. The neighborhood we used to reside in was a constant source of worry, and my father went to great lengths to secure our escape from its confines. “There are still many boxes downstairs. Move! Move!” Dad says, commanding like he’s a platoon commander.

“Ugh, I said I wanted to help, not die,” Eleanor whispers, and I let out a nervous snicker.

As we make our way back downstairs, Eleanor begins again.

“I hear there’s a fire club around. It’s about ten minutes from here. You should check it out. C’mon!”

She winks at me repeatedly, in a hilarious manner, as she always does. Every time she does, it’s so convincing me to make a bad decision.

“Eleanor, after lifting this many boxes back and forth, the last thing I want to do is go to a wide, wild night. I need to rest, and so do you.”

“Okay, how about we leave the club early?”

I grimace, shaking my head.

“Say yes. C’mon. C’mon.”

She does the wink again, and I giggle.

“I can’t believe I’m saying yes to this, but fine. Let’s do it.”

She pumps her fists in the air, and the boxes in her arms nearly spill.

Fortunately, she catches them, looking around to make sure dad didn't see.

a warm

mise of



After a long day of box lifting and organizing, Eleanor and I walk to the living at night.

We get there in no time. “Ruthless. That’s it! That’s the club’s name,” I says in a slightly raised tone.

I worry, “Let’s go!”

She grabs my hand, rushing in with gusto.

Stepping into this new realm feels like traversing into uncharted territory I never experienced anything quite like it. The last time I was in such a loud extravagant setting was during Prom, but even that memory is tainted by the disaster that followed. I ended up getting drunk and embarrassingly vomiting all over the dance floor.

As I take in the scene around me, the room is dimly lit, adorned with pulsating purple and red lights that create an otherworldly atmosphere. When booming music reverberates through my entire being, as if it could reach the dead. The air is heavy with the acrid scent of alcohol, threatening to overwhelm my senses.

People on the dance floor move with frenetic energy under the flashing disco lights, seemingly high on adrenaline. Some daring individuals have already discarded their shirts, exuding an air of wild abandon. My head spins a beat as I realize that Eleanor, my companion, has vanished into the crowd of revelers, leaving me alone in this pulsating, sensory overload.

What the actual hell?

I walk to the bartender behind the counter.

“A glass of margarita, please.”

I plop down on the bar stool, holding my forehead in my hands. It doesn't surprise me anymore. She didn't even wait for a second before clubbing me. I run my eyes around the bar, searching for a sign of her. Nothing.

"Here, miss."

The bartender passes the glass toward me. His hair is shaved, and his hands are warm.

"First time?"

I nod and take a sip.

"Mmm. It's good."

"Thanks. It's on the house. What are you celebrating?"

"A new beginning," I say without thinking.

"Congrats."

I smile and look for any sign of Eleanor, or at least her blue top. Finally, my eyes catch something blue at the other end of the room. It's Eleanor, already grinding on the dance floor with a dark hottie. I shake my head and take a sip, tapping my feet to LMFAO's *Shots* blasting in the room.

She never found it difficult to clinch any man she wanted. In fact, she did it by rejecting. Even though she was the popular girl, and had all the boys drooling, she never seemed to appreciate the obsession. She didn't drop a dime and had a good eye for men. The pizzazz around her didn't distract her. She often found good use of them though, when she was bored, like to

A man at the opposite end of the counter fixes his gaze on me, a bottle of whiskey clutched in his hand. Our eyes meet, and he offers a wave of his hand, turning away. I take a sip from my second shot, swirling the liquid in the glass. Tonight was supposed to be about cutting loose, but here I am

Eleanor without any company. The one person who was meant to be by my side before already vanished into the crowd.

I signal for another shot, downing it quickly and placing the glass back on the table with care to avoid shattering it. A few nearby patrons whistle and are drawing my attention. I shrug nonchalantly, but the whistles grow louder and someone catcalls. I turn to see the commotion, only to realize that the attention is not directed towards me.

A man on a raised platform is showcasing his impressive dance moves, drawing cheers from the crowd. I let out a belch, feeling a wave of nausea wash over me. Getting drunk tonight would not be ideal, as the likelihood of a dreary hangover looms in my mind. I need to be cautious with my alcohol intake.

"Mind if I join you?" I turn to find a tall guy behind me. He's handsome, but he's not my type. With his glasses and his corporate shirt, he looks more like she's a nerd. Who wears a shirt to a bar? What's next, a three-piece? Against my better judgment, I flash him a smile. Any company is better than no company at all tonight.

"It's a crime to be out here alone, you know?"

He sits in the empty chair beside me even though I didn't invite him to sit there. His shy smile reminds me of the high school nerd everyone made fun of. I turn and act her to the bartender.

"I'll have what she's having."

His face curves into a smile and it dawns on me that this is a bad idea. Before I can say anything, the man isn't my type; it becomes even more obvious when he tries to look at me. I look in my with me. His gaze glides over me and I shudder. His presence is a little too obnoxious.

"Listen... I think this was a mist—"

side has "Do you want to maybe go somewhere quiet?"

I blink. This can't be happening. I turn over, searching for Eleanor. She's on the other side of the room with a guy a moment ago. Where the hell is she? I glance around and finally find her talking with the dark guy on the dance floor. Now I have to get her attention from across the room? Actual telepathy would come in handy right now. I frown, fixing my eyes on her as if boring holes into her head. To my surprise, she turns and our eyes meet. I mouth the words "I have special skills," and turn back to face Mr. Nerd.

concern "Uhm...actually, you see, the thing is —"

booming "Hey, bestie!" Eleanor cuts in, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It's not even midnight yet, and I'm already having a terrible night.

She turns to the Nerd guy, "I'm sorry, she's taken." She leans on the counter and casually picks up my drink, taking a sip. She has a mischievous grin. I watch as the nerd guy, who had been vying for my attention earlier, looks visibly hurt. He turns from Eleanor with a look of disappointment etched on his face, before standing up and walking away without uttering another word.

"You're supposed to be having fun, not hanging out with boring people." His voice is sharp. "Don't even start. You freaking left me!"

He turns back to me. "Hey, we came to have fun. I went off to have fun."

"Without me?"

She makes a fake sad face.

She says, "Get out of here."

She giggles.

A deep, clear voice echoes behind me, jolting me from my reverie. "M

I tilt my head to glance at the new person. Just a glimpse steals the breath from my lungs. Eleanor makes a ridiculous face and winks at me.

zooming off. My gaze slides over him. He's wearing a brown V-neck
he was with a shirt underneath. It's not his outfit that leaves me breathless.

around looks. This man is quite literally Adonis.

how do "Yes, you may." My voice is breathy, husky.

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zooming off. My gaze slides over him. He's wearing a brown V-neck sweater with a shirt underneath. It's not his outfit that leaves me breathless. It's his looks. This man is quite literally Adonis.

"Yes, you may." My voice is breathy, husky.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Jason

I've had the shittiest day, and it's only the start of the year. Davidson, my soon-to-be father-in-law, is a handful, but if Cons get to the next level, we need him. We've single-handedly broken through American and Australian markets, but the Asian and European markets have been the most daunting. To break through, we need Fedam, Davidson's financial giant. Getting a partnership with him hasn't been easy, but when he hinted at being interested in marrying Eva, his attitude has softened my partnership proposal.

My head hurts as my mind reels out every single event that played out from the intense meeting with Mr. Davidson to the irritating conversation with mom. I suck my teeth and look out the window. The traffic light is red, and I slow down. Mom wants a grandchild and needs me to get married as soon as possible.

"Someone needs to inherit all that money, and it won't be me."

Her words echo over and over in my head, and I groan. Of course, I need to get married to Eva, Davidson's daughter. I can't say it makes me enthusiastic. In fact, the thought sends chills down my spine. Why

world do I need to be tied down with a demanding wife and a noisy kid? The only reason I'm considering marriage with Eva is because of the part with Davidson. When Dad was alive, he often said when it came to boys, only the insane ones ever made headway.

My jaw tightens as the green light comes on, and I zoom off. Finally, I approach **Ruthless**. I've come to this bar at the end of each day this way to unwind, and today is no different. As I walk into the room, my pulse quickens from the thrill in the air. A smile tugs at my lips. I can forget about the pressure for a few hours.

I walk toward the counter.

Andrew "The usual."

The bartender nods and tosses a bottle of whiskey my way.

"Hectic day?"

"You have no idea."

I perch on a stool at the edge of the counter, captivated by the sight of Davidson since he's on the dance floor, seemingly possessed by the music. He's twirling, toward himself in the air, and even executing a daring backflip. I can't help

be so impressed by his wild moves, and I let out a boisterous laugh, joining in the cheers of the crowd. He must be either insanely talented or incredibly lucky.

Taking a gulp of my whiskey, I scan the room, observing the small groups of people engaged in conversation or enjoying their drinks together. But my attention is drawn to a slender lady who approaches the counter.

She orders a drink and settles on the stool at the other end, crossing her legs and revealing a tantalizing glimpse of smooth skin through a long slit in her dress. *Oh, wow!*

Intrigued, I can't help but keep my eyes on her, taking in her presence. Her poise and grace are captivating, and I find myself drawn

id? The dim lighting casts a seductive glow on her figure, making her
nership more enticing. She takes a sip from her drink and glances around li
usiness, searching for something or someone. Our eyes meet, and I hold h
before waving and looking away. My number one rule is to never
nally, I thirsty. Let's give it some time. She looks away and asks for a secur
week to Why is she here alone?

se rises Her short white gown accentuates her curves in the most flattering w
out the her long hair falls over her shoulders. A tall guy in glasses walks up
and even though I can't hear their conversation because of the loud mu
obvious she finds him obnoxious. I watch with amusement as the
unfolds before my eyes. The tall guy seated beside her was suddenly r
by a blonde lady, presumably her friend. The guy seems to have v
into thin air, leaving the two women alone. I can't help but hold back a
at the turn of events. It's clear that she has a discerning taste when it co
f a man her company.

tossing I take another sip of my whiskey, my curiosity piqued by the un
but bedrama. Finally, I lift myself from my stool and walk over to her whil
g in the facing the other way. As the owner of Ruthless, I've never spok
high. woman here since its opening four years ago. It's my principle to neve
oups of with or flirt with customers. I've always only come here to clear my he
ut then, find women, at least not until today.

er. She "May I?"

er legs, She turns, and I look into the most gorgeous eyes I've ever seen. Sh
r attire. over me, assessing me. As if satisfied, she replies in a split second, "Y
may."

alluring I'm not surprised. No woman has ever rejected me, and why would the
i to her. I offer her a warm smile, feeling a surge of confidence as I take the

all the stool beside her, leaning in slightly. The scent of lavender wafts toward her as she's filling my nostrils and making my head feel a little dizzy. It's an intoxicating aroma that adds to the allure of the moment.

appear *She smells so good.*

and shot. "Tonight just got a thousand times better. What's a goddess like you doing out here alone?"

say, and I keep my gaze on her. Although the room is dimly lit, I know her cheeks are flushed. I always have that effect.

basic, it's "I'm here with my best friend," she says, pointing to the blonde lady who just came out with a dark man.

replaced It's easy to read her personality; she's the reserved friend who's been finished and abandoned even though she doesn't want to. Her more fun-loving friend abandoned her to have fun. I tell her this and then offer to dance with her. "If she didn't want to be here in the first place, maybe I could make it better for both of us."

folding "I'll have you know I can't dance to save my life."

le she's "Well, it's a good thing you don't need to do much. Let your body talk."

er sleep I take the lead and ease her into it as *Single Ladies* blasts from the speaker. In a short time, Little Miss can't-dance-to-save-her-life is working hard on me without caution.

Electricity runs through my body, and I pull her in from behind, and she looks along with her waist glued to my groin. I shut my eyes, taking in everything from the smell of alcohol mixed with sweat to the screams of delight and occasional claps to the rhythm. I bury my head in her neck, taking in the lavender scent, my eyes still shut. My pulse quickens.

empty "That's it," I whisper into her ears, suppressing the overwhelming

rds me, nibble her neck.

icating “Damn girl, you do know how to work that body.”

Heat rises from my skin. I pause to catch my breath before I lose my st

“I’m going to get a drink. Can I get you something too?”

u doing “Yes, please.”

I dash off. The goal isn’t to lose control tonight. If I plan to let a
eeks are happen, it has to be completely within my control. The bartender gr
walk toward him.

making “She’s hot, man.”

I look over at her on the dance floor giggling with her friend.

orced to “Yeah. A bottle of mojito and another bottle of whiskey, please.”

nd has “Dude, you’re the luckiest guy tonight,” the bartender says, pass
ier. bottles to me.

: a little I wink and walk back to the dance floor. Her best friend zooms off w

sees me coming. I can already guess what they talked about, or shoul

who they talked about. Her face is flushed as I hand over the bottle to l

do the “I wasn’t sure what you wanted, but I brought a mojito.”

“Sweet. Thanks.”

reakers. I run my eyes over her, taking in every curve, and a sudden thirst lo
er bodythroat. I swallow, struggling to keep my breath steady.

“Do you want to get out of here?”

moving Her eyes darken just before she closes the space between us, but sl
ything, nothing.

ght and Instead, she grabs my hands and dashes out of the bar. Outside, it’s qu
; in her the air’s fresh again. I look around. There’s a small motel three block

here. Taking her hand in mine, we walk down the street, the heat risin
urge to bones. Her breathing is hard. We walk past a dark spot, and I pull her

slam my lips onto her. She welcomes them like a starving creature. It is slow but urgent, and her breathing is shaky.

enses. “Get a room!” Someone yells as they walk past, startling us.

“Shit.”

She giggles and takes my hand again. Finally, we arrive at the small room and book a room. In less than ten minutes, we’re in a room, shutting the door behind us as I land pulling at our clothes. Apart from the slightly humid smell of the room, I notice little else. I focus on the tall hottie in a short white gown and silky brown hair. I claim her lips again and pull her into myself, closing the gap between us. She shoves her tongue into my mouth, and her lips envelop me. It’s new, fresh, like nothing I’ve ever tasted. I grab her hand and a soft moan escapes her lips, driving me on edge. Without thinking, I push her onto the bed and mount on it, ignoring the creaking of the bed when she frames me. She grabs my pants and starts to undo my belt as I plant kisses on her neck, inhaling deeply. Her scent sends me to a rainbow garden filled with lavender flowers, and I close my eyes, savoring the moment. Next, she starts to get my sweater and shirt off.

“Wait.”

I can’t recognize my own voice. It’s husky and breathless.

She looks up at me. I pull her gown over her head and throw it aside, revealing her in her perfection. Her white undies are a matching pair, and as I take her off, she digs her nails into the back of my neck. Her breasts are firm and well-formed, and as I trail her curves with my eyes down to her feet, goosebumps form on my skin. She tugs at my sweater, and I take it off along with my shirt. But when she moves to take off my undershirt, I stop her by taking both of her hands, I hold them down on the bed. Slowly, I plant kisses on her neck and then on her breasts. I move to her belly button and, finally,

The kiss the moistness between her legs. She lets out a soft scream, and I let her go. She pushes me onto the bed and takes my boxers off. I swallow her as she makes her way between my legs. Taking my length into her mouth, she works with precision and speed. I close my eyes as I approach ecstasy. Just before I get there, I stop her and push her back to the bed. I find her with my hand on the door between her legs and thrust into her, suppressing a grunt. She gasps and she pushes her groin up to meet me.

“Fuck me,” she whispers, and I lose all of my senses. One second she is thrusting, and the next, she’s screaming.

“Almost there.”

“Me too. Me too.”

I grunt, putting all of my energy into my final thrust. Her legs tighten around me as she screams in final pleasure, shaking all over. I collapse in satisfaction on her top of her, and the world fades into blackness.

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“Almost there.”

“Me too. Me too.”

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Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Fiona

The drive to the clinic is like a long walk to freedom – in this long drive to freedom. The struggle to focus on the road leaves me exasperated, and I want to throw up. It wasn't the easiest morning. I want to and, for a second, forgot where I was. Placing my hands over my forehead did nothing to ease the throbbing in my head. It felt like I'd been hit by a moving truck. Every part ached, especially my head, and my mouth tasted like I swallowed some raw eggs. Mom offered to drive me to the clinic, but I refused. I regret it now as I struggle to keep my eyes open. There's a persistent siren-like sound in my ears, like something is ringing, and an overwhelming urge to spit is too much for me to handle.

I'm burning up. Again.

It doesn't help that everything is so loud, and it's only like 11 am. I let out a soft groan and pull over on the side of the road to catch my breath. Everything else is moving like my world isn't swirling every second. I shut my eyes and rest on the car seat. A few minutes later and the clouds in my head clear, I start the car. The funny taste in my mouth is back. I grimace, hold my belly in my hands.

Finally, I pull up into the parking lot and rest my head on the steering wheel, taking in deep breaths. This has never happened before. My chin trembles as I tighten my hold on the steering wheel. What's going on? After a few more deep breaths, I'm ready to walk in. I take my time, walking unhurriedly until I reach the reception. The plump woman behind the counter is snoring with her mouth slightly open. I stand there, watching her. Do I wake her up? I bite my lip and look around. There aren't many people here except an older man watching TV and a young woman seated beside him, holding his hands. The strong smell of antiseptic sends a wave of nausea through my stomach, and I rush to the bowl beside the entrance door. Without warning, everything I had for dinner last night rushes out in violent torrents, and my right shoulder vibrates.

I wake up "Are you okay?" A woman in scrubs rushes to me and pats my back.

I breathe "I f...I feel really sick."

She nods "A fast-I wipe my runny nose and take in another deep breath.

She smiles "Aww. Just have a seat. I'll get you a bottle of water."

I nod and thank her, looking around for the most comfortable place to sit. Finally, I take my place in the front seat and rest my head on my knees, using her arms as support. The room hasn't stopped swirling, and even though I don't think there's anything left in my system, there's still the strong urge to throw up. The kind nurse returns with a bottle of water.

She asks "What's your name?"

I reply "Fiona. Fiona McFall."

She says "You'll see the doctor soon. Hang in there."

She goes off. I She hands the bottle over to me and goes to speak with the nurse at the desk before disappearing. I gulp the whole thing at a go, shutting my

...wheel, relish the coolness washing over me. A quiet belch escapes my throat as my lips press together.

The seat beside me remains conspicuously unoccupied, yet an advertisement for Imagazine beckons with its captivating cover page - a stunning portrait of a strapping young man. My fingers eagerly grasp the publication, and as I hold it to my line of sight, a sense of familiarity washes over me as I look for the striking individual on its cover. With an insatiable curiosity, I begin reading the written text accompanying the photo:

...ugh my **Inside the Greene Empire.**

Warning, Greene? As in Jason Greene, the business mogul? My hands fly out of my mouth as pictures of the night from three weeks ago flood my senses.

Whoa.

I can't believe this.

The Adonis guy is Jason Greene.

I slept with Jason Greene! What?

My heart pounds as I look over his photo again. Am I dreaming? But it's real. It's very real. Same fierce eyes. Same hair. It was black, after all, with eyes that are dark brown, and he's wearing a scowl. The black shirt with the rough cross patterns hugs his frame as he crosses his arms.

I urge to "Fiona McCall?"

I jerk and look up. It's the front desk nurse. She smiles at me.

"The doctor will see you now."

I stand up and walk up to her. She points to the hallway.

"Down the hallway, second office on the left."

The checkered floor is squeaky clean and makes a squeaky sound as my eyes glide over it. I look up at the doors in the hallway until I come to the one on the left.

t, and I knock.

“Come in,” the voice calls from the other side. I push the door and wait. An alluring thin man in glasses sits behind a small brown table. The trait of a nameplate on his table reads, “Dr. Jimmy Fall.” Beside the plate is a small frame of him and a kid in glasses wearing a baseball hat.

I gaze at a small bookshelf hangs on the left side of the office, with five large books perusing sitting on it.

“Hello, miss. Please have a seat.”

I sit, placing both hands in between my legs.

“What's your name?”

“Fiona McCall.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Not good. For a couple of days, I've experienced splitting headaches, nausea. My appetite is a little weird; I haven't eaten any real food in days.”

no, it's *Not to mention I just found out the man I slept with three weeks ago is all. His name is Greene.*

h white I don't add that part but the words form a painful lump in my throat. He studies me in silence and proceeds to scribble in a note.

“Have you checked if your breasts are tender?”

“Uhh...I don't know. I haven't paid attention to that.”

“Have you seen your period this month?”

I look up, twitching my lips. I haven't exactly been one to monitor things, but this is the last week of the month. It should come this week.

my sole “It usually appears toward the end of the month. It's a couple of days a month. He scribbles again.

“Have you been experiencing fatigue?”

Judging from how difficult it was to move from my bed this morning in. A would be a yes. I nod.

isparent“There are a couple of suspicions, but we can't be entirely sure until picturetests. We'll have to get a sample of your blood. Do you understand?”

I nod again.

books“Great. Just walk over to the lab. I'll let them know I'm sending you on with this. The lab is at the end of the hallway.”

He scribbles a note and hands it over to me. As I walk out, I start squinting. Nothing on the note makes any sense.

Do doctors speak another language?

I roll more eyes and walk down the hallway. On the last door, the sign says “Diagnostic Laboratory.”

ies andI push the door open.

in two“Hello. Doctor Jimmy sent me for a blood test.”

s Jason



Loud horns scream as the maddening gridlock gets worse. I love even about LA, but the traffic situation is a mess. I slap my steering wheel and suck my teeth. I look at my wristwatch—4 pm. Dr. Jimmy said to come in about four hours.

Just great.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about the magazine, about that, but cover, about Jason. Now that I think about it, he looked like a million dollars that night. He even smelled that way. But that's not what I saw.

way.” Images of the lust burning in his eyes as his hands moved over my body and my senses. It was one of the most passionate nights of my life.

ing, that everything happened like it was an explosion from fantasies about ex-
the depths of one another in the dark. When he kissed me the first time
we run was a mix of tenderness and brashness. Three weeks later and the memories
still make me tingle between my legs.

I still can't believe it was Jason Greene. Would I have treated him differently
if I knew it was him? I was too far deep in a lust haze to know.

The vibration from my phone adds to my growing irritation, and I frantically
rummage through my bag in search of it. I find it on the second ring
mom.

"Hey, Fifi. Are you back at the clinic yet? Remember, he said four hours
in reads "Traffic is crazy, Mom. But I'm close."

"Have you eaten something yet?"

"Uhh... Yeah. Chicken salad."

"Good. Call me once you get the results, okay?"

"Yes, Mom."

The call drops and the road clears a little, enough for me to swerve into
everything clinic street. My heart pounds as I approach the clinic again. Ever
levels and thought crosses my mind. Maybe it's just an infection. Food poi
ne back perhaps. It shouldn't be serious. I pull over into the parking lot and m
way to the reception. The same woman is at the counter.

"Hi. Appointment with Dr. Jimmy now."

ie front "Right. Just a sec."

1 bucks She picks up the telecom.

"Name again, please?"

ody fill "Fiona McCall."

fe, and "Fiona McFall is back. Yes. Okay."

She drops the receiver and gestures for me to go to Dr. Jimmy's office

ploring to his door and knock softly.

There, there. "Come on in."

Memories His office is a lot hotter as I step in.

Did the AC break or something?

Indifferently "Hi again, Fiona. How do you feel now?"

"A little better, thank you."

When as I "Please have a seat." He gestures, and I sit.

ing. It's He lowers his head to stare at his computer screen before looking back

"According to the blood test, you're about two weeks pregnant."

urs." The air in the room stills, and a sudden coldness hits my core. He's saying something but his voice fades to the background and all that runs through my head is that one single statement:

You're two weeks pregnant.

My stomach ties in a knot. I've never in my wildest imagination believed something like this could happen to me. I'm usually a decent girl. I play things safe. But that night...

My body revolts in a violent quiver as the information settles. Is this a nightmare? How could I have gotten pregnant from a one-night stand? I shiver and I can't tell if it's from the sickness or the shock.

"Fiona?"

My tongue adheres to the roof of my parched mouth, and my mind becomes a jumbled mess of confusion and fear. With great effort, I bite down on my tongue to stave off the tears that threaten to spill over, unwilling to succumb to the overwhelming sense of despair that threatens to consume me.

"Fiona?"

"Uhhh... Yes?"

I look up at the doctor. He offers a sympathetic smile.

“The next step is figuring out your due date. From the tests, your iron are pretty impressive. You’ll also have to...”

His voice fades off again. The vivid image from just three weeks ago is etched in my mind, but this time, it elicits a bitter taste. Jason Greer, father of this child - is now a looming presence in my mind, but the prospect of locating him feels insurmountable. And even if I do manage to track him down, what then? What is the next course of action? The weight of it all presses down on me. The uncertainty is suffocating, and I struggle to catch my breath.

“Oh, God.” My head swims. “Oh, my God.”

The tears escape my eyes, and I sniff.

“Fiona?”

I stare into his face.

“Do you have any questions or concerns?”

I plaster a weak smile on my face and stand to my feet.

“Not at all. Thanks, Doc.”

As I walk out of the hospital, the urge to throw up overwhelms me. I’ve never been in a situation like this. What am I going to do? The thought of my parents finding out fills me with dread - they’ve always taken pride in my unblemished record of good behavior, often boasting to anyone who would listen about their model daughter who never gave them any trouble. I’ve come through a rebellious teenage phase, and the prospect of disappointing them comes crashing through my lips.

Now I’ve gotten into more than enough trouble.

My phone rings as I get into my car. It’s Mom. My heart sinks.

“Hello, Mom.”

“So, what did the doctor say?”

I swallow. *Oh no!*

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Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Jason

“**B**ruh! Shoot like a fucking male.”

I snicker at him, celebrating my fifth victory. I love my brother, Richard, but his zero game pisses me off. How can you not have some game?

I chug down an entire bottle of water in one go, quenching my parched throat before collapsing into the cushioned patio chair on the balcony. The morning breeze washes over me, carrying with it a sense of tranquil calm. As the gentle swaying of the trees provides a serene backdrop, I take a deep breath of the crisp air and allow myself to be transported to a relaxing setting, at least in my imagination.

“Snooker isn't for kids, dude. Learn to pot a ball. You make it so boring.”

“Yeah, right. Meet me on the basketball court.”

Richard rolls his eyes and strolls into my living room. I might be a decent snooker player, but Richard is the Lord of basketball. When it comes to a basketball game, I'll probably never defeat him, even though I'm much taller than he is.

“By the way, can I borrow your Audi? I've got a date tonight.”

“Ohhhh, who's the chic?”

Richard shrugs.

“A pretty girl I met at Target last week.”

Not bad. Unlike me, Richie has grown into a fine young gentleman. At twenty-five, I wasn't going on dates. I was either sleeping over at my mom's or in a new woman's bed. Before agreeing to settle with Eva, I'd had to convince mom that I could just get a woman pregnant without having to marry her. I'll never forget the flash in her eyes as she banished the idea that a child of hers would bring a kid into the world without a stable nuclear family. She didn't even approve of my plans for marriage with Eva. “You should marry someone you're in love with,” she always said.

“Okay. But you pay if there's a single scratch. Also, LA folks aren't used to not having drivers, especially women. That's a driving lesson. You should write it down.”

Richard snorts.

“You know I've been driving for years, right?”

“Not an Audi.”

I take a deep breath. I gifted him a BMW on his last birthday. After riding an Avalon for almost a decade, it was glaringly obvious he needed something new. The first time he drove around in his new car, he couldn't wipe the grin off his face. When David was born, I promised they would lack nothing, and everything I've done has been to ensure this.

A shrill sound startles me. It's my phone—Eva.

“Nope. Not today.”

I walk into my suite, clenching my jaw, and throw the phone on my bed. Fortunately, it doesn't fall; the Greene sofa is big enough to catch it. I have to get a bath if I'm ever going to make it to Dam's art display.

afternoon. The goal is to beat LA traffic. The shrill sound comes
Why's she calling me?

I walk into the bathroom to shower and, afterward, dress up.

man. At

my office



tried to "Hi, Mom." I give her a peck and sit at the dining table. I don't have to
be with everyone else all the time because I'm always at the office. This
isn't my favorite – when I take a well-deserved leave to spend time
with my family.

My mother should "Hmm. Smells good in here. What are you making?"

"Just pancakes and sausage."

My dog Tex dashes toward me, barking but mostly squealing the way he does
when he's not seen me for long.

"Hey, boy! It's good to see you too."

He lays on his back with his limbs up, and I rub his tummy, grinning.

"Who's a good boy? That's right. It's Tex. Tex is a good boy."

Mom places a plate of pancakes and sausage before me, and Richard
pays for five in.

My father drove "Hey, Tex!"

My mother had died Tex rushes over to him and skips.

My mother has "Aww, you want a hug, don't you?"

He squats, and Tex jumps on him, nearly pushing him to the ground.

"What are you doing today, Jason?" Mom asks.

"Uhhh...I'll be heading to Glendale for a friend's Art exhibition."

My mother is living "Oh, in that case, I'll need you to help me pick up some cat food.
There's a new pet shop called Pet Star on Rodeo Drive. Tracy and I
will lay this

again, eating like they were starved in a previous life. They say the new shop is a pet paradise.”

“Guess I should also do the same for Tex. Do you have the address? I get going soon so I can make it in time for Dam’s exhibition.”

“I’ll send it. Will you be seeing Davidson anytime soon?”

Breakfast I love my mom, but boundaries are a difficult thing for her to understand. She has reiterated countless times that work-related discussions are off-limits whenever I’m on leave, regardless of how brief they may be. The last thing I want is to be burdened with stress while trying to recuperate. I lift my fork from my plate, giving her a sharp glare in response to her slip-up. She chokes on her throat and turns away, presumably to tend to the cooker.

As when “I forgot. Sorry.”

I exhale and eat the rest of my food in silence. When I’m done, I wipe my mouth and stand.

“I’m leaving. Anything else you want me to get?”

“Yes! Doritos.”

I stroll “Not you, idiot,” I say to Richard, grinning.

“Ouch.”

I shake my head and walk to the parking lot. It looks like it might rain, but the sunny skies are replaced with dark gentle whispers from the wind blowing the trees and from the chilliness escaping the pool in the back. I get into the car and drive off.

It’s raining when I hit the road, and pedestrians run helter-skelter, frantically searching for shelter, and only a handful of people are equipped with umbrellas. I hear

voices are “In 500m, turn right,” Google Maps says.

I look up and squint. It’s difficult to see where exactly I’m supposed

is likewith the downpour, but I turn into a small street.

“Keep going on Rodeo Drive for 1km. Your destination will be on your left.”
The rain is starting to ease off as I approach the store. I’ve been on this street a thousand times. I never saw a pet store once. My brows furrow as I keep my eyes on the lookout for a pet shop called Pet Star. Nothing.

My phone rings; it’s Eva. Again. Maybe I should pick it up.

“Why have you been calling me all morning?”

“Hey, don’t you miss me too?”

My fists tightened around the steering wheel.

“Am I supposed to?”

“Hey, I was just asking. Chill out.”

I turn my head in search of the pet shop, frowning.

“Look, Eva. I’m a little busy right now. I’ll call you back later.”

“You can’t—”

I end the call before she says anything and spot a pet poster after a sale sign.
That has to be it.

When I get to the shop, I sigh and rest my head on the car seat. This street is not that easy to find. I step out and survey the surroundings. It’s probably the largest pet shops I’ve ever seen — not that I’ve been to so many, and a gentle windMy PA handles most of the petty errands, like getting dog food from the backyard, I approach the pet shop, I notice that the front of the store is covered in glass, which also doubles as a showcase. Beautiful portraits of cats and dogs are artistically splattered across the left side of the glass, while the right side displays a wide array of pet food. The organization is impeccable, and I take a moment to appreciate it before stepping inside.

Inside, it looks like a supermarket with various items on display, including grooming items. A black litter box catches my eye. Tex has outgrown

litter box. He'll need a bigger one. I admire a couple of other litter
r left." When I get to the grooming aisle, the beautiful packets intrig
s road aEverything is here.

I try to*How did Mom know about this place, and I didn't?*

"Welcome!"

A petite woman walks up to me.

"What can I do for you? "

"Uhhh...cat food. I'd also like some dog food."

"You have a dog and a cat? You must be a sucker for animals."

"Just a dog. The cat food is for my mom's cats."

She walks over to the cat food aisle, and I follow behind her. If it wer
her face, I'd say she has the stature of a teenager. Her hair has also Gr
although some parts can't decide if they want to stay brown or go Gree

"This place is amazing, by the way."

on. She beams, picks up a refill pack, and hands it to me.

"Thanks. Oh, by the way, here's a little something for them."

wasn'tShe hands me a pack of pom pom toys and walks to the dog food aisle
r one of"Do you have any Dalmatians I can take a look at?"

nyway."Oh yes!" She says and hands me a refill pack of dog food. I look up
l. As Ithat she's already walking ahead. I increase my pace to meet up. We
n glass,different room. The top reads, "**Happiness is a warm puppy.**"

ogs areI smile and walk in, taking in all the different breeds, shapes, siz
lays anc colors. Is this what a dog heaven looks like? A small chihuahua sque
nent tomakes to stand in its cage, and I go toward it. On a different aisle, a

woman stoops beside a golden retriever. She whispers to the dog, and
cludingmake out what she says. From behind, the view is wonderful, and th
his lastfrom her full brown hair reflects the light in the room.

boxes. *I have to see her face.*

me. Like a pull from a magnet, I walk toward her.

“Hello there.”

She turns to stand, and her eyes widen. She steps back, pointing at me.

“What?”

Has she never seen a handsome man before?

“Adonis guy!”

Her cheeks flush, and she almost runs into a pet cage behind her.

“Hey, careful. What’s the problem?”

Her glare makes me pause, and I can't help but wonder where I've seen her before. I try to keep my gaze steady on her, but I can feel my fingers fidgeting as I rub the back of my neck.

me. “Do I know you?”

“Ruthless!” She blurts.

In a millisecond, a flood of pictures from almost a month ago overflows my senses. Suddenly, it all clicks into place - she's the girl from Ruthless.

“You!” I blurt out.

“What are you doing here?”

to find “This is my parents’ shop.”

get to a “Wait, what?”

Oh shit. This is about to become quite a day.

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als and

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“What are you doing here?”

“This is my parents’ shop.”

“Wait, what?”

Oh shit. This is about to become quite a day.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Fiona

They say that the universe works in mysterious ways, and as I stand in front of Jason Greene, the man who has turned my world upside down, I finally understand what those words mean.

Who would've thought that in a city as big as LA, I'd run into the one person I so terribly needed to talk to? The odds are crazy, and yet here we are. Jason has a t-shirt on, with carton brown pants and white Converse sneakers, the same sneakers from that night, or maybe it's a different pair, but memories come flooding in, and I swallow. His brown hair has a sheen, and the sight of the waves makes me want to run my hands through his strands.

A stray thought nearly throws me off my feet.

I'm carrying Jason Greene's baby.

Mom walks in. She's been beaming all day.

"I see you've met Jason. He's a new customer. "

Today just keeps getting more interesting. Out of all the pet shops in town, he just so happens to have randomly found this one.

I look over at him. He's quite visibly speechless, and scratches his

taking another step back. Mom pauses, looking from Jason to me.

“You guys know each other?”

“No,” I say.

“Yes,” Jason says at the same time.

I suppress the urge to facepalm my forehead. Did this dude come to my life?

“Where did you guys meet?”

“Uhh...she came by my bar, Ruthless, with a friend of hers.”

“That's great.”

That's *not* great. Mom hates bars because "people get drunk and there's no respect for personal boundaries. It's unbecoming of a well-behaved person." She said those words to my cousin, Stacey, who came over to spend last summer with us. I don't think Stacey anticipated how much friction she'd get for suggesting a night out at a bar.

Mom walks out of the room, and my feet stay glued to the floor. She'll bring it up later. Jason has not stopped staring at me. Now's the time to tell him about this pregnancy thing. It's definitely going to throw him off balance, but we need to come up with a solution fast. The universe didn't bring me here for me to cower and hide it from him. I'll be damned if I go through this alone. I peer into his face; he's still watching me.

“Are you in haste? We have to talk. It's urgent.”

He shifts his weight to his other leg and crosses his arms, revealing sculpted biceps that threaten to rip his t-shirt.

“I'm waiting.”

He says, “What? No, not here. It's highly confidential.”

He presses his finger to his lips, his gaze still on me.

He says, “So...you're asking me out on a date then?”

I grimace.

“Are you usually an airhead? You have to check your items out and v
me outside. I'll pretend to go get some food and meet you out there.”

He opens his mouth to say something but shuts it again and turns to lea
uin my “I'll go home if I don't see you in five minutes.”

When he leaves, I pace the room, chewing my nails. The real task is b
the news to him and finding a way to come up with a solution togethe
if he rejects the baby? A soft bark fills the room from one of the cage
ignore it. It's most likely from Moon, but my mind is too hazy
s lots of attention. The room swirls, and I lower myself to the ground. It's
se exact never. I rub my palm over my chest in a bid to manage nausea. What h
ith us. Inow? Carrying the secret has been a heavy burden, and at this poin
r even want someone else to know.

My heart slams in my chest as I contemplate how Jason will take the
ll likely know next to nothing about him except that he's wealthy and I'm carry
e to tell child. Is he kind and understanding, or is he selfish and uncaring
his feet, daunting unknown that fills me with anxiety.
ng him *I'll go home if I don't see you in five minutes.*

through I jump to my feet and walk out of the pet shelter, heading to the front c

"I'm going to get a burger, Mom. Do you want anything?"

Mom looks up from her book record, her glasses falling farther fr
culpted eyes. Two crow's feet decorate her forehead and wrinkles form when
break in a smile.

"You could just place an ord —"

"No! I... I think I need a walk too. It might do me some good."

I turn and hurry off before she gets a chance to say something else
been asking if I've been getting better, and even though I've told her I

over and over, I don't think she believes me. I've been secretly taking wait for boosters to hide my weakness.

The black tundra outside looks like it could be his, but he's nowhere in sight. I scan the street to the left and the right. No sign of him. Maybe he's already, and the tundra isn't his. My mind goes blank. Now, what am I reaking to do?

r. What "Over here!"

is, but I a deep voice calls out, and I turn to find him standing in front of George's to pay open food cart. George runs a spectacular food cart serving hearty meals now on his trailer with an open food court. As I approach the food cart, the smell of sizzling grilled meat assails my nostrils and my mouth waters.

t, I just "I almost left. What took you so long?"

I stroll towards a seat nestled on the distant right, settling down with the news. I nod. Opposite me, he positions himself with an unyielding gaze.

George says "So what's so urgent you held me from going? You're going to have to go? It's a quick; I need to be somewhere else in less than two hours."

I clank my fingers and lean back, studying his features. Handsome, but a bit obnoxious.

George asks. "Hello?"

I snap out of my reverie and lean forward.

George says "About that night at the motel..."

George says "Yeah?"

I look around. It's almost noon, and customers will troop in soon for lunch breaks. For now, there's just us, and a woman on the far left, eating by herself.

George says "She's "Hey, Fiona."

George says "I'm fine" I look up. It's George calling from the trailer. I wave and offer a friendly

energy I've been here every day for lunch since Pet Star moved here and I always get the same thing; a grilled cheese sandwich. George is a single father whose wife died of cancer just a couple of months ago. He told me this one day he left the close of work, while I munched on a grilled cheese sandwich and I went to clean up the food court. Since then, I've made it a point to ask him how he's holding up, and how Tish, his two-year-old, is doing. He's always been wondering why today's different.

George's Jason glares at me.

He asks from "Your name's Fiona?"

I tell him of "Yeah, what about it?"

"Nothing. You were saying?"

I clear my throat and run my hands over the table, avoiding his gaze. I say in a soft "I began to feel sick after that, and I went for a test last week."

I suck in my breath before I continue.

I tell him to be "I'm... I'm about three weeks pregnant."

Jason's stare is expressionless, but his jaw tightens, along with his fingers. He looks like he's seen a ghost.

"You're joking," he says.

"Do I look like I have the time for childish jokes? Are you crazy?"

"Watch your mouth."

He shoots me a dark stare and looks down at the table, running his fingers through his hair.

He says to me "I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know your name until... until I was sitting by there was no way to reach you."

His fists bang on the table, and his gaze meets mine.

"I should've known you were the type to be careless. Why didn't you take any extra measures?"

ays get "Oh my God, you're unbelievably insensitive! Why would you say
whoseme?"

day, at He rubs his nose, already red from rage.

and he "I don't care. How do I know you're not lying? There's no way to c
m how that."

must be "Look, Jason. We have to make a decision fast; it's almost a month old

Silence sits between us. A sheen of sweat forms on his forehead, a
table vibrates as he taps his feet.

"I'm giving you one week to decide, as the father of this... this chi
don't hear from you after a week, I'll... I'll let everyone know. You
know you can't run away from this. I'll go legal if I have to."

Would I really let everyone know though? My biggest nightmare
parents finding out. If Jason doesn't come up with something, I'm g
have to find another way to deal with this without anyone finding out.

"Are you trying to ruin my day?"

ists. He "I'm talking about our whole lives here and you're talking about a day?"

I press my palm to my forehead and exhale, forming an "O" with my l

"When you make up your mind, you know where to find me."

I rise to my feet and stride away in search of hamburgers. Deep down
sensed that this rendezvous was doomed from the start. However,
is handunprepared for Jason's blatant lack of empathy. If this was a glimpse

true character, then I knew I was in for a bumpy ride – one that I was
l today. equipped to handle. I shake my head ruefully. Fate had a twisted s

humor, forcing me to coexist with an individual who lacked basic d

How quintessentially ironic.

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Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Jason

As my eyes flutter open, a searing headache rips through my consciousness, causing me to groan and clutch my pounding head. Blinking in confusion, I struggle to orient myself in my unfamiliar surroundings. Where on earth am I? Struggling to sit up, I scan the room with bleary eyes, trying to make sense of the indistinct shapes and shadows. But then, my gaze falls upon the source of the gentle snoring, and I realize I'm not alone. A tousled redhead lies beside me, her smooth skin exposed to the air, and my heart begins to race with panic.

My phone, lying on the bedside table, catches my eye. I glance at the screen and see it is seven o'clock in the morning and three missed calls from Eva. My battery is running low, and there's no charger in sight. As the realization of my predicament dawns on me, my mind races to recall the events of the previous night, which trickle back to me in disjointed fragments. Fiona's unexpected pregnancy had been weighing on me all day, and I had been struggling to come to a decision. Overcome with the emotions, I sought refuge in a nightclub, hoping to forget my troubles for a while. But then, how had I ended up taking a woman home with me from the club? Despite my best efforts,

remember, my mind draws a blank. All I can remember is being thoroughly inebriated, to the point of stupefaction. A deep sigh of relief escapes me as I realize that, despite my hazy memory, I have not made the grave mistake of taking a stranger back to my own home. For the sake of both safety and discretion, I have always adhered to a strict rule - never to engage in encounters at my house, a friend's house, or any other public spot. I always opt for a motel, and if none is available, I cancel it altogether. It started as a simple precaution, a way to avoid the complications that come with strangers knowing my address. But as time passed, it became a major principle.

When I look over at the redhead still sleeping.

I don't even know her name.

I walk to the bathroom, groaning with every step and rubbing my forehead. It's a good thing I'm still on leave; this would've been a shitshow. I step into the shower and wash away all the anxiety from overthinking. I don't think about Fiona, but she gave me one week, and my mind keeps coming back to it again. After my bath, I pick everything up and exit the bathroom.

Nothing about this place elicits any memory from last night - the stale air, the dead silence, the wall stains. The reception counter is empty. When I walk out the door, the sun's brightness hits my eyes, and I feel my arms as shade. Where did I park my car? A memory comes to me — the Audi out last night.

Shit, I drove drunk?

I cast my eyes around the parking lot, scanning for a white Audi. My car is a strip-land on it, parked near the exit, and I stride purposefully towards it. As I reach for my keys, a momentary panic grips me - have I misplaced them? I tap my left back pocket, but they're not there. With a wave of relief,

roughly my right pocket, and my fingers close around the familiar metal. S
my lips into the driver's seat, I start the engine and accelerate smoothly out of
mistake As I drive down the familiar road, I realize with a jolt that I'm close
ety and office.

in fuck "Move, dude!" a man calls from the car behind. I wave for him to go p
stead, I and as he speeds past, he scowls. "Quit driving like a sissy."

l out as The traffic on this road is light, and as I come to a halt, my phone v
having It's Eva again.

atter of "Hello?"

"Where have you been? I called all night. I even called Richard, he
had no idea where you went."

"I went out, I needed to clear my head."

rehead. "You sound like shit."

tep into I roll my eyes and nod.

want to "I have a hangover, and you're not helping."

running "Aww. Are you home yet? I wanna come over."

uilding. "I'm not, and I'll go to sleep once I'm home. I'd prefer to be alone."

ness of "Okay, I'll check on you later. Be good, alright? Bye."

empty. The call ends just when I arrive at the house.

use my With a casual toss, I fling my keys onto the console in the entrance

I drove before making my way toward the living room. As I step inside, I no

mother seated on the couch, her chin resting in her palms. A sense of

creeps up on me - her expression seems troubled, and I can't help but

ly eyes what might have caused it.

it. As I "Where have you been?"

hem? I "Mom, not now." I groan. "I have a hangover and I really need to ge

I checkrest."

slipping Her nose flares.

the lot."You're not getting any younger, Jason Benjamin Greene. You're a
to my man, and a man your age should be going home to a family - a wife

You're thirty-seven, almost forty and there's no heir yet. How can you
wast me, irresponsible?"

"Mom! Drop it! I will do what I want, when and how I want, and it's
vibrates for debate."

I unclench my fists and hold my throbbing head, staggering all the way
upstairs to my suite. All that's on my mind is my bed, and as I throw
said he into it, thoughts of Fiona and the baby flood my mind again. Mom
need an heir. I get it but marriage —

Like lightning, the thought strikes me, forcing me to sit up. Fiona is pregnant.
An heir. I've slept with different women for years but this has never happened
before. I'm pretty sure I used a condom. Did it break? Maybe it's an oops.
I'm getting a child without having to get married at all. A light bulb
on. What if we make some kind of a deal? I pick up my phone and dial
number.

"Hello?"

"Fiona, it's me. Can we meet up later today? at 5 pm? Same place."

the lobby As the call drops, I toss the phone aside and grab a pillow, pressing it
tightly against my face as I stare up at the ceiling. But even in this moment of
uneasiness and solitude, I can't escape the nagging thought that has been plaguing me
wondering about Andrew Davidson. Our partnership with Davidson is critical to C
expansion into Asia and Europe, and it could be a game-changer for the
construction industry. But if he were to find out about my relationship
with Eva, it could jeopardize everything we've worked towards. I should

thoughts down. Let's do this one step at a time. I shut my eyes and even grownfades to black.

e, kids.

u be so



The way to Pet Star is easier to find this time. As I pull up in front of not upShop, I pull out my phone, and my fingers fly over the screen.

I'm at George's Food Cart.

he wayI walk over to the trailer. George is stirring eggs.

myself"Hi, George. Got any drinks?"

u says I" Yeah, punch?"

"I'll have two."

regnant.I look up to find Fiona walking toward me.

ppened"Hey, George."

men —George waves. He hands over the drinks, and I pass one to her. She s

comesglance at me, and her body angles away.

dial her"Not interested?"

She takes the drink from me.

"Thanks."

We sit at the same spot as last time. The place is a little busier. She lo
: tightlyat me.

nent of" So? What's it going to be?"

e - EvaI study her features, and for the first time, it really hits me.

onsco's*She's carrying my child.*

in theI swallow.

ip with" How...how are you feeling?"

ove the" Like shit. You didn't call me here to ask how I'm feeling, did you?"

rything "I've made my decision."

"And?"

I lean forward.

"Okay, so here's my decision. But before then, do you want this child?"
the PetShe shrugs, taking a sip.

"Depends. But if there's a reasonable way to not be burdened by this, I'll take it. I just don't want my parents to find out. It'll kill them."

"Okay, I have the perfect idea. What do you say you stay at my house and give birth to the child? Then take care of the baby for six months before I take part ways. Of course, I am going to compensate you any amount you want. And you can continue your life however you want it."

She rubs her chin, staring into the distance.

"What?"

hoots a "There's one problem."

She clanks her fingers and takes another sip of her drink.

"Where do I tell my parents I'm off to? Actually, a million problems about your family? Your mom? She knows my mom."

I gulp the rest of the punch and set it down, rubbing my chin.

looks up "About your parents, can't you tell them you're going for something? I don't know."

"You do realize we're talking over a year, right?"

An idea falls through, and I snap my fingers.

"That's it! Do you have any plans for study? How about you tell them you want a scholarship to study? Or even a job. There are so many excuses out there. Search hard enough."

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. It's a lot, I know, but we don't have that many options. Nothing is ever going to be the same.

"Too much. Too much," she says, closing her eyes like she's dizzy. Her breathing is loud and labored. I let her process it, the quietness between us stretching into minutes.

"About my family, I'll handle that, leave it to me."

I let the silence linger between us some more without taking my eyes off her. I'll grab "So, do we have a deal?"

She lifts her fingers to her mouth, and starts to chew her nails again. I use and staring at the table, but I can tell her thoughts are all over the place.

fore we "D... Does this mean I'll essentially be hiding?"

wish so If this is going to be successful, it means no one has to find out about the baby. The part with Eva is still going to be a tough nut to crack. How do I get married to Eva and keep the baby without anyone finding out? I don't want her as a factor in that part. What if she becomes a hindrance? What if she tells my dad, and he calls off the deal with me? I adjust the collar of my button-down shirt. It's suddenly hot out here. Fiona waves her hand over my face.

3. What "Hello? You here?"

"Yes, unfortunately, you'll be hiding. I'm sure you'd also not want anyone to see you pregnant, especially not your parents. It also means your movements might be restricted. No going out, and all."

She exhales.

"One stupid decision and I'm going to pay for it with one year of my life. In the next life, I hope I become a man."

you got She grimaces and chews her fingers.

if you *Looks like it's a bad habit of hers.*

I can't tell if her statement was supposed to be a biting remark or just a sign of grief over the major life change she has to endure for over a year.

"How soon can you leave your house?"

zy. Her "Honestly? As soon as possible. Next week is fine. How do I get
ween us place?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll come pick you up myself, Tuesday next
I'll come after work, be ready by 6pm. Send your address."

off her. She nods, and sags against her chair, gulping the last of her driv
expression on her face is difficult to read. A tear drops, and she tu
1. She's other way, sniffing. I stay quiet, unsure of what to do or say. How
comfort a woman who's mourning the life she used to know? Afte
time, she turns back to me like nothing had happened.

t her or "One more thing, Moon's coming with me."

ow do I "Who's Moon?"

I didn't "My dog."

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"One more thing, Moon's coming with me."

"Who's Moon?"

"My dog."

"What? No way!"

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Fiona

The smell of smoke fills the entire house, and I cover my nose, rushing to the kitchen.

"Mom! What happened?"

"I completely forgot the pasta was still cooking," she says, coughing.

"How bad is it?"

She gives a nonchalant shrug, and I make my way over to inspect the damage. To my relief, it doesn't look too serious. A small wave of guilt washes over me - this could have been a complete disaster. I turn around and head back to the living room, where my father is seated, engrossed in a TV show. This was the last room we put together, a space that we'd taken great joy in designing. We'd sold our old gray sofas and replaced them with sleeker ones that matched the curtains perfectly.

As I take a seat beside my father, I feel a sudden surge of emotion that threatens to overwhelm me. Leaving my parents for fifteen months feels like a heavy burden, and my chest feels tight as I try to swallow down the feelings in my throat. But I remind myself that this is for their own good, that I'm doing it to spare them the heartache that will inevitably come with my presence.

my chest, trying to calm myself down, and ignore the beads of sweat that have formed on my forehead. At least this way, I'll be the only one with the pain.

Dad coughs and goes over to the windows, opening them up.

"Who forgets they had something cooking?" He wipes off the tears from his eyes and coughs again, louder than before.

"Uhhh... Mom. Dad. I have news."

Mom turns to me from the kitchen. Dad walks over to the sofa and sits next to me. My heart slams in my chest. I've never had to live apart from my family. Worse, I've never had to lie to them. The thought drives a wedge through my heart and I tighten my fingers around my denim shorts. Drastic situations call for drastic measures.

"You know how I've always wanted to go to Vet school?"

Dad lowers the TV's volume and faces me. I swallow.

"Uhhh... the good news is, I got a scholarship online."

Mom's hand covers her parted lips, and she rushes toward me, taking me into her arms.

"Well done, Fifi. That's amazing!"

Dad grins at me.

"But what's the bad news?"

I straighten out my clothes and clear my throat in finality.

"It's in New York, and I'm leaving next week."

The silence in the room is palpable, and I can feel my heart racing as I avoid making eye contact with either of my parents. I nervously chew on my fingers, feeling the weight of the secret I'm keeping from them pressing down on me. How will I ever be able to look them in the eye for the rest of my life. I rub

eat that knowing that there's a grandchild out there with the Greene surname, a
dealing I've kept this from them?

As I bite my lip, my eyes dart up to my mother, who's standing not
seemingly lost in thought. My father's gaze remains fixed on the TV
room his oblivious to the turmoil that's raging inside me. "C'mon, aren't you guys
say something?"

"We're happy for you all the same. It's just..." Dad looks up at Mom
; besides sudden."

n these I nod.

edge in "I know. I feel the same way."

uations Mom hugs me, and her hand runs through my hair. It tickles.

"I'm happy for you, Fifi. Does El know yet?"

Not like I can keep secrets from her.

"Of course, she does."

El's place was the first place I went to from the hospital after the doctor
me into the news. She worked at a diner close to the house, so it wasn't difficult
pull her out and back home. She called in sick eventually and spent the
the day handing me tissue papers as I vented my frustration.

"What day are you leaving?"

"Tuesday."

She nods and turns to make her way back to the kitchen. In truth, I've
wanted to attend Vet school, but my parents could never afford it,
I avoid reality, I still can't. I tried all kinds of scholarship programs, but none
on my successful. It'd be nice to get a real Vet school scholarship. My stomach
g down tightens in frustration, and I shut my eyes to prevent the tears threatening
my life, overflow. Finally, I stand and walk away to lock myself in my room.

and that



ionless, "Fifi!"

screen, "Oh hey. Door's open."

s gonnaBlondie waltzes in like she owns my room.

"Are you done packing up your bags?"

om, "soI nod without looking up.

"Sure you aren't forgetting anything? Let's do a crosscheck. Anyway forget anything, I'll come get it for you."

I look around, confirming that everything's in my bag. When I'm satisfied, I zip it up.

Eleanor's eyes are fixed on me, but I avoid them like the plague. I hope she can read my mind, that she's already doing it right now. I turn around to make for my dressing table to pick up my makeup and perfume.

or broke"Fifi?" she says, walking up to me.

difficult to "Look at me."

the rest ofShe's going to cause the tears to spill — tears I've prevented from getting out of hold of me all morning. She takes me in her arms and holds onto me. I feel her tickles my face.

"We all make bad decisions. No one's perfect, including you. I want you to always know that you'll be fine. I know you're scared, and you have no idea how things are going to play out, but you'll be good. Really."

we wereBy now, the tears are spilling, and I let them, sniffing. I still hate that she can read my mind, but I hate it more that I'll be lying to my parents for the next year. She rubs my back and plants a kiss on my cheeks.

"Am I allowed to visit, at least? "

I shrug. I didn't talk about that with Jason.

"I'll miss you," I say finally. She tightens her grip on me, and her breath soft and light, is like a lullaby, calming my nerves.

My phone vibrates. It's Jason.

"Where are you?"

"I'm home. Are you on your way?"

"Yeah. I'll be there in about ten minutes. Keep your phone close."

The call drops. El is quiet, but I know her mind isn't.

"Please ask if I can come to visit. I can't bear to be apart from you for a year. I just might die."

I burst out laughing for the first time all morning.

"I might die too, El. Don't worry, we'll be fine no matter what happens. Okay?"

She nods.

There's a knock on the door.

"Sweetheart, are you ready to go?"

I stand and walk up to Mom. Her glasses keep falling off her nose.

Her hair over her petite frame and wrap her in my arms. Her teardrops

fall on my shoulder, and my heart sinks. This is difficult. I wish I could tell her

how this looks into my face the way she used to when she sent me off to school.

She'd look over my hair, check. Face, check. Outfit, check. Eyes, she can't find it weird that she always peered into my eyes before sending

me over aOnce I asked why she did that, she gave a profound quote instead:

"The eyes are the windows to the soul."

She peers into my eyes now, and I wear my brightest smile. Is my fear hidden?

"You'll be alright without me?"

Nothing, "I should be asking you that." She playfully punches my shoulder and pulls me into her arms.

"I'll miss you. I hope you find a big world waiting for you, Fifi."

My phone vibrates. Mom peeks into my phone screen.

"Who's that?"

"My uh... my Uber driver. He must be here now."

I walk to my bags, pick them up and walk out of my room into the living room. Mom and El are behind me. In the living room, Dad's standing at the doorway. His eyes soften when he sees me. He lifts his arms, gesturing for me to walk into them. A tear drops as the strong arms that have held me since childhood hold me one last time.

"Don't cry. We'll be here when you get back. Okay?"

I nod, wiping my nostrils. I look over from Dad to Mom to El. Mom's eyes are dry. She likes to be strong, but when I leave, she'll cry a river.

"Bye, guys."

With that, I walk out the door, out of safety, out to a world of uncertainty. My phone vibrates again.

"I'm a block away, in front of the brown house on the left."

"Okay. I'm coming."

Thankful I packed light, I pull my suitcase in one hand and hold tight to my small bag in the other. When I arrive, his face is drawn up in a smile. I ignore it, place my bags in the trunk, and sit in front.

"What took you so long? I told you I was ten minutes away."

"Don't even start. You're not the one who's leaving your parents and I'm not in the mood."

He opens his mouth but shuts it as if deciding to choose peace. The car

his house is quiet, but the tension in the air is thick. Neither of us knows if this arrangement is going to turn out. I bite my tongue gently, watching people walk or drive past. We drive into what I'd call a street for the elite, unlike all the other streets in L.A. My mouth stays open as I take in the mansions, the cars, and the trees.

"Almost there. Ours is the white house two blocks away, but you can't see it from here."

I lift my eyes to find the house he's talking about, and as we approach the door, my mouth drops. I've always heard of Mediterranean houses but have never seen one in real life. The white building towers in the neighborhood, crowded with palm trees that fight for prominence. A soft wind blows on the car as we drive in, and I look up, mesmerized. Six palm trees flank each side of the building, three on each side. A separate car garage sits opposite the main house. There are three other cars here, and I don't know much about cars, but I'd recognize an Audi anywhere. In the middle of the driveway, there's a small water fountain with slabs around it for sitting. A small dog kernel sits on the left of the house. It looks like a house dog, smaller and simpler. A bark fills the compound from the kernel, and the head of a black dog peeks out.

"Awww, a German Shepard, right?"

He's silent as he works to take my bags out of the trunk. My heart tightens. Moon's barks ring in my ears. I miss him so much already.

"Come on," he says without looking back at me, and I follow behind him to the house.

"Did you tell your mom, yet?"

He stays quiet.

What's his deal?

As we step into the expansive lobby, a pristine white console table g
atching near the entrance. Beyond it lies an even grander living room that lea
lite. It's awe-struck. It's clear that the title "*Jason Richest Under Forty*"
in the exaggeration. The towering ceiling dwarfs anything I've ever witness
a magnificent chandelier commands the center, cascading down in
n see its glory. Adorned with translucent gemstones, the chandelier ex
breath-taking aura.

A woman who looks like she's in her early sixties walks into the living
er seen brows furrowed. She looks at me, then at Jason, then back at me.

covered "Hello."

She flashes a warm smile that reaches her eyes before turning over to
side of Jason didn't tell her yet. This is going to be really awkward.

house, "Uhh... mom, please sit. We need to talk."

She squints, pausing for a second, before sitting. When she sits, I not
of the how tall and sophisticated she is. She looks like she should be a movie
ting. AI sit near Jason. My eyes land on the picture frame section; there ar
e, only frames here. I count twenty-four altogether. There's a photo of wha
he head like Jason. He's holding a baby in his arms - it must be Richard.

"What? You're joking!"

Her gasp draws my attention to the situation at hand. Her eyes are on m
tens as "Is what he's saying true?"

I didn't hear a word of what he said.

into the "Uhh... yes."

She presses her fingers to her lips, studying me.

"How many weeks?"

"Should be four now."

She exhales and stands to her feet.

reets us "This... this is..." She sighs - the kind that says *I give up*.

ives me "We don't have a choice. I think you both made the best decision. It'

is nothan getting rid of it. Welcome, Fiona. Please call me Bertha."

ed, and "Nice to meet you, Bertha," I say without meeting her eyes.

all its The front door opens, and loud footsteps slap the marble tiles.

udes aA thin figure walks into the living room. He places both hands on hi

his eyes fixed on me.

g room, "Uhm, hello?"

Jason stands to his feet and walks to the thin boy, tapping his shoulder.

"Richard, this is Fiona. Fiona, this is my baby brother, Richard."

Jason. "Hi, Richard." I manage to say. He smiles at me and turns to Jason.

"I'll explain everything to you later, Richie. For now, she needs to settl

"Let's go, Fiona. Your room's this way."

ice just We climb the staircase and walk into another wide lobby. He pushes

star. that opens up to reveal what looks like a luxury suite.

e many *Literally an apartment in a house. Who are these people?*

it looks "Wow." It slips from my mouth before I catch myself.

"My suite is next door. Let me know if you need anything. I'll let yo

in."

ne. He bows slightly, turns, and leaves.

As I stroll past the living room, I make my way towards the balcony. A

yellow potted flower resting on a sleek, slab-like platform catch

attention. After taking in the stunning view, I retrace my steps back i

living room and continue towards a spacious bedroom. Adjacent

bedroom balcony, a cozy kitchenette sits nestled in the corner.

Do people actually live like this?

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Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Jason

A knock on the door draws me out of my thoughts.
"It's Richard."

"Come on in."

He strolls into my suite, walks to my bedroom, and hesitates to sit. I pull up my T-shirt and turn to my mirror.

"How do I look?"

He rolls his eyes.

"Like you need to be told."

A grin spreads across my face as I reach for a comb from the dresser. There are only a few things in life that I take pride in, and my stunning hair is one of them. Approaching my forties, I have yet to encounter the nightmare of a receding hairline or balding. I run the comb through my hair and it glimmers in the light. As I gaze at myself in the mirror, Richard's eyes meet mine, and we share a fleeting moment of connection.

"Where are you off to?"

"I have to meet with Eva."

Eva called it a date. I wouldn't call it that. Richard exhales. "I know you

questions about Fiona."

Finally, he goes to my bed and sinks into it.

"Who's Fiona and what's she doing here?"

I pause the search for my white Converse sneakers and walk over to him, sitting beside him.

"It's a long messy story. I wish I didn't have to tell you, but I'll give you a short version. I met Fiona at Ruthless, we had a good night and I thought we were safe until I ran into her like two weeks after, and she said she... she was..."

I clasp my hands and look up at him. His expression is blank.

"She was pregnant. We decided she'd give birth here, take care of the baby for six months and then go back home."

Richard shakes his head and offers a weak smile before looking at me.
"buttonbalcony."

"That sucks, especially for her. She must be really shaken up."

He turns back to me with a slight frown.

"Her parents have no clue, do they?"

I shake my head and stand to find my sneakers.

"g table." "What did she tell them? Does she live with 'em?"

"ig hairs" "She does. She told them she got a scholarship in New York."

"iter the" My phone rings from the back of my pocket, and I take it out with one hand, my hair, while using the other to put on my shoes.

"l's eyes" "Eva, I'll be there soon."

"I've been here for fifteen minutes already."

"I'm sorry, I had a couple of things to sort out at work. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"ou have" The call drops and I look up. Richard is watching me.

"How are you going to handle Eva and Fiona? Do you plan to tell her?"
I lower my gaze, lost in thought. The prospect of breaking the news fills me with apprehension, not because I'm afraid of causing her pain. In the end, all, Eva is a self-centered, entitled individual who lacks the emotional maturity to handle complex situations or relationships. My true concern is the fact that she'll waste no time in blabbing to her father, potentially jeopardizing the business deal we've worked so hard to secure. In fact, she probably takes pleasure in spreading the news far and wide if given the opportunity. I ball my hands into fists, feeling a surge of frustration.

Vengeful and spoiled.

I take one last look at my reflection in the mirror and smile, pleased with the way I look. I flex my biceps, and Richard laughs.

to the "You're getting too old for that."

"Sexy has no age."

I wink at him and pick up my car keys and credit card.

"Mom is really cool with this arrangement?"

I had a conversation with her the night Eva came. At first, she hated it, but she kept repeating one thing - "At least you have an heir now. And I have a grandchild." I wasn't surprised. An heir was really all she talked about for days. She didn't like Eva anyway, and she never told me why. When I finally told her about my plans to get married to her because of the partnership, she wouldn't have it. She married for love and she wanted all her children to do the same.

I grin at Richard.

in a few "Maybe she finally gave up on me. Please make Fiona feel comfortable and let her know to reach you if she needs something."

"Aye Aye captain. I'm getting a niece, after all."

" I stop halfway and scrunch up my face, turning.

to Eva "Nephew, you mean?"

1. After "Nope, it's definitely a girl."

otional "Okay, you can either agree with me or get out of my suite. In fact, ern lies out, I need to lock up."

entially He sighs and walks out, making his way downstairs. I pause in f t, she'd Fiona's guest suite for a second. What's she doing currently? I lift my ven the to knock and change my mind halfway. Taking out my phone, I sen text instead:

Going out. Find Richard if you need anything.

ith how I finally walk down the staircase and dash out of the house. Better make Eva madder than she is already. I get in my trusty Tundra and off, calculating how long it'll take to get to the Thai restaurant. Per: I'm not a fan of Thai cuisine, but Eva seems to enjoy it. I find it unapp and even remember throwing up the first time I tried Spicy Shrimp which happened when I was just eight years old. Maybe it wasn't tha l it, but Thai; it was the shrimp - I hated seafood too. I spot the Thai restaurant have a distance. Its huge signpost is hard to ignore:

at these **Emporium Thai Cuisine**

1 I first As I pull up in the parking lot, my phone vibrates again.

ip deal, "I'm here, Eva. Trying to park."

ldren to When I finally park, I sit still in the car, tapping my fingers agai steering wheel. She'll bring up marriage and kids; I need to stay comp no losing my temper, no saying what I'm not supposed to say. I'm nc ble. I'll know she's been in love with me for years, even though I pretend know. I also know her father, Davidson must've mentioned that I hi marrying her. Even though we were childhood friends and even d

some point in high school, I don't see a future with her. I don't even like her. But like Dad says, when it comes to business, only the insane ones ever get ahead. Yes, I'll marry her for a business deal, that's how far I'm willing to go.

I sigh, arrange my hair with the rear mirror and step out of the car. It's unusually hot tonight and a little hotter as I step into the restaurant. The smell of spicy noodles assaults my nostrils. A strong mix of veggies, cheese, and her lime smell is in the air as I look around. Two women are seated near the entrance, giggling. A man takes a portion of his soup and feeds it to his toddler. The restaurant is noisy in here, but it's not too quiet, either. An Asian woman beams with a smile. I don't try the shrimp soup, the same one I had years ago. I grimace. I don't zoom. *It's not beam-worthy.*

Personally, I turn around to the other side, searching for Eva. Finally, I find her. She's wearing a short, sleeveless gown at the far end. The gown reveals just enough cleavage to make anyone else crazy. A little sympathy wells up in me. I know it was her. She's trying too hard.

From a distance, the sun-kissed tone of her skin accentuates the beauty of the dress, with the deep hue of her hair amplifies the radiance of her wide eyes. As I approach our table, I meet Eva's intense stare, her jaw tightly clenched.

"You've made me wait for over thirty minutes."

"I'm sorry."

Instead, I clasp my palms as if doing a short prayer before taking my seat. She looks at the menu.

"Fool, I'll get you what you want." "What will you get?"

"I told you I don't like Thai Food."

"You did?"

"Her eyes are wide."

like her." I never heard. I think you should still try something. You just might like it. I shake my head and pick up the menu to go over drink options. Nothing for me to eat here, but perhaps there's something I can drink. A fresh mango smoothie catches my attention. I'll go with that. A waiter comes to our table one minute later to take our orders, and as he leaves, he blurts out.

"He's handsome. It's a good thing I'm getting married to the most handsome man."

She peers at me from underneath her lashes. She's expecting me to do something, to make it official. It's a trap. Instead, I look out, taking in the brightness of LA street lights in the dark.

"Are you here?"

I lift my head to look at her.

"Yes."

"I asked if you plan for us to get married."

I adjust my collar and clear my throat.

"Let's just have a light-hearted evening okay? We'll talk about the future another time."

Eva's smile turns into a scowl. She holds her head up with her hands.

"I'm starting to think I don't really mean much to you, Jason. There's one excuse or the other. You show up to dates late, hardly take my calls, avoid conversations about our future."

My breathing is now labored, and I stare at the exit. This was a bad idea.

"We're not even together, Eva. Chill out. I think we need some time before we make any serious commitments that we might regret because —"

"And the serious commitment we might regret is marriage?"

I pinch my forehead, exhaling through my lips. Is this deal with Eva

like it.” even worth this? Although Eva and I grew up together, there’s never been anything romantic between us — at least not on my part. But with a marriage of convenience looming over us, she’s been pressuring me far too much. She shows “Our parents have always wanted this. Well, our dads. It’s inevitable; you’ll get married. But you sure don’t seem too eager.”

"Eva. Drop it."

She sucks her teeth and looks away as the waiter returns with two trays. The smell of Eva's chicken dumplings and Thai coconut soup leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I pick up my smoothie and gulp it, desperate to escape the food smell.

The silence between us forms a gulf that’s comforting for me in the moment. "It’s time for us to talk about this. Do you even have plans for us when we’re married?"

I almost don't hear it, I'm lost deep in thought, but her sharp tone snaps me back to reality, and my blood boils.

I push my seat back and stand.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. You're obviously not interested in a peaceful date, and the food’s making me nauseous."

I avoid her gaze and turn around, making for the door.

"Jason, you're going to walk out on me?"

Her voice fills the entire restaurant, and all eyes are now on us but I refuse to pay her any mind.

"Jason!"

I storm out of Emporium Thai and climb into my car, eager to distance myself from the heated confrontation with Eva. Pummeling the steering wheel isn't my usual pastime, but the seething anger inside me demands

er been release. A few minutes later, I pull over in front of a mall, taking deep
arriageto calm myself down. The streets of LA are still buzzing with activity,
h. this hour-09:00 pm. Images of Fiona flit through my mind, and I
we will what she's up to right now. But then, the image of Eva's angry face cr
reminding me of the complicated mess that I'm in. I hit the steering
once again, and the blaring sound of the horn startles me. I shake m
ys. Therealizing how close I am to losing my composure. My stomach growl
ur tasterealize that I haven't eaten a proper meal all evening. With a sigh, I s
he Thaiengine and head home, passing by several raucous clubs blaring mu
hosting inebriated patrons. In one of the clubs, I spot a couple making
oment. dimly lit corner, and I roll my eyes in exasperation.

to get *Get a room, y'all. Jeez.*

A man on the other end of the street walks his dog on a leash. It's a b
aps me Dalmatian. I want a Dalmatian so bad. I get carried away with the c
almost run into a cyclist.

"Shit! Sorry!"

Finally, I swerve into my street, and in no time, I'm home. No bark
ie Thai from Tex. I walk to his kernel in search of him.

"Buddy? Are you in here?"

It's empty. I frown. That's odd. I enter the house, and two voices are
living room. Wait, three - Tex is barking. I walk past the lobby, thr
efuse to keys on the console table, and enter the living room. The sight that gr
causes my pulse to quicken with irritation. Fiona's attention is on Tex,
perched on her lap while Richard has his arms wrapped around her. Sh
listanceup and smiles at Richard, who brings his face closer to her. For a se
steeringthink he's going to kiss her, but he kisses Tex instead. I exhale and cl
emands

breathstroat. Tex is the first to see me. He barks and dashes toward me. I even atstands to his feet, along with Fiona.

wonder"Who's a good boy!"

eeps in,I rub Tex's stomach as he rolls on the floor, wagging his tail.

; wheel"Welcome," Fiona says.

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I give Fiona a slight nod and walk up the staircase, unclenching m

Richard just met her; why's he all over her like that? Why'd she let hir eautifulher? Are sparks flying between them? The thought speeds up my he log andand I climb onto my bed.

What's wrong with me?

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"Who's a good boy!"

I rub Tex's stomach as he rolls on the floor, wagging his tail.

"Welcome," Fiona says.

My jaws tighten, and I avoid her gaze.

"Fiona wanted to play with Tex. I took him out of the kernel for her. He loved her instantly. You should've seen him."

I smile at Richard.

"Can you please help me take him back? I'm exhausted."

I give Fiona a slight nod and walk up the staircase, unclenching my fists. Richard just met her; why's he all over her like that? Why'd she let him touch her? Are sparks flying between them? The thought speeds up my heartbeat, and I climb onto my bed.

What's wrong with me?

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Fiona

Abruptly awoken by a loud ringing, I groggily glance at my screen, only to see that it's Eleanor calling. With a heavy yawn, I answer the phone.

"There are better times to check on your best friend that would be considered terrorism, you know?"

She giggles.

"What kind of best friend would I be if I didn't terrorize you?"

"It's so good to hear your voice, El."

"Same, Fifi. How are you? What's it been like at his house? Did you tell him about me visiting?"

"Woah. Woah. Easy."

I slowly rub my eyes with the back of my palm, attempting to wake up, and sit up in bed, squinting as my eyes adjust to the light.

"I'm okay. The morning sickness just really knocks my brains off. Even though the house is pretty nice, especially his brother, Richard. He's such a gentleman, handsome too."

"Uh oh, don't tell me you already have your eyes on him."

"What? No! Jason is a little cold, it's refreshing to know that there's someone who isn't."

"So about my visit?"

"Right, I've not really spoken to Jason since I got here. He's always out or just somewhere. I'll ask him, don't worry."

"Okay. Gotta bounce. Take care, okay?"

"Hey before you —"

As the call is abruptly disconnected before I have the opportunity to talk about my parents, my heart plummets in dismay. Casting a gaze about the bedroom, I take note of the surroundings. It is commodious, yet snug, and the bed is capacious enough to accommodate three individuals with ample room to spare. The soft sheets, which enfold one's body, seem to beckon a slumber. The brown marble flooring resonates beautifully with the mahogany bed stand and living room sofa, imparting a delightful warmth to the room. Across the room, my eyes alight upon the television, resting on an ornate stand flanked by two flower pots and two speakers in the living room.

"Fiona?"

A knock comes on the suite door. I move off the bed and walk toward the door. "Yeah?"

"It's Bertha."

I unlock the door to find a disheveled Bertha yawning. "Good morning," I say, glued to the floor.

"Come on, I could use some help with breakfast."
"Oh, okay."

She studies me as if deciding whether to ask or hold back. Finally, she

"How do you feel?"

"Like shit."

Someone She chuckles and walks downstairs, and I follow behind.

"When I was pregnant with Jason and then Richard, I felt like a w
going on inside of me. It was horrible."

it work, I laugh. It's a good thing there's some mother figure to help figure things

"Oh, by the way, we'll need to have an OB-GYN come in every month
can't be seen outside, and there's no other way to be as discreet as possible."

The doctor, of course, will need to sign an NDA. I'll speak with Jason
inquire that."

out my As we make our way into the living room, I am greeted by the presence
and the two feline companions. One boasts a blend of tawny brown and white
space while the other is entirely cloaked in a coat of pristine white.

restful "Oh my! Whose cats are these?"

watching "They're mine. Tracey and Doe."

the room. "Awww! How cute."

elegant I sit beside them and rub their backs.

"You love cats?"

"I love all animals, but cats and dogs are certainly my favorites."

it. Bertha smiles and opens the refrigerator.

"I got both of them about a year ago. Richard found them as newborns
beside a dumpster. They needed an intervention, so I took them."

I stand and walk to the kitchen, watching her.

"What are we making?"

"Pancakes. Those are Jason's favorite, by the way. Here, mix them together."

I nod and take the empty bowl from her. Everything's already set
asks counter. I set out to mix the flour, baking powder, salt, and sugar.

catapulted to the kitchen at home, with Mom chasing me out of the living room.
She hated obstructions and would rather not have anyone with her.

odd, but it came with the privilege that I didn't have to do anything
far was kitchen if I didn't want to.

"What's your favorite kind of dog?"

gs out. She cracks the eggs open, looking at me.

th. You "Hmm... it's hard to say. I love all of them, but I'd probably pick the
ossible retriever. I have a golden retriever puppy. His name's Moon."

n about "Aww. That's cute. I also had a golden retriever in college. Why did
come along with him?"

ence of Do I tell her Jason refused? I look around the kitchen, admiring the
nite fur, walls.

"Jason said not to."

Her smile fades while she brings the vegetable oil from the top cabinet

She stares at me for a few seconds and walks up to me, running her
through my hair. She holds my chin up and pulls me into her arms.

"You must feel really scared and guilty about this whole thing. I'm so
have to go through this, and I'll be here every step of the way, I promise

The tears spill without my permission, and I sniff, wiping snot off my

She doesn't let me go for another minute or two. I needed this. This h

. kitten's a lonely journey, and even though it's Jason's baby, he could care less
how I feel. Bertha tightens her embrace, rubbing my back.

"The mother of my grandchild is my daughter too."

The hug lingers, and I shut my eyes, savoring the feeling of another hu
ether." my space. Even though she looks disheveled, the scent of her hair shar

on the difficult to ignore, and there's a slight essential oil scent. Is it rose
jar. I inhale softly and wipe my tears. She tears away from me and wip

kitchen cheeks.

It was "These pancakes aren't going to make themselves."

I giggle, pick up the bowl, and resume the mix.

The sound of yawning comes from opposite the stairs. Richard appears in the living room, yawning and scratching his hair.

He waves shyly when he sees me and walks over to the counter.

"Hey, mom." He turns to me, "What's up?"

"You need to leave now. We don't need the crowd. Please."

Richard rolls his eyes, chuckling, and a smile tugs at my lips.

He turns to me.

"Are you going to let her bully me like this, Fiona?"

"Sheesh, I wish I could help you."

He grins and walks out. At a distance, an individual stands observing with arms folded and a scowl etched onto his countenance.

Who the hell wakes up frowning?

I feign ignorance of his presence and take the dry mixture to Bertha.

"Thanks," she says, pouring the mix into her egg mix. She raises her head to find Jason scowling.

"Uhhh, good morning to you too, grumpy." He approaches us and looks at me from behind the counter.

"Hi, Mom."

"Good morning." That's all I muster, but he doesn't look my way. I look at my

lips. Did I do something wrong? I've never met someone as closed-

mouthed as he is. I once had an ex who tended toward moods like that.

It's exhausting having to deal with that all the time. Unfortunately, I can't

leave. I have to stay with Jason. I can't just up and leave. It's good that we're not close;

but I have to suffer from his obstinate moods. There has to be a reason why

I feel like this though. Do I want to dig deeper? I walk past him to the living room

and sit beside Richard.

He punches my shoulder playfully.

s in the "Hey, Tex's new favorite."

I giggle.

"What are you doing today?"

"To be honest, I don't know. We could hang out if you're down. A swim would do you some good."

"I'd love that! What do you do for work?"

"I play basketball professionally."

Not bad. He leans forward and whispers.

"Compared to Jason, I'm a pathetic pauper."

ing us, It catches me off guard, and I burst out laughing. From the side of my

watch Jason charge upstairs. I should speak with him, so El can come

I stand and follow behind, but he's moving with speed.

"Hey!" I call just before he pushes his suite door open. He pauses, a
head to my gaze.

"Is there a problem?"

means on He stays silent.

"Are you usually this cold?"

He shoots me a stink stare, and I take a step back.

oite my "I came to ask if I'm allowed to have one visitor, my best —"

off and "No." He cuts me off before I get a chance to finish. I punch my fist

It was wall.

: 'break "What is your deal? Do you have a problem with me?"

I won't His breathing is noisy, and his face goes red.

he acts "You don't get to be an asshole because I'm under your roof!"

g room "Then stop acting like one!"

He grunts, opens the door to his suite, and bangs it behind him.

What the actual fuck!

This is unreal. How can a grown man act like a teenager? I walk back step into my suite. Me? Acting like an asshole? Wow.

Every encounter I've had with this *real* asshole has been unpleasant; im later the man who'll raise this baby? I plop down on the sofa in the living r heat flushes through my body. I run my hands over my stomach; the almost significant bump now. My mind goes to El. I won't see her for too. My throat locks up, and I pick up my cell phone. There's a miss from Mom. I sink into the ground, my shoulders shaking. The sobs co chipped, and I dial El's number. It rings, but there's no response. I try y eye, I Nothing. Just then, my phone rings. She's calling back.

to visit."Now, I know I told you I was here to torture you, but that doesn't talking multiple times a day."

voiding My throat locks up.

"Uhh... Fifi, are you there?"

"Yeah." My voice is shrill.

"Fiona! What's wrong?"

The sobs follow, and Eleanor stays quiet. She's always done that. She silent whenever I needed to talk and let me cry. She always knew I'd after that.

s at the "I hate this place, El. Jason makes it so difficult to breathe. He's an a teenage jock kind of asshole. It just makes no sense at all. I get that v made a mistake, but shouldn't we both bear the consequences? Why o have to take it out on me like I'm his enemy? I'm suffering here too."

"It's okay, Fiona. You're okay. Breathe in. Breathe out. You're ok guessing I won't be visiting any time soon."

Suppressing my emotions, I tightly clamp my lips together and remain

The mere idea of not seeing her for fifteen months sends shivers down my back and spine, but I am determined to discover a solution. Failure is not an option

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The mere idea of not seeing her for fifteen months sends shivers down my spine, but I am determined to discover a solution. Failure is not an option.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Jason

As I draw nearer to Fiona's room, a sense of emptiness with intensifies. I wish to reject the culpability that weighs heavily on my chest for the way I berated her. Yet, I cannot bring myself to apologize; she has grown close to Richard, and I deem it impolite to conduct such actions in my home. It shouldn't happen in my house. But was it necessary to call her an asshole over it? I frown. She called me that first time.
Whatever!

I straighten my brown long-sleeve T-shirt and knock on the door. A muffled reply comes from the other end.

“Coming!”

My chest tightens. I've only seen her twice in almost three weeks because I'm busy but also partly because something about her is starting to get under my skin, and I don't like it. This should never have happened. It should never have happened.

The door opens slightly, and she peeks through, a puzzled expression on her face. I've never ever come to her room; I've never had a reason to. The door opens fully, and she steps aside, silent.

“I’m having a couple of business associates over for a party. No one about you and we need it to stay that way. That means you can’t come else someone might see you. Just stay here until I tell you it’s safe t out. Gotten?”

She stays still, unmoving. My eyes waver before landing on her sto swallow. It’s starting to protrude. There’s a baby in there—my *ba* heart starts to race as the thought catches me off guard, almost throw off. I glance around the room, noting how lonely it must be for her. “I asked if you got it.”

“Yes,” she says, avoiding my eyes.

hin meI hesitate for a second before turning to step out. Maybe I should let l on my friend come by so she’ll be less lonely. But that means her best frie gize, asknow this house. I don’t need that kind of attention.

ct suchThe loud doorbell distracts me from my thoughts, and I step out of he t reallymaking my way downstairs. Mom’s been cooking all afternoon for th st. even though I specifically told her she didn’t have to. I was fine with o food, but in her words, “I’m bored out of my mind. I need the chal A faintSometimes, she exerts herself when she should be resting. Today is those days. Maybe I shouldn’t have retired her as early as I did.

Honestly, the food smells pretty good.

, partlyI walk to the front door and open it. It’s Enns —always the first to sho rting toeverything, including work. Enns has been working at Consco from wl ed. *She* was in charge. He’s probably the most loyal Project Manager on th

There are only two things I dislike about Enns: his badly-timed jokes u on her bald head. He offers a wide smile as he steps into the living room.

he door“Where’s the music, Jason? Are we having a party or a funeral?”

Here we go.

knows It doesn't take long before everyone else starts to arrive, from Char
e out or MD, to Gabe, the Finance officer, to Kavia, the CTO. Kavia is th
o comewoman on the team. She's also the smartest and most efficient. I'm t
person who hasn't hit on her at Consco because I never mix busin
nach. I pleasure. I wish everyone thought the same way, but no one else
by. My considers it a big deal. Enns, over fifty and married for twenty-four ye
ring me on her too. Well, most of the Consco guys are married and sleepin
Hello? I everyone else but their wives anyway. Marriage really does suck.

It doesn't take long for the house to get packed. The party hits it off
short work speech, a few drinks, and some delicious snacks from m
er best the loud music fills the air, everyone wants to dance with Kavia,
nd will keeps asking me to dance. I finally agree, but only because to
different. As we move our bodies to the rhythm of Travie M
r room, *Billionaire*, I let myself loose, realizing how great a dancer she is. She
e party, shakes, and turns like she was a professional dancer in her previous lif
rdering would explain her toned body.

llenge." Just when the music gets to my head, I spot a familiar figure from the
one of of my eye. Richard. What's he doing here? I told him to stay out of r
until the party ends. It gets worse when I notice who he's dancin
Fiona.

w up at Everything in me boils as I fix my eyes on them. They're obliv
nen da everything and everyone else as they move to the beat of the music. I
e team. whispers something in Fiona's ears that causes her to laugh. I clench n
and his and look around. No one's really bothered about them.

They probably assume she's Richard's girlfriend.

The thought sends a wave of red-hot rage through my body, and m
pounds in my chest.

les, the Kavia, unaware of my change of mood, places her arms around me only when the slow music starts. My gaze keeps shifting toward Richard and Fiona, and I completely lose it when Fiona places her arms around Richard's neck to dance. I abandon Kavia before she realizes what's happening, really hastening toward them. Richard spots me first and whispers to Fiona. She grins. If I don't hold myself back, I'll lose my shit here. "What are you doing here?" I say.

My eyes dart from Richard to Fiona, resisting the urge to wipe my face after an ridiculous amused look on their faces. "Chill man, we just came to have a little fun too. We'll be out of here in a couple of minutes."

I turn to Fiona, who looks like she's about to laugh. Has she been drinking? "Let's dance," I say.

She stares at me with a puzzled expression on her face, then she blinks. That's gone. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I place my hand on the small of her back, over her tight shorts and hoodie. The hoodie hides her ass well enough.

"Did I not tell you that no one must see you?" I say in a low voice, trying to keep my voice down for the loud music. At least no one else will hear me.

"I was really bored staying upstairs all day. Richard came over and suggested we crash the party. I needed something fun."

I glance around to ensure that no one observes our heated conversation. Unfounded rumors spread. Then, I raise her hands and spin her around in a graceful circle. Her movements are elegant, prompting a smile to form on my lips. When she returns her arms to my neck, I become ensnared by her mesmerizing ocean-blue eyes, catching myself before I am completely lost. A slight

My neck runs down my spine as her fingers brush against my neck, taking me
hard and How does she possess such a potent effect on me?

Richard's "Fiona, when I say you stay in your room, you stay in your room."

Opening, She moves her feet two steps back and waves her hand in the air before
me again. another twirl. I close the gap between us, my gaze still fixated on her
are you shit. Everyone must be watching us. I look up to find a couple of
whispering to each other. Kavia seems displeased.

off the I need to talk to Fiona privately.

"Come with me," I whisper to Fiona and walk into the hallway. I peek
are in the room on the left. Empty. Good. I turn to ensure Fiona is behind me
opening the door and entering. When she steps in, I shut the door and
kiss her.

"Okay, I get it. I'm sorry, okay? Won't happen again."
kisses and "You don't get it!"

l on the She looks away, rolling her eyes and blowing out a noisy breath.

her little "I have a reputation to protect. No one can know about you. If it so
leaks, I'll lose everything! It's selfish to ignore all of that because
thankful bored!"

She scowls at me. I move back slightly, thrown off by her reaction.

gestured "Don't yell at me. I'm not your child! You know what? You're the
one. Hear me?"

on, lest It takes a while for me to process what she's saying, but she doesn't
end with She's almost screaming now.

lips. As "You get a girl pregnant and then what? Treat her like trash? Yell
whenever you feel like? Hardly ever talk to her except when you're
t shiver mood to yell at her some more?"

Her angry face morphs into a sorrowful expression.

back. "Do you think this is easy for me? You think I like my life snatched from me? You can have your business, work, and parties and I'm just supposed to hide with absolutely nothing to do. Do you ever even stop to think about the child you're doing carrying your child? *Your child.*"

Her. Oh I fall silent, my expression contorted into a frown. My gaze drops to the floor, watching the light reflect off the people brown marble tiles, and a profound stillness permeates the room. I am at a complete loss for words. Though I am loath to admit it, she is right that I have never contemplated how much of her life she has had to sacrifice. I raise my hand to her face and capture a tear as it trickles down her cheek, and I feel sorry for her before within me crumble as well. My mind becomes hazy as I once again struggle to glare at the allure of her ocean-blue eyes. What is happening to me? No one has ever managed to penetrate my defenses like this before. I have always been so focused solely on my life and my work, never experiencing guilt for not prioritizing myself. So why is this situation different?

She's sobbing now, and my heart throbs as I take slow steps toward her. When I reach her, I lift my fingers to wipe the tears, but she turns away from me. "What exactly do you want from me? I've given all I can. A job, a home, protection, a way out of the mess for you. What else do you want?"

"It makes no difference if you treat me like shit while at it."

I look away, trying to gather my thoughts. It's not working. I'm not thinking straight.

"I don't owe you anything."

"That's a lie. I'm the mother of your child. You owe me respect."

Her voice sounds like the agonizing grunt of a wounded soldier. The air is thick in the space between us now, and as she speaks, the warmth of her breath stirs my thoughts. I go blank. Looking down at her, the flashes of anger that have been building between the both of us spark a kind of electricity that I've never felt before.

ed fromThe next thing that happens is something I've never stopped thinkin
osed tofrom our first night together— my lips crashing onto hers. It happens
hat I'mintensely as the argument just moments ago. I shut my eyes, suspend
confused thoughts as my tongue finds hers. I run my hands over her
; to thedigging deeper with my tongue, finding ecstasy amid bewilderment. I
am at ashe's just as bewildered by how she tentatively places her arms arou
e neverneck. I grab her face, rubbing my thumbs over her skin softly. Flashes
eyes torush through my body as she bites my lip. Then it dawns on me wha
nothingbe happening between us.

iccumb*Shit. No. No. No.*

one hasNo matter how much I protest, the sensation of her lips on mine is a
alwaysthink about. It's just like the first time at Ruthless. Slow but urgen
uilt forquick and hungry.

Finally, we break off. I avoid her gaze, keeping my eyes on the sma
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breathing is still heavy. What the hell just happened? The thought of v
back to the living room annoys me and the idea of leaving her here t
hinkingwith unexplainable dread. The pull toward her is strong. I shut the doc
to her and claim her lips again, dizzy with desire.

re's no
ops my
hat ebb
before.

The next thing that happens is something I've never stopped thinking about from our first night together— my lips crashing onto hers. It happens just as intensely as the argument just moments ago. I shut my eyes, suspending my confused thoughts as my tongue finds hers. I run my hands over her thighs, digging deeper with my tongue, finding ecstasy amid bewilderment. I can tell she's just as bewildered by how she tentatively places her arms around my neck. I grab her face, rubbing my thumbs over her skin softly. Flashes of heat rush through my body as she bites my lip. Then it dawns on me what might be happening between us.

Shit. No. No. No.

No matter how much I protest, the sensation of her lips on mine is all I can think about. It's just like the first time at Ruthless. Slow but urgent. Then quick and hungry.

Finally, we break off. I avoid her gaze, keeping my eyes on the small table close to the door. Her breathing is loud and hitched. I try to calm my pulse, but nothing happens. I have to leave this place.

Too stunned to speak, I walk to the door and open it. I look back at her. Her breathing is still heavy. What the hell just happened? The thought of walking back to the living room annoys me and the idea of leaving her here fills me with unexplainable dread. The pull toward her is strong. I shut the door, walk to her and claim her lips again, dizzy with desire.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Fiona

As a twenty-six-year-old, I've experienced all kinds of confusion. Nothing prepared me for this kind of confusion—a man is yelling at me one minute and slamming his lips onto mine like he's starved for a minute. As I watch him walk to the door, my heart drops. A part of me wishes he'd stay some more. He stops when he opens the door, turns, and stares at me. Am I imagining it, or does he look as befuddled as I feel? He lingers at the door, his eyes still fixed on me. What's running through his mind? His midnight-dark hair shines in the light. What would it feel like to run my hands through them again? Like that night when we were caught in sweat and wild lust. My heart stops when he shuts the door and walks toward me.

Is this happening? Before I figure out what's going on, his lips brush against mine, enveloping them in a passionate kiss that causes my stomach to flutter. With both hands, he grabs my face, sliding his tongue into my mouth. His hands run from my back to my ass. He grabs it, pulling me to him. The whiff of his cologne fills my senses, and I shut my eyes, lost in the

scent of wood and strong fragrance. He pushes me to the table close to the door and tugs at my hoodie.

Oh, God. This is really happening.

I lift my hands as he takes the hoodie off, running his eyes over my body. He leaves my black bra in place and resumes kissing me. The thought of his hands through his hair again fills me with anticipation, and the more I try to suppress it, the more intrusive it becomes. I lift my hand slowly and place them on his neck. He runs his hands over my thighs, pushing his fingers between my legs. I let out a short gasp, lifting my head. Finally, I lean back and grab his full dark hair. My hands run through it, and the sensation is like a warm blanket. But my chest with warmth. He breaks contact with me and steps back. My head sinks. I should've known he was going to stop.

The expression on his face is difficult to read. He tilts his head for a moment, looking over my body. Then he closes the gap between us again and takes my bra off, rubbing my nipples with his thumbs. I let out a soft moan, and he grunts. His hands make their way down my shorts, and he tugs at the waistband. He wastes no time taking them off. He lifts me, placing me on the table like he's spreading my legs and undoing his belt. When he lets himself into me, his thrusts are slow and steady at first, like his kisses, until they become quick and hungry, engulfing my entire being.

My senses disappear with every thrust leading up to the final one that makes my legs vibrate. He's also vibrating as he releases with a force that makes me gasp. He grunts. His jaw tightens with his eyes still closed. When he opens his eyes, his darkness comes over them, and he steps away to clean and straighten himself. Aup. He's avoiding my gaze. I try to touch his hair again, but he shrinks away, moving my hand away. My heart shatters. This was all meaningful.

to the course, it was just sex and nothing more. What was I expecting? And importantly, how did I let this happen?

“Are...are you okay?”

My voice is raspy. I clear my throat, looking up at him. He ignores me, running putting himself together.

“You’re not saying anything.”

He’s done dressing up and walks toward the door, not throwing as much as a glance my way. The ache in my chest threatens to rip me apart.

“Jason,” I call when he turns the door handle.

“Are you okay? Talk to me.”

But he doesn’t. He looks up at me, all the bewilderment in his expression

wiped off. In its place is a dirty look that causes a cold shudder to run through me. He opens the door and lets himself out. I only notice that I’m

when a tear drops on my thighs. I wipe my eyes and the snot off my nose and he

No. I straighten. There’s nothing to be sad about. It’s just sex. What was I expecting? That he’d be ready to come crawling to me from now on

before my clothes back on, thinking about the first time we had sex from Richard. He was just as passionate, but everything disappeared after we were done

quickly left almost immediately without speaking to me. His expression was the same. But it didn’t bother me the last time. I didn’t know him, and it didn’t

cause a scare. So, why do I care now?

The door pushes open, and I look up. It’s not Jason. My heart sinks.

Richard walks up to me, studying me. He frowns, angling his body away from me. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes go wide.

“Are you crying?”

and more “No. I’m fine. Seriously.”

“You’re not a very good liar, you know?”

He sits beside me on the table.

me, still “Did Jason talk to you? Did he say something mean?”

He lowers his head to study me when I stay quiet but says nothing. I
he exhales.

much as a “I’m sorry. I know Jason can be a bit of a moron. A cold one. I honestly
know why, but I’m so sorry you have to go through this.”

Wait till you find out how he treats people after fucking them.

He takes my hand and covers them with his, rubbing them.

expression “I know you’re lonely. You don’t have to go through it alone. I’ll be here
for you. Overokay? Count me as your brother for life.”

crying A smile tugs at my lips, and I rest my head on his shoulder. He lowers
my nose to his chin, placing it on my head as he holds my hands.

it was I “It’s my fault. I’m sorry I made you come out. All of this wouldn’t
have happened if you’d just stayed in.”

useless. I raise my head sharply.

one. He “Don’t say that. I’m glad I got to do something fun.”

was the “Yeah?”

I didn’t “Yeah.”

His eyes light up.

“I have an idea.”

He jumps off the table and grabs my hand.

ay. “Let’s go play video games.”

He waggles his eyebrows. I want to tell him I’m not in the mood but
bring myself to. His presence keeps me grounded just when I think I can’t

it anymore – the way he treats me like he’s known me for years. He’s kind, and gentle. A stark difference from his older brother.



Finally, Summoning the fortitude to confront Jason after the events of the previous night, I find my knees unsteady. Sleep evades me and when it finally doesn't arrive, it is disrupted by a dream in which I am bereft of the child growing inside me. The mere thought of losing the baby causes me to remain awake for the rest of the night. Despite the fact that I never wanted the child, the delicate movements within me each morning elicit a smile on my face. Here too, if someone is relying on me to survive, a feeling that borders on enchantment.

How is it possible to feel such an intense love for someone who is your enemy's unborn? As I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I tenderly caress my belly.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand. 7 am. I have to go talk to Jason before he leaves for work. Throwing on a sweatshirt, I put on a slip-on and head out of my room. In the lobby, I walk toward Jason's room. When I get to the front of his room, I lift my hand to knock, but the door opens before I can blink. Jason exhales when he sees me. He's shirtless and covered in sweat, with just a pair of boxers on his waist, lowered slightly below his waistline. My heart skips a beat. So he works out first thing in the morning.

"W...What do you want?"

I'm tongue-tied as he scowls at me. I practiced the words I wanted to say over and over, to make sure I didn't get intimidated, but as I look into his eyes, everything dissipates.

I can't "I...we —"

Jason can't do "You'll have to be quick. I have to get to work in forty minutes."

is sweet, His hair is put together, not a strand out of place. How's that possible early in the morning?

"Hello?" He waves his hand over my face.

"I wanted to talk about what happened yesterday."

revious His gaze flickers and he looks down, as if searching for something.

ly does "Okay?" He finally says.

growing He folds his arms, leaning on the door rim. I try as hard as I can to t
awake my gaze from falling on his body, but it becomes difficult as he leans v
ild, the arms crossed. The sweat drips with slow intention, running down his c
e. It's ashis chest. It's the first time I get to see his finely sculpted muscles, esp
ntment, the abs that make him look like the god of war. I clear my throat,
et to bespeaks first.

ly. "If I may ask, what exactly happened yesterday?"

before My jaw drops.

ead out "We were together. We—"

t to the "Yes, I get it. And I'm sorry I let that happen. I lost control. It won't
I do. I again, I promise."

is sweat, I bow my head, fighting back tears, realizing that this was not the out
ist. My had hoped for. But then again, what was I expecting? I chide myself

naivety. Before I can even gather my thoughts, Jason abruptly shuts th

My breath catches in my throat, and I take a deep breath before tur

to say, leave. As soon as I step into my room, my phone buzzes. It's mom.

at him, I wipe my eyes before taking the call.

"Mom!" I say, in my most excited pretend voice. It still comes off
shrill. I hope she doesn't notice.

"Hey, Fifi! How are you?"

"I'm...I'm okay. I'm getting ready for classes today."

le very “Aww. I miss you. Made any new friends yet?”

“Uhh..yes. Two actually. Bertha and Richard. They’ve been super helpful to me.”

I facepalm my forehead quietly. Richard and Bertha? I groan. This is so silly.

“What’s wrong?”

prevent “Uhh, nothing. I didn’t sleep well last night. I was trying to catch up with some schoolwork that I’ve been behind on. Hey, how’s dad?”

him and “He’s alright. I think he misses you more than I do.”

pecially “I miss you guys too.”

but he Tears well up as the words leave my mouth. I miss them so much. I miss the safety I felt having them around. I miss not having to lie or hide things from them.

“Did Eleanor tell you about her promotion? She’s now the manager of the deli. What’s the name again?”

happen “Rudolph’s?”

“Bingo. She didn’t tell you?”

to come I’ve been so caught up with my life that I haven’t bothered to check in for my My heart clenches from guilt. There are actual people who love me. I need to focus on them and ignore the ones who don’t give a hoot.

ning to “We haven’t talked in a while. In between classes and work, there’s always phone call time. I should call her anyway. I think I’ll do so today.”

“Fifi?”

a little “Yes, Mom.”

“No one’s giving you a hard time over there, right?”

I wish I could tell her someone really is giving me a hard time, and his name is Jason Greene. But then she’ll ask me how they’re doing that. There’s

It's not like I can say he got me pregnant, and now he's mean to me. I know he's helpful to think he can have sex with me whenever he wants and treat me like a normal girl right after.

is just "Fifi? Are you there?"

In the background, Dad yells, "I'll be ready to throw hands!"

"I'm here, Mom. No. No one's giving me a hard time."

up with I shut my eyes and imagine I'm at home and Mom's making my favorite meal — stir-fried spaghetti and meatballs.

"You can always talk to me if something bothers you, Fifi."

"I know. Thanks, Mom."

miss the As soon as the call ends, I slump onto my bed, consumed by a whirlwind of emotions. I can't afford to wallow in self-pity, not now. I need a distraction.

something to keep my mind occupied and prevent it from wandering

at that Jason. That's when my favorite fantasy of donning a graduation gown

becoming a successful veterinary doctor flashes before my eyes. I

fueled by newfound determination. It's high time I give my school

applications another shot.

on her.

should

's little

is name

1 what?

It's not like I can say he got me pregnant, and now he's mean to me. He also thinks he can have sex with me whenever he wants and treat me like trash right after.

"Fifi? Are you there?"

In the background, Dad yells, "I'll be ready to throw hands!"

"I'm here, Mom. No. No one's giving me a hard time."

I shut my eyes and imagine I'm at home and Mom's making my favorite meal — stir-fried spaghetti and meatballs.

"You can always talk to me if something bothers you, Fifi."

"I know. Thanks, Mom."

As soon as the call ends, I slump onto my bed, consumed by a whirlwind of emotions. I can't afford to wallow in self-pity, not now. I need a distraction, something to keep my mind occupied and prevent it from wandering back to Jason. That's when my favorite fantasy of donning a graduation gown and becoming a successful veterinary doctor flashes before my eyes. I sit up, fueled by newfound determination. It's high time I give my scholarship applications another shot.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Jason

Despite not seeing Fiona for weeks, our last encounter has been in my mind. It haunts me even at work. One moment, I'm engaged in conversation with Gabe about finances, and the next, I'm hearing her voice echo in my ears. Or, I'm playing snooker, and the gentle touch of her fingers in my hair leaves me numb. I've tried to sleep with other women, but it's all futile. The only time I tried, with a French woman named Aurélie I met on a business trip, I couldn't even get to the second base. We sat next to each other on a flight to Belgium, and she introduced herself with a sexy accent. She was the daughter of a wealthy shipping magnate, and we made small talk until she invited me to her penthouse. I had time to spare before my meeting with the suppliers, so I agreed. But, after one kiss, all I could think of were Fiona's luscious lips. It was alarming how her memory consumed me, and I had no choice but to leave Aurélie's penthouse immediately. I lied and told her I had received an urgent text that required my immediate attention. Now, sitting in my therapist's office, the thoughts claw at my heart, and the helplessness of it all drowns me.

“Jason?”

I'm snapped back to reality by the gentle voice of Sean, my therapist sitting in his small, yet cozy office, surrounded by abstract paintings of various colors and moods. Each artwork on the white walls is unique and captivating in its way, but one, in particular, catches my attention even when I'm here. It's a colorful masterpiece, with brushstrokes that seem to swirl like a whirlwind. Sean once told me that the paintings help him understand how his clients perceive the world in their unique ways.

"I'm sorry."

As I look up at him, I notice that Sean has cut his hair shorter and dyed the grey strands. It's a small change, but it's noticeable, and it makes sense why he would want to do it. Despite being in his late forties, he always had a bit of grey hair, which sometimes made him look older than he actually is. But when he moans about the new haircut and dye job, he looks younger and more vibrant.

He looks at his fingers and asks, "Did you hear my question?"

"Of course, I did. His question was the trigger that relaunched your thoughts on Fiona."

He asks, "You asked what kinds of dreams I've been having lately."

Aurélie says, "Yes. You went quiet. What were you thinking about?"

I shift in my seat, leaning back.

"Uhh...I've been dreaming about Fiona."

His stare is blank as he fixes his gaze on me, leaning forward.

He asks me, "You mean Fiona, who's currently in your house?"

I told him about Fiona months ago, complaining about her pregnancy and how I was having to take her in. He didn't consider it a bad thing that she was pregnant.

In fact, he congratulated me and suggested I try looking at the possibility of having her at the time, though, there was nothing positive about it except the prospect of a new heir. I told him that. He didn't push.

ist. I'm "Yes."

ings of "What kinds of dreams have you been having about her?"

ue and I shrug, folding my arms.

ry time "I don't know. Just..." I rub the back of my neck. "Sometimes, I'm l
le pict a her lap and she has her hands in my hair. Other times, it's ...it's a..."
ow his my throat. "A sex dream."

"Hmm. So does that mean no nightmares still?"

"Yeah."

yed the "Jason, it seems that your nightmares have disappeared. Can you rer
se why the last time you had them?"

a lot of I started having nightmares in boarding school. At first, they were m
but with as I got older, they became more bizarre. Many nights, I was unable t
unless I was thoroughly exhausted. And when I did sleep, the nigh
made sure it wasn't for long. In my teens, I often woke up crying, l
ghts of grew, I accepted that I'd probably deal with it for life and adjusted
didn't make them any less gruesome. I just found a way to shut it o
work, sex, or working out like a beast. I'll never forget how the nigh
started. I clench my fists as the senior high student's pale face form:
mind.

"I can't remember."

"Well, let's see." He flips his notebook, tracing the pages with his

"You told me about your last nightmare almost four months ago. It wa
icy and falling down a pit and almost dying in there. Do you remember that?"

egnant. "Oh. Right. I think I remember. I had a meeting the following day w
ves. At Davidson."

ct of an He places his pen on his lips, his nose wrinkled. His elbows lean on tl
to support his weight on the glossy mahogany table covered in several

“Can you give a short rundown of what the next day looked like?”

I tilt my head to the side, rubbing my chin. It’s a bit hazy, but the more I think about it, the more the details come to me.

“I didn’t sleep a wink that night because the dreams were especially disturbing. I stayed up working all night, and left for work in the morning.

Later that day, I went to see Mr. Davidson. It was a grueling conversation.

After that, I think I went home for dinner, but my mom wouldn’t talk to me about marriage and kids. She kept saying I couldn’t marry Eva because marriage should be for love. I got pissed and left to go to Ruthless.

I had a few drinks, had sex with a woman from Ruthless, and went home tired and a little wild, but in the morning.”

Sean lifts a finger, motioning for me to pause. Then he rotates his finger, telling me to repeat something. I scrunch my face up, confused.

“You said you had sex with a woman. Was it Fiona? You mentioned her name. That you met Fiona at Ruthless, right? You’ve never had sex with a woman from Ruthless.”

I blink. He’s right. That was the night I met Fiona at Ruthless. A picture of her in my white dress comes again, followed by the sex at the motel.

“Yes. It was Fiona.”

He snaps his fingers and offers a wide smile.

“I think there’s something going on here. So, let’s be clear. Since Fiona’s nightmares have suddenly stopped. And now she’s the one you’re dreaming about.”

At this point, I’m too stunned to speak. The faint buzz of the AC above the window fills the room, drowning out the silence. Sean is watching me with a grin on his face.

“W...what are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying you should consider that she might be helping. Does this make any sense to you?”

I stay silent. Fiona is helping ease the nightmares? Wait, does that mean having her around is good for me?
Morning. I scoff.

Question. “Why do you think that is?” He asks.

I shut up. “To be honest, I don’t know.”

Question. “Is it more that you don’t know or that you can’t see it yet? Do you think it might be a coincidence?”

The next I inhale. I want to believe that Sean is making some sense but it’s difficult to see it. I think it’s only a coincidence that my nightmares have stopped. I definitely don’t think she has anything to do with that.

“I think that’s a coincidence.”

Question. “That’s okay. Has anything changed about you since the night the woman stopped?”

“Well, I think I can show my feelings better. A little. I’m not angry anymore. Part of the time too.”

“Okay. Can you tell me just two things that you like about Fiona?”

“Are we going to spend the day talking about Fiona?”

“Just two.”

Fiona, the memory of her beautiful brown hair and piercing blue eyes, along with the innocent way she smiles, comes back to me.

“Uhhh...I think she’s really pretty and she knows how to be vulnerable with the people.”

Question. A stray thought causes me to pause. Am I learning vulnerability from her?
That’s...that’s not possible.

“I think you should consider spending more time with her. Get to know her.”

s make and take note of as many admirable attributes of hers as possible. At some time to reflect on all the ways you've been changing. We'll talk about that the next time you're here. Is that a deal?"

I stare at the brown rug, running everything he's said through my mind. Do I need to do that?

I grimace. "Fine."



think it

As I drive home, Sean's words keep ringing in my head.

It's difficult to "Is it more that you don't know or that you can't see it yet?"

It happened. I But what's there to see? My nightmares stopped the same time I met her. What? The memory of her tears in the vacant room downstairs tugs at my heartstrings, and I can't help but feel a sense of remorse for causing her nightmares. It's not just her honesty and candor that I admire, but also her uncanny courage to be true to herself. Fiona wears her heart on her sleeve, a trait most of both vulnerable and captivating. There's an aura of excitement and adventure that surrounds her. When was the last time I had some healthy fun that wasn't sex or alcohol?

The weight of my cowardice hits me like a ton of bricks as I recall meeting Fiona after our little tryst and then hastily escaping the next morning with mortifying how I ran away from a mere conversation about it. If only I could explain to her that my flight was spurred by the fear of my own vulnerability. I've never allowed anyone to get that close to me before, and my aversion to vulnerability keeps robbing me of meaningful connections and causing me to wonder about Fiona? to those who can't fathom my actions.

How her,

so, take I look out the window, watching a man walking to a black car beside a
k about uniform who's probably around thirteen. I was about the same age w
high school senior did what he did to me. My grip tightens arou
d. Why steering wheel as I try to shove the memory down. I never told anyon
it, not even mom. I didn't know how she'd react to it.

As I approach the house, my phone vibrates — Eva. I want to ignore t
but after she got upset the last time, it wouldn't be wise.

“Hello, Eva.”

“Hi, Jace. You free today? I'm having a couple of friends over for dri
games tonight. I thought you might be interested.”

her. So “Uhh...I wish I could, but I'm honestly exhausted. Just coming fr
; at my therapist's office, and there's a lot to process.”

er pain. “Oh. Makes sense. That's okay. Take care.”

aving I drive into the house and step out, hesitant. So, I'm just supposed t
it that's Fiona and talk? I exhale, walking to the house. A part of me looks for
venture it. I've seen her just once since the sex thing, and that was the time sh
: wasn't to my room to talk about it. Maybe I can find a way to apologize to
my coldness after sex.

leaving When I step into the house, the whole place is silent, and there's no
ing. It's sight.

I could *Where's everyone?*

otions. I look up at the lobby on the other end upstairs, where Richard's r
rsion to located, it's empty. All of a sudden, strange sounds fill the air, but they
ng pain from his room. It sounds like —

My eyes go wide. *Fiona.*

I march up the staircase to her room, my fists clenched. The closer I
louder her voice. It sounds like she's moaning. Isn't that Richard's voi

A boy in head spins as I stand in front of her door, and I push it without thinking. When the door opens, both of them are in here, with Tex. They jump in shock as the door flies open. There's an awkward silence as they stare at me, puzzled. They jump toward me, barking. I'm such an idiot. They're just playing with me.

How'd I think anything like that would be happening?

When he calls, Tex jumps on me, licking my hands. I stoop as he skips all over me, with his tail wagging.

"Hey, boy! How are you?"

He licks my neck.

"Woah. Easy."

I let out an awkward laugh and look up at them. I nod at Richard.

"What are you guys up to?"

"Uhh.. since when do you care?"

I grin and stand to my feet, my eyes on Fiona. Her brown hair is in a bun, leaving her face bare but completely beautiful. I smile like a high schooler with a crush.

For Jeez, Jason. Get a grip. "Sorry for not knocking. I thought it was my room."

She presses her lips together and tilts her head, brows furrowed.

"Anyway, how are you feeling?"

My eyes land on her stomach and I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to touch it. In normal homes, fathers talk to the baby and even rub the belly. What if the baby grows distant from me because it didn't receive my love from me while in there?

As if reading my thoughts, she rubs her belly gently and looks up at me.

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure? What about all the morning sickness stuff? And the accident? MyShe scrunches up her face.

g. Sure“Uhhh...Jason, are you okay?”

he door“I’m fine. You didn’t answer.”

ed. Tex“I still get sick, but it gets better at noon. The doctor came in this morn
th Tex.a routine check. Says everything is fine.”

I nod, looking around her room. Do I go in and sit? No. That’d be too
raggingI’ll take it slow.

“Okay. I’m tired. Going to rest.”

I give a slight wave and turn to go, but Tex follows.

“Hey, buddy. C’mon, go back to Fiona, okay?”

When I finally exit her room and shut her door, I release the breath I l
idea I am holding.

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ool kid

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e.

ies?”

“Uhhh...Jason, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. You didn’t answer.”

“I still get sick, but it gets better at noon. The doctor came in this morning for a routine check. Says everything is fine.”

I nod, looking around her room. Do I go in and sit? No. That’d be too much. I’ll take it slow.

“Okay. I’m tired. Going to rest.”

I give a slight wave and turn to go, but Tex follows.

“Hey, buddy. C’mon, go back to Fiona, okay?”

When I finally exit her room and shut her door, I release the breath I have no idea I am holding.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Fiona

As each passing day ensues, my hunger only intensifies, and perched within the confines of my living room, with a plate salted crackers laid out before me, the tales I've ingested regard peculiar cravings of gravid women begin to resonate with new meaning.

“Yesterday, I just wanted peanut butter, and the day before, it was (food. I've never even had that, but I just decided that's what I wanted.” Richard laughs.

“What's the weirdest craving you've ever had?”

“Hmm...there was this one time last week I wanted to eat ice. And the smell of soap in the shower made my mouth water this other time. I'd sworn I was going crazy, but the doctor said it was nothing to be worried about. She gave me some vitamins.”

Richard completely cracks up, throwing his head back. His calm personality makes it so easy to hang out with him. How's he so different from Jason? Well, Jason's been a little different these days. Weird mostly, but

kind of nice. I went from only seeing him once in three weeks to seeing every other week. He even joined some of my small talk with Richard. On one occasion, as I ventured forth to open my door, there stood a man resolutely fixed in front of my portal. His explanation, that he was stationed at the locale for a certain item, was rather questionable, as it appeared to me that he had been stationed there for quite some time. I cannot help but perceive that there exists some deep-rooted complication that afflicts him, a perplexing quandary which he is currently grappling with. Nonetheless, I am confident that he has yet to subject me to the indignity of verbal tirades.

The vivid image of him leaning nonchalantly in front of his door, clad in a dark, heavy nether garment and drenched in perspiration, comes surging back to the forefront of my thoughts. The resultant effect is a sudden and intense wave of embarrassment, causing my countenance to flush with an irrefutable crimson hue.

The loud doorbell draws me out of my thoughts.

Chinese “I’ll get it,” Richard says, standing to his feet.

’ I nibble on the last piece of cracker, staring at the empty plate.

Still hungry.

I sigh in frustration.

When the clank of heels fills the house until a tall, slender lady walks into the living room. The first thing I notice is her hair — its tips are dyed a slightly worried pink. *Kinda pretty but too flashy.*

She stops and stares directly at me. I stand to my feet, stretching my hair care-free. “Hi. I’m Fiona. Welcome.”

From She narrows her eyes, staring me down.

Out also “Can you please get me a drink? I’m thirsty.”

I blink.

ing him “Uhhh...”

Who’s this and why does she think she can send me on an errand
without ignoring my outstretched hand?

“That’s kind of rude.”

She gives me a dirty look and steps back. Her short sparkly silver dress
underneath as she does.

“What’s rude? Asking you to do your job?”

I stand still. What job?

“I’ll give you some advice for free— If you want to keep your job,
you’re going to have to drop that nasty attitude and entitlement.”

Richard jogs in, brows furrowed.

“What’s the problem, Eva?”

I stare at my feet, holding my breath. Tears prickle my eyes, and I
look away.

Eva turns to face Richard, her jaws clenched. She points to me.

“Your maid is a little entitled. Who hired her?”

She thought I was a maid? Who the hell makes conclusions like that?

Maybe I looked like one.

Richard scratches his jaws and blinks rapidly. Then he opens his mouth
to say something, but no words come. Finally, he clears his throat and
looks at me.

“Did you just call my girlfriend a maid, Eva?”

He places his arm around my neck, shuffling his feet. I almost choke
but stare at him, but he avoids my gaze.

“Meet Fiona. Fiona, meet Eva, a friend of the family.”

Eva’s jaw drops, but she picks them up quickly.

“This...this is your girlfriend?”

She looks me all over, as if sizing me up.

I smile while “In that case, I’m Eva. It’s nice to meet you.”

The grimace on her face is still quite obvious, but she turns around. Tears fall down my face by now, but I wipe them quickly.

She sways “Where’s Jason? I wanted to drop by for a surprise visit. I’m sure I’m super pleased. I even got his favorite snack.”

His favorite snack? I don’t know what that is. Is she his girlfriend? I wonder before looking away again, my throat closing. So then, Jason has a girlfriend you’re I lower my head, gripping my elbows. If she doesn’t know me, then he’ll tell her about the baby. So, his plan is to mess around with me and then get out? Bile rises in my throat.

“What in the world is going on here?”

A deep raspy voice comes from the entrance lobby. It’s Jason. He steps into the living room and walks directly to Eva, frowning.

“Jason! Hi! I just met Richard’s girlfriend. No one told me he got a girlfriend. I’m starting to think no one in this family bothers to tell me anything anymore.”

Jason turns to me, but his nostrils flare. Is he angry at me? What’d I do? I turn back to Eva.

Jason asks up “What are you doing here?”

“I dropped by to bring you your favorite snack.”

She rummages through her pink bag and brings out a pack of Doritos. I try to hand it to him, but he stares at her.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Eva’s cheeks turn red, and she takes a step back, looking from Richard to me.

“Eva, don’t come over without first letting me know.”

“I just wanted to —”

“I said don’t show up without informing me first, unless it’s urgent. I don’t want you to show up unannounced. This should never happen again.” He takes the Doritos from her. “But thanks for the snack. Are you staying?”

“No. I just dropped to check on you and give you the snack.” She sounds like she’s about to cry and turns quickly, walking out the house.

She isn’t Jason’s girlfriend, then?

Jason walks over to me and takes my hand.

“Are you okay?”

I sniffle.

“Come with me.”

Taking my arms, he leads me up the stairs and into his room. Jason slips into my arms and leading me into his room? When I step into his room, my eyes go wide.

A startling realization dawns upon me as I behold the expanse of his room, taking note of its grandeur and sheer scale. A mammoth L-shaped chandelier, gleaming in hues of gold, commands my attention, while a gargantuan television screen, dwarfing its counterpart in the living room below, looms in the background. An intricate and elaborate chandelier, suspended from the lofty ceiling, serves as the pièce de résistance, elevating this space to a level of opulence and sophistication surpassing even that of the downstairs living room.

Jason leads me to the sofa and pulls the ottoman to sit on it. He sits facing me and studies me quietly. For the first time, I peer into his hazel-brown eyes. He takes my hands.

“What did she say to you?”

I stay quiet. He keeps his gaze on me, rubbing my hands with his thumb.

t's rude "She thought I was the maid."

kes the "And Richard said you were his girlfriend?"

"Yes." My voice breaks. I clear my throat.

"Yes."

of the He breathes deeply, staring at the floor for a long time before looking at me.

"Did she insult you?"

I want to say No. I don't want him to be nice to me simply out of pity.

"I don't know. She was just rude."

He bares his teeth, tapping his feet rapidly.

A stray thought hits me.

holding *I've descended to new lows. People think I'm a maid now.*

ny eyes Unbeknownst to me, a single teardrop falls from my eye, betraying overwhelming emotions that have engulfed me. The realization that my existence, my very being, is at the mercy of another is perhaps the most disquieting sensation one can experience. A mere fleeting encounter with another individual has had the capacity to irrevocably alter the course of my life, impinging upon not only my relationships with loved ones, but also inducing profound physiological changes within my own body. Such is the unsettling nature of this precarious situation in which I find myself.

s living "Don't cry. Please."

With a hesitant motion, he raises his hand to brush away the solitary tear touching my cheek, his touch gentle yet tentative. His hand lingers on my visage, tracing a path along my chin, as if his fingers were custom-made for such a task. In this moment, all of our past disagreements and clashes seem to fade into obscurity, as if they were mere figments of my imagination. For a moment,

ib.

instant, a sense of tranquility envelops us, as if the universe itself conspired to bring us together in this singular moment.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been the best during this difficult time you’re through. I’ve been really selfish and stupidly insensitive.”

g up at Although I am taken aback by his sudden display of contrition, I am aware that any sort of verbal acknowledgment may serve as a distraction, potentially derailing this fleeting moment. As such, I remain silent, lulled in the warmth of his touch and the overwhelming sense of connection we share in this brief moment of respite.

“I should’ve known better. It’s tough for me, but not half as tough as you. You haven’t seen your parents in months, your best friend’s family, your life’s on hold, your body’s changing really fast, and you’re increasingly lonely. Yet I never help out with your needs. I’m never available. I try to be very harshly even though you’re carrying *my* child. I act like I forget you are the most important person in my life.” He pauses like he’s deep in thought and then continues.

er with “I’ll try to be better from now on. If you ever need anything, you can come to me. Or come over here. I won’t shut the door in your face. I promise.”

out also He grins and crosses his heart with his finger. I’m still in shock because of his apology. He looks up at me and leans forward. It takes me a while to

he’s staring at my lips. My mind fights the thoughts that stream in. What if he kisses me and becomes cold all over again? What if he sends me out of his room in anger? What if he yells at me again?

delicate When his lips meet mine, all of the thoughts fade into oblivion. His kisses are soft, like flowers in a blooming field. With his thumb, he caresses my cheek.

de into Our lips perform a slow dance, one responding to the other in a fleeting harmony like it’s a dance we’ve been performing for years. He doesn’t

it. He doesn’t take my tongue like he’s ravenous. Instead, he kisses me

elf hadgift he has to cherish. Like a fragile object. When he breaks away, tugs at his lips. He inches closer, planting a kiss on my cheeks and another going my forehead. Heat rushes through my cheeks, and I hold them to his hue. His eyes twinkle. This is the first time there's something more acutely blank expression on his face.

reaction, "Will you stay a little longer with me?"

basking "You want me to?"

that we He nods.

In one swift motion, he lifts me effortlessly, and I find myself perched on his lap, my legs encircling his waist. We move together, his sturdy arms carrying us to the massive sofa, where he lays his head gently upon my shoulder. Without hesitation, I wrap my arms around him, tangling my fingers in his hair, and savor the intoxicating aroma of his shampoo. Time seems to stand still as we remain ensconced in this tender embrace, enveloped by a sense of calm and comfort that is all-encompassing. The nagging thoughts of uncertainty and apprehension that had plagued me earlier are suddenly replaced by a sense of contentment that can only be found in this moment with him. The possibility of his distant demeanor resurfacing tomorrow becomes a distant concern, as the overwhelming sensation of being enveloped in his embrace washes over me, soothing my very soul.

He lifts his head.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

"I'm not."

"Let me know if you are."

"Okay. But I'm not."

"Should we watch something? What's your favorite show?"

"Mmm, I don't think you'll like it."

a smile “Try me,” he says with a smirk.

other on “*You*.”

side the His nose wrinkles.

than a “Me?”

I burst out laughing at his genuine confusion.

“I’m flattered, but I’m not a show.”

“I mean *You*. The name of my favorite show is *You*. That’s the title. Y-

It takes him a while, but eventually, his face lights up.

ed upon “Oh! You mean *You* is the title of the show?”

7 frame He bursts into laughter.

y chest. “Right. Okay, let’s watch it. What’s it about?”

s in his “It’s about a guy named Joe and all his...uhmm...adventures.”

o stand A gentle chuckle escapes from him as he reaches for the remote cont

ense of movements are fluid and graceful. I plop down onto the sofa next to hi

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narrow content to let reality take a backseat for just a little while longer.

being

“Try me,” he says with a smirk.

“*You.*”

His nose wrinkles.

“Me?”

I burst out laughing at his genuine confusion.

“I’m flattered, but I’m not a show.”

“I mean *You*. The name of my favorite show is *You*. That’s the title. Y-O-U.”

It takes him a while, but eventually, his face lights up.

“Oh! You mean *You* is the title of the show?”

He bursts into laughter.

“Right. Okay, let’s watch it. What’s it about?”

“It’s about a guy named Joe and all his...uhmm...adventures.”

A gentle chuckle escapes from him as he reaches for the remote control, his movements are fluid and graceful. I plop down onto the sofa next to him, still in a state of disbelief that this surreal moment is actually happening. A part of me wonders if this is all just a pleasant dream, an illusion conjured up by my subconscious mind. Nevertheless, I allow myself to revel in the moment, content to let reality take a backseat for just a little while longer.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Jason

I'm covered in sweat as I jerk from sleep, panting. Rolling over to the nightstand beside my bed, I turn the bedside lamp on and sit up. I feel the cool breeze from the AC above my bedroom window. Its soft hums continue even though the room is suddenly hot. The nightmares are back, and this time they're worse. I've had two nightmares this week, and it's just Wednesday. My mind races as I try to remember the details of the nightmare. It's a bit fuzzy, but I remember I saw Dad. He came to my office, insisting that I stole his position as CEO. I tried to explain that he had left me in charge, but he didn't listen. Before I could blink, he began to strangle me, and as I choked, I was coughing. I hold my neck, grimacing. Is this ever going to stop?

Every nightmare I've had revolves around a trusted person harming or abandoning me. Years ago, I dreamt I married a woman who stabbed me with a knife. It's a reflection of my fears concerning marriage. You're like a ticking time bomb, the mercy of someone who might turn their back on you when you least expect it.

I should get something to drink to help me go back to sleep. A glass of water should do. I move out of bed, feeling around for my slip-on. But what

to sleep and have another nightmare? I turn the doorknob, making my way to the kitchen downstairs.

The entire house is dark and quiet, except for the hums from the electrical outlets around the house. A dim light glows from the kitchen, and as I step into the hallway, my heart skips. Fiona is standing with her back turned to me as she faces the refrigerator. Her brown hair is in a bun, and her shorts reveal her thigh and creamy skin. My heart stirs. I clear my throat, and she turns, a glass of milk in her hands. She grins as I walk toward her.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?”

“You realize I’m pregnant, right?”

I scratch my head. What’s she talking about?

“I deal with insomnia on some nights. Woke up an hour ago to throw up, but I couldn’t go back to sleep because no matter how much I turned, even though they’re so uncomfortable.”

I didn’t know that. I should respect her more; she’s dealing with so much, but I should.

“And you’ve been dealing with this constantly?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs. “I walk around, or go to the terrace to watch the night sky. It gets lonely, but I handle it well enough.”

I rarely experience guilt, but as she speaks, I realize all the ways I was wrong. I can’t believe the woman carrying my baby has been unable to sleep most nights, and I had no idea. *Dammit, asshole.*

She was right. I was such an asshole. It’s a good thing I’ve been married to her for at least a year, even though nothing will make up for all the times I humiliated her.

“Sorry about that.”

She drops the empty glass in the sink.

“What about you? It’s like 2 am. You just got back from a trip a

way to should be resting. Why are you up?"

I climb onto the counter, and she does the same, watching me intently.
Electronics "I had another nightmare."

in, my "Another? So...you have nightmares all the time?"

ces the "Yeah."

hs with I can't believe how easy it is to spill things to her that I've never told
of water else except my therapist. Mom doesn't even have an idea.

I peer into her face, observing her blank expression. What's she thinking
about?

"How long have you had those?"

"You don't even want to know."

up, and "Actually, I do. Tell me about it."

rything She places a hand on my lap and looks up at me. Her eyes glow
tenderness. I fall into these eyes every time I look at her. Do I like or love
much feeling? I'm not so sure.

"It's been like that from high school."

She lets out a small gasp as her fingers touch her lips.

noon. It "That's like over twenty years. A really long time. And you have these
night?"

s unfair "Well, not every night. But yeah, most nights. On a good week, I can
to sleep without one, but that's rare. Although recently..."

My voice trails off. I want to tell her that I've gone months without
king up thanks to her, but how will she receive it?

her. "Recently what?"

"They disappeared for a while. I guess they're back, and I don't know

Or maybe I have a hunch. For the past month, I have been consumed with
and your demands of my job, traveling incessantly to establish a new branch of

in a foreign country. The days blur together, the endless meetings and negotiations blurring into an indistinguishable haze. In the midst of it all, my thoughts constantly drift back to Fiona, wondering how she's faring in her absence. The moments of respite between work obligations are filled with thoughts of her, wondering if she's lonely, if she's taking care of herself. I know she misses me even half as much as I miss her. The distance between us feels like a palpable weight, a constant reminder of what I'm missing out on. I wonder, "Maybe they disappeared because you weren't as stressed?"

You have no idea.

"I guess you're right. But I don't know for sure."

"Please tell me you're in therapy."

I let out a chuckle.

With her, "Yeah. I've had one since my dad died. That's like since I was twenty-three." She jumps off the counter and makes her way to the terrace. I follow her. Resting on the silver railing, she looks up at the sky, almost enchanted. I'm enchanted too, but it's not because of the sky.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

In every room, "Oh, it's absolutely beautiful," I say, my eyes fixed on her. She turns, and our eyes meet. She smiles shyly and plops down on the floor opposite the round white table surrounded by white stools. This particular spot in our house is reserved for special occasions, as it offers a unique outdoor experience that can't be replicated at the dining table. I can't help but feel a sense of peace spread through me as I realize how much she's missed me, and I make my way over to her, settling down beside her with a sense of ease. "Why?" contentment.

With her, "Do you know why you keep having these nightmares?"

Consciousness As I sit beside Fiona, my breath catches in my throat. Part of me wants

ings and keep my troubles to myself, but another part of me yearns to share even all this, with her. Her gaze is still fixed on the sky, and I follow it, staring at the glowing moon hanging overhead. Its soft glow stands out against the backdrop of a dark night sky, the tiny stars scattered around it like diamonds in the sky itself, if beautiful sight, and for a moment, I find myself lost in its beauty. Her words echo in my mind, and I can't help but agree with her - it is beautiful.

“It’s a long horrible story. I don’t think you want to hear it.”

She turns sharply.

“No. I do. I told you, I’m every bit interested in listening.”

“Why are you so interested?”

No one has ever shown a genuine interest in me before. They were always after something - my money, my car, or the prestige that comes with it. “I’m not the only one associated with me. It’s no wonder that I’ve never had any close friends behind people who don’t need my money are equally exhausting, spending thousands of dollars on women who don’t truly love them or trying to one-up each other with flashy cars and expensive watches. It all seems so childish. But here, with Fiona, it’s different. She’s interested in me for me, not for what I can give her.

“I don’t know. You’re kinda difficult to understand. Hearing your words helps put things in perspective, I guess.”

“You’re interested in understanding me?”

“Would it hurt to get to know the father of my child better?”

A smile tugs at my cheeks, and a tingling sensation runs all over my skin as my throat grows thick.

“Something happened in high school. I’m still trying to heal from it.”

I push my back up and rest my head on the wall. She doesn’t take her eyes off me.

rything “I went to an all-male boarding school. I was just a sophomore
ne half-everything changed for me. At first, it was going well. I was pretty co
p of the the seniors; many of them flocked around me because my dad wa
y. It's aknown. One of them seemed to care a lot about me, and we became
Fiona's close, even though he was an eleventh grader. I had no idea I had ene
iful. was really weird. I was a confident kid, and I guess some peopl
intimidated. So this senior, who was my friend, invites me to a party th
seniors are having.”

I make air quotes around ‘party.’

“I had no idea it was an ambush. They planned for it all along and t
always senior I completely trusted lured me into the trap. They beat me up, a
h being forced me to...to—”

ds. The I blink back the painful tears and swallow. Fiona doesn't say anythin
eir timelike senses this is difficult for me. I've never shared this story with
up each except my therapist. How am I telling her this so easily?

to me. “They forced me to do all kinds of things. It was sexual abuse. When
: what I up, I was at the clinic, and this...this senior who was my friend was
beside me. He told the nurse he found me passed out outside.”

stories I clench my jaws, avoiding her gaze. The feeling of dread, shame, and
washes over me afresh, like it was yesterday, not twenty-three years ag
“That's when I started having these nightmares.”

Fiona is quiet, and her eyes are wide. Something glows on her cheeks
cin. My crying?

“It's been a long time and honestly, I think I've grown past it.”

“Why didn't you tell the authorities about the incident? Those cru
er gazes should've been severely punished and expelled.”

I shake my head.

when “You don’t understand. When I opened my eyes, the senior who I trusted with me they would hurt me if I ever told a soul. It wasn’t hard to get me as well-up honestly. I was just a kid. They could harm me if they wanted to if they really wanted to forget about everything.”

Silence lingers between us for a long time, but Fiona’s gaze stays on me. She shuffles closer, rests her head on my shoulders, and rubs my arms.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that. I can’t imagine how scared and alone you were.”

I place my chin on her hair, running my hands through them. Finally, I touch her face with my finger on her jaw. She looks up at me, and my mind then quickens. I inch closer slowly until the distance between our

lips is nonexistent. I inhale when my lips touch hers, closing my eyes to savor the taste of her lips. She places her hands on my chest, running her hands over them. I’m enraptured as electricity sparks my skin, causing goosebumps to form.

She moans when I bite her lip and slowly push my tongue into her mouth like I know my way around. My heart pounds in my chest while she seated plucks at my left nipple. My body is set on fire. The slow kisses become

heavy and hungry. Every part of me is thirsty for her. I run my hands over her body, filling my senses with her tenderness. Her scent assails my nostrils.

I shut my eyes, inhaling the smell of flowers and spices.

Is she

el kids

“You don’t understand. When I opened my eyes, the senior who I trusted told me they would hurt me if I ever told a soul. It wasn’t hard to get me to shut up honestly. I was just a kid. They could harm me if they wanted to. I just wanted to forget about everything.”

Silence lingers between us for a long time, but Fiona’s gaze stays on me. She shuffles closer, rests her head on my shoulders, and rubs my arms.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that. I can’t imagine how scared and hurt you were.”

I place my chin on her hair, running my hands through them. Finally, I lift her face with my finger on her jaw. She looks up at me, and my heart quickens. I inch closer slowly until the distance between our lips is nonexistent. I inhale when my lips touch hers, closing my eyes to savor the taste of her lips. She places her hands on my chest, running her hands over them. I’m enraptured as electricity sparks my skin, causing goose pimples to form. She moans when I bite her lip and slowly push my tongue into her mouth like I know my way around. My heart pounds in my chest when she plucks at my left nipple. My body is set on fire. The slow kisses become heavy and hungry. Every part of me is thirsty for her. I run my hands over her body, filling my senses with her tenderness. Her scent assails my nostrils, and I shut my eyes, inhaling the smell of flowers and spices.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Fiona

Jason's breathing is loud as he runs his hands over my skin, exploring every part of it. When his hands reach my thighs, the hairs on the back of my neck rise. Slowly, he traces the skin on my thighs, running his fingers up and down until he gets between my legs. When his fingers brush over my already pulsing clit, I shiver, my head swimming with desire. He stands on his feet, taking my arms in his. When I stand, too, he places one hand behind my back and the other below my knees, lifting me. He walks out of the living room and climbs the staircase. I gulp. I know where this is going, but I don't want to ruin it by thinking about the last time and how it ended. I want to stay positive. He's been changing these past few weeks, and I'd rather focus on that. It's too late to turn back. I'm already panting with greed. I place my hands around his neck, taking in his scent of soap, wood, and a touch of sweat. Now in front of his room, he pushes the door open with his toe and walks in, closing it with his heel. His room is cool and has a faint tobacco scent. He walks past the living room, going straight to the bedroom. When he gets to the bedroom, he lowers me gently to his bed, and the black sheets envelop me like a tender hug. His eyes are fierce, darkening

desire. He takes his nightshirt off and goes to his nightstand to get a condom. When he's done, he climbs onto the bed, keeping his eyes steady on me. His lips meet mine again; this time, his kisses are ravenous, like he has a mission to claim me as his completely. He spreads my legs and thrusts himself onto me with his firm chest brushing over mine. His bulging erection makes me gasp as he moves over me with all of his attention on my pussy. I suppress a groan as my knees turn into mush, weakening under his gliding movement. He stops, staring deep into my eyes. The tingling on my skin intensifies when a flirtatious smile tugs at his lips. The smile of a man who knows he has me weak in the knees. His hands move down, reaching for my shorts. His fingers maneuver through them until they find my back of wetness. With his thumb, he plays around with my clit, and a raspy groan leaves my lips. I lift my hips off the bed with my eyes shut, but he never stops. Finally, he pulls my shorts off, along with my panties, lifts my legs, and places them around his neck. I shiver at the thought of what he's about to do to me. He glances up at me.

“Do you want me to go ahead?”

At this point, my whole body is on fire, and my senses are suspended. The best I can do is give a small whimper. I can't form words that explain how desperate I am for his tongue to meet me down there. He grins and, with his tongue, claims my clit.

Jolts of electricity surge through my body. Sensations I've never felt before fill my stomach as he runs his tongue all over. My eyes roll to the back of my head, and my mouth is open as I pant like a thirsty creature. He pushes his tongue into me, and I grab a pillow to cover my mouth. If I don't, the neighbors will likely hear my screams, and it's too quiet.

Jason doesn't stop. He takes off his shorts and climbs back to bed, leaning

wear at the headrest. He lifts me and places me on his hardness. I gasp as he
easily pushes himself into me. After tonight, my lips will likely protest from all my
efforts on aHe pulls me closer, and I tighten my legs around him. As I move, he
presses raising his hips to meet mine. Whenever he does that, it's like he's a
erection rip me apart with the depths he gets to inside of me. The screams come
from my lips. Jason responds with grunts. I move faster, covered in sweat. His eyes
close, the back of his head, and his jerking tells me he's about to have org
asm in my increase my speed, aware my screams are getting louder. I don't thin
k of a man hold them back anymore. He straightens himself out, and my toes cur
ving for climax together with one big grunt. I collapse on his chest, and he ho
lds me warm stroking my back.

I moan "I have a confession."

Jason doesn't "What's that?"

I explain, "The sex thing at the party was because I was scared."

Jason looks at me, "It's not your fault to do. I lift my head to look at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never been open with anybody. With everyone, I flee before
I can get there. The ever a chance to get there. So when the whole thing happened with
me, I freaked out. I felt like I needed to create some distance to protect myself
from him. That would explain his coldness.

"Do you still feel the same way?"

Jason looks at me, "Before His lips curve into a smile as he stares at me.

I shake my head, "No."

Jason says, "I lay back down on his chest, relishing his strong masculine arms around
me. He asks, "What's your favorite sex position?"

Jason says, "No one's ever asked me that. Not that I've been with many men. I've been
hooking up with just three men. The first was at a youth camp with Jeremy, the I

guideskid. We did it in his dad's car. The second was with Nate, the handsome biting school jock that I really liked. The last was Nick, who was probably pants, worst experience.

about to "I don't know, to be honest."

me, and He chuckles.

roll to "Okay. How about we find out?"

gasm. I sit up, looking at him.

ok I can "What do you mean?"

l as we "Let's try them all until we find one you're madly in love with."

lds me, My jaw drops.

"That's going to take all night." He winks, sliding a finger into me. I didn't see that coming.

"You're dripping," he says in a low growl. His voice is like music to my ears and his finger thrusts, fire in my bones. I'm getting turned on again.

"You ready for the long ride?"

I'm unable to form words with his fingers thrusting into me like there's squishy sounds of my wetness fill the room. I shut my eyes again, and you, he bites my neck, his warm breath tingling my ears. This is going to be the best night of my life.



Three weeks later, the grunts of Jason and I still fill my ears when I wake up in my daydream. We really fucked all night, and he wasn't joking when he told me we'd try all of them. I did find a favorite position, though — when he had me with my back laid on the snooker board on his balcony and he had sex hanging around my neck. The sensations that came from between my legs were a pastor's

ne high were not things I'd ever felt. As I think about them, a shiver runs through my spine and a moistness forms between my legs. I bite my finger.

I thought I'd find myself drooling over a bad boy like Jason. I was the center of his attention the whole night and not just for sex; he really opened up to me. We were extremely exhausted when we were done, but he held me, and we talked about his childhood. I learned about how lonely he was as a kid. By the time Richard came along, he was almost a teenager. My heart soared when I realized I was the first person he was opening up to like that.

My phone vibrates, jerking me back to reality.

I roll my eyes as I pick it up to look at the screen. It's mom. I clear my throat. "Fuck. Hey, Mom! How did you know I was just about to call you?"

Soft breathing comes from the other end of the line, but there are no words in my ears, "Mom?" The breathing turns into full-blown sobs that send panic through my heart.

"Mom, what's wrong? Talk to me."

She snuffles and exhales.

and he "Fifi, we're in trouble."

the best "Hold on. What do you mean trouble? What trouble are you in?"

I stand and pace the floor as her sobs become more unsettling. Finally, they die down a bit, but she's still sniffing. I stay silent, waiting for an answer. "The loans."

never I Oh shit.

he said "Wait, a sec. I thought the loans were all settled now."

fucked "We were only able to cover for the apartment. We thought it'd be easy to pay off the other loan for Pet Star, but time flew past so quickly. The bank is already demanding payment. It's due, but we don't even have the money."

My heart disintegrates as she speaks. They're going through so much

ugh my probably scared out of their wits. I can't even do anything to help. I never even go to them. The thought leaves a deep ache in my chest, and I stare at my feet. This shouldn't be happening now. I should be with them.

up. We "What about getting a loan from someone else?"

She talked "I know. I tried a couple of people at church. No one has such an opportunity going around."

She told me I hate it so much that I can't do anything for her. Her sobs drive a nail through my heart. I can't even hold her and let her cry on my shoulder. My stomach churns.

throat. "What about Dad? How's he holding up?"

"He hasn't been able to get good sleep for weeks. I worry he might have a heart attack or something."

She waves "What can I do, Mom? How can I help?"

"I don't think you can, Fifi. Unless there are friends to ask in New York. Can I ask Jason? I mull at the thought, running it through my mind from every angle. What would he think of me? He'd probably see me as some desperate digger after his wealth. Or maybe he'd understand and be willing to help with a loan?"

Finally, she says "I don't know, Mom. But I'll see if I can come up with something."

never. There should be a way to help out. I want to.

"I hope so. They'll take away the shop if we're unable to meet up. I'll do everything I can."

"Mom, is Dad there?"

easy to talk to. I should talk to him too. He had a near heart attack last year from a bank's situation. We were able to pay that back, but he collapsed and was rushed to the hospital. Dad worries too much and ends up compromising his health and safety.

and are "Hey, Fiona."

I can't "Dad. Are you holding up fine?"

But my "There's nothing to worry about. I told your mom not to bother you with
but she wouldn't listen. She just never listens to me."

The fight is starting – the one that comes from financial tension between
amount couple. My parents have a stable marriage. I hardly saw them fight
their voices; whenever they did, it was because of money issues. If
wedged fighting now, then it's already chipping away at their relationship.

ers. My *No. No. No.*

"Dad, it's fine. I wanted to tell you that everything's going to be
okay? Don't beat your head so much. This happened the last time
I have a somehow, you found a way. It'll happen again, okay?"

He's silent on the other end of the line for a few seconds.

"Thanks, Fiona. We'd hate to dump all of our issues on you. I know
k." busy with schoolwork. I'll call you later."

id from When the call ends, it leaves a hollow feeling in my chest. Maybe I
ne gold call Eleanor and ask for help. Not that she'd have that kind of
offer anyway. I don't think she knows anyone too.

Just when my mind circles back to asking Jason, there's a knock on the

"Who's that?"

"Bertha."

ve tried I walk over and open the door to find Bertha beaming.

"Hey, Fiona. How are you feeling?"

"Uhh...I'm okay."

similar "Jackie's downstairs. Are you ready to go?"

shed to Right. Jackie's the obstetrician who's been in charge of checking
lth. making sure I'm in top shape. I forgot she comes on the last Friday
month. Couldn't she have found a better time? I'm not in the mood.

I plaster a smile across my face. “Okay. I’ll join you downstairs. Just get
with this, a minute.”

between a
or raise
they’re

alright,
me and

you’re

should
money

the door.

me and
of each

I plaster a smile across my face. “Okay. I’ll join you downstairs. Just give me a minute.”

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Jason

Kavia's legs were elegantly crossed as she leaned forward, her determined gaze fixed on my office desk. We had been grappling with the same issue for weeks, unable to reach a satisfying conclusion. I admired her work ethic, and her tireless commitment to finding the best solution. Sometimes her relentless drive could be overwhelming. Kavia possessed an uncanny ability to ignite passion in those around her, to spur us all on and act upon her vision. She was not one to shy away from confrontation, always ready to defend her ideas with a fierce, unyielding passion. Her challenges were often challenging, even exhilarating at times, but today, my patience was wearing thin. Exhaustion had taken its toll, my bones aching with weariness and my stomach grumbling with hunger. I could feel myself on the brink of collapse, a single task away from crumbling into a heap.

Being the CEO of Consco means that I'm always on the go — talking, planning, and leading but it also means that I'm exhausted and not always in the mood to argue.

“What I mean is users should be able to find construction materials we're not going to be contracted for the job. This way, we're top of

mind when they're considering actual contracts."

"I've got an issue with that. I don't think it makes sense for anyone that perk if they're not going to contract us. That's shooting ourselves leg."

"No! It might be a magnet for some."

"I'm sorry. I just don't see it."

Kavia's delicate fingers pinched the bridge of her nose, her golden l glinting in the subdued light of my office. I always kept the lighting avoid distractions; bright lights tended to scatter my thoughts like c

The soft, blue-tinted illumination seemed to seep into my mind, hon rd, her focus to a razor-sharp edge. Hours could pass by without my noticing ng with the rhythm of my work. Kavia, on the other hand, seemed less enamored admired the ambiance. She exhaled a deep breath, her eyes glancing around th ion, but lit space before settling back on me.

ssed an "How about I do a compelling presentation so you can see the pos 1 to see stats?"

ntation, I rub my chin, spinning my seat slowly.

I found "Okay. I think that might work. When do you think you can do that?"

ce was Her eyes light up, and a satisfying grin crawls up her face.

ariness, "Monday next week is perfect. Eight am."

rink of "Fine. I'll be looking forward to it. Please let Enns know that I'm wai him."

inking, "I don't think Enns is at the office right now. He said he needed to che all the site at Decker Canyon."

I glance at my wristwatch. Four pm. It's unlike Enns to check on site even if evenings. He typically does that on his way to the office first thing of their morning.

“That’s strange. But alright.”

As Kavia steps out of my office, the telecom rings. I look over at it. It’s just one more hour before I get off work, and I would like not to be bothered.

There’s so much to do. Finally, I pick it up.

“Emma?”

“There’s someone here who’d like to see you.”

Oh, for God’s sake, I don’t have the time for visitors right now. I instruct Emma, the front desk manager, to make it clear that I’m not taking visitors the moment.

“Emma, I told you I’m not available for visits.”

“Yes. But it’s Eva. She keeps insisting she needs to see you. I explained you weren’t available, but she’s making a scene.”

Dammit.

I pound my fists on my table before leaning back in my chair. I close my eyes and exhale before opening them again. I’m not up for visits, especially Eva. Her voice is loud and shrill in the phone background, insulting for doing her job. I don’t know how this woman manages to push all my buttons, but somehow she does so every single time. I can’t tell Eva to send her away; she obviously is bent on not moving an inch. It’d be embarrassing to send the security.

“Okay. Send her up.”

My head throbs as I drop the receiver. I stare at my monitor, but my screen is blank. The little stopwatch on my table reminds me I don’t have all that time to spare. I need to give feedback to the partners from Croatia tomorrow, but they haven’t even concluded the research. And I don’t want to remain here during office hours. I want to go home.

To Fiona.

The thought stems like fragrance, but I shove it down. I've battled with it for years, and it takes just one person to dismantle my walls? The door opens, and none else but Eva struts in, wearing a short red dress and her

"Could've at least knocked."

I struggle to take the edge out of my voice, but it doesn't work.

"You know, it's rude not to let them know that I'm not like everyone else. They have special access. How could you not tell them that?"

I roll my eyes and undo the top button on my shirt.

"Are you going to sit or not?"

She opens her mouth to say something but shuts it, staring from the ceiling to the far end of my office to the chairs around my work desk. Finally, she sits on the chairs, adjusting her short dress to cover a bit of her thighs.

"What are you doing here, Eva?"

I lean forward, narrowing my eyes. She glances at the TV up on the wall, only to find it tuned into Fox News. They're talking about the immigrant problems. Emma It's been all over the news for a couple of days, and no doubt, the President is getting a lot of heat. After a few minutes, she looks back at me.

"Look, I don't have all day. I'm way behind time and your visit is costing me a couple more minutes. I told you to stop coming to my office without informing me first."

"Well, you said home, not your office."

"Why are you here?"

"Because of your attitude, Jason. For months, you've all but convinced me to ignore you, but I tried to do stuff together with you but you turn me down. I come over, but you're never available. I come over, but somehow, it just turns you off and I'm starting to wonder if you're intentionally avoiding me. How can a woman who isn't even my girlfriend be such a handful?"

th trustrepeatedly tried to remind her that we broke up in high school, but it's
or flieslike she intentionally ignores that.

als. "So you interrupted my work to tell me I've not been giving you attent
"Why are you making it sound like it's not important? It's a big deal
because it's hurting me. Don't you care that I'm hurting?"

else. I'm sick to my stomach with the theatrics all the time. How did I ever
could be married to her? Of course, I need Davidson if Consco is going to
break through Asia, which means I kind of need her. The thought makes
stomach churn. What about Fiona? What if she finds out that I'm
ouch at getting married? Will she understand that it's strictly for business? And
she sitsam I considering her in my decision-making?

"I've just been busy. I'm not avoiding you. And if you keep pulling
like this, I'll stay busy because you're making work pile up."

ie wall, "Is there another woman in the picture?"

s again. I lick my lips and laugh. It's a nervous laugh, but it's still a laugh.
ident is point, I'm starting to think Eva's deluded. She keeps thinking I should
owe her something even when we're not official on any level yet.

already "What are you talking about?"

see me "Answer me. Is there another woman?"

"I honestly don't get what you mean."

"Are you seeing someone? That's the only reason you're acting like this
it? There's someone who has all of your attention? Even if you don't
pletely know there is."

I invite "Stop being ridiculous. If I was seeing someone, why would I hide that
t pisses "I've been curious about Fiona."

." The question catches me off guard. I blink, rubbing my palm down on
il? I've legs. What do I say? Of course, I can't say baby mama, she'll flip and

almost she's not getting married to me, and that's not what I want. Plus, *baby* I hate that word so much. It's so...undignifying. That's not a name I want to be associated with Fiona. But I need this marriage for Consco. I to me "What has that got to do with me?"

"Is she really Richard's new love—"

I think I "No!" I say faster than my brain and instantly regret it.

Now she's going to be suspicious. Or she's already suspicious? What would she be asking that? I'm under immense stress, and it's making me think very slowly. Her head tilts back. *Shit.*

And why "No?"

"Uhh.. I mean, uhmmm...she's his uhmm...They're still getting together and stunt each other."

She grimaces.

"That doesn't make any sense. They're dating and Richard said so. At this though I'm not sure I believe him. There was something weird about the way he said it. And she seemed shocked that he'd call her his girlfriend."

"That's what I mean. They're still talking and he called her his girlfriend. I was bound to get her shocked, but in a pleasant way, if you get what I mean." Eva narrows her eyes.

"You're lying."

is, isn't "No! I'm not. Why would I lie?"

Why it, I "But you stared at her. I saw it with my own eyes. Like you were interested in her. That's a look Richard didn't give her."

t?" How does she have the time to put inconsequential puzzle pieces together?

Eva is highly observant and has always had an eye for detail. Of course, when her father put her in charge of his company finances.

I decide "Are you done?"

mama? "You're not telling me who she is, Jason."

[would "But I just did."

"Does she live there? Why did she look so cozy?"

"Uhh...No, she doesn't. But she does come over often to spend son with Richard."

She presses her lips together.

hy else "Jason, I want you to listen to me carefully. You told my dad yo ing methinking of marrying me. I'd marry you too. But if this is going to you're going to have to show that you want me too. Right now, you'r that very badly and I'm not convinced. I just want to feel like I'm sp o know you. Am I?"

If there's one person who's grown to be completely special, it's Fior thought of her makes my heart flutter.

o, even "Jason."

he way I jerk back to reality.

"Am I?"

riend. It "Of course you are."

mean."

terested

gether?

rse, her

“You’re not telling me who she is, Jason.”

“But I just did.”

“Does she live there? Why did she look so cozy?”

“Uhh...No, she doesn’t. But she does come over often to spend some time with Richard.”

She presses her lips together.

“Jason, I want you to listen to me carefully. You told my dad you were thinking of marrying me. I’d marry you too. But if this is going to work, you’re going to have to show that you want me too. Right now, you’re doing that very badly and I’m not convinced. I just want to feel like I’m special to you. Am I?”

If there’s one person who’s grown to be completely special, it’s Fiona. The thought of her makes my heart flutter.

“Jason.”

I jerk back to reality.

“Am I?”

“Of course you are.”

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Fiona

Richard is cackling as I throw popcorn at him. He hasn't been taunting me about the sounds he heard from Jason's room weeks ago. At first, he had no idea it was me. He casually told me he felt like Jason was seeing someone because he'd never brought any woman home. Even that was a shocker to me. According to him, whoever Jason brought home into his room must be really special. I played along, pretending I didn't hear any sounds, which was really stupid because my room was the closest to his. It was a bad move. Of course, Richard didn't believe me, but I told him pregnancy makes you sleep like you're dead. At least that part made sense. Until I told him I hadn't gotten much sleep that night. Then he gave me a weird look and asked,

“Fiona, was it you in Jason's room?”

I've never been a great liar, and it was easy to tell when I was lying. I said 'No' at first, but Richard burst out laughing. In just a few months, he knew when I was lying. He asked me to spill the tea and then told me to be careful because Jason was cold-hearted when it came to women. He then asked if I had any feelings for him. I denied that I did.

Now when he wants to annoy me, he makes moaning sounds to remind me of that night. Bertha might have heard it too, but she never spoke about it. As Richard makes the ridiculous sounds, I throw my popcorn at him, grinning. He runs around my living room, and I chase him, a bowl of popcorn in my hands. Eventually, he surrenders and collapses to the floor.

“You’re going to have to pay for all the popcorn I just lost because of you!”
“You should be grateful,” he says, huffing. “I just helped you get some exercise in. Jackie did say you needed as much physical movement as possible. I guess you preferred another kind of *physical movement*.”

He smirks and picks up his phone. Heat rises to my cheeks.

I stopped. “Hey!”

Minutes ago. I smack his shoulder, but he doesn’t move. His eyes are fixed on his phone, and there’s a frown on his face. I tap him, but he doesn’t respond. His eyebrows are furrowed when he looks up at me.

He says to me, “I think you should see this.”

Richard’s usual lighthearted expression had been replaced by a look of seriousness, and my heart skipped a beat at the sight of it. As he handed him his phone, I could feel the tension in the air, thick and palpable. My hands trembled slightly as I took the device from him, and as I looked down at the screen, a wave of shock coursed through my body. The headline of the article before me was enough to make my heart stop beating for a moment. I blinked, hoping it was just a terrible dream, before reading the words. I said my eyes scanning the page frantically.

Already **Popular Business Tycoon Jason, Allegedly Expects a Baby With Me to be Woman Named Fiona.**

There even is a photo of me placed beside one of Jason’s—it was the same photo I had in front of the magazine at the hospital. I recognize this photo of me

And Mom took it — probably the worst of my photos on Instagram. I
stares at the floor, wringing his hands. He looks up at me.

at him, “Are you okay?”

popcorn *How can I be?*

In a split second, I’m up on my feet, pacing. This is a gossip magazine
you.” Maybe not many people will see it. I shake my head. Who am I kidding
it some *Tea* is a popular magazine across all of America, which means everyo
nent asks me will see my photo and find out everything I’ve tried to keep

Sweat breaks out on my forehead as I go back and forth in the living
Maybe my parents won’t see it. They’re not the kind of people who
gossip magazines. But what if someone else shows it to them? A du
phone, attacks my chest, and I collapse to the ground with my head in my
s brows This is bad. No, this is a disaster. I shouldn’t have ever met Jason. Now
not only one year of my life but also everything else.

Including my parents.

grave The thought makes my chest tighten in fear, and I hyperventilate.

ded me “Hey. Hey. Breathe.”

fingers Richard shuffles closer, rubbing my back.

n at the “Everything will be fine. It’ll go away. We’ll find a way to end the
ie news Jason can make a press statement to counter the speculations. They’r
ment. Ispeculations and these kinds of things happen all the time. It tak
s again, response from him for everything to go back to normal. Don’t be scare

Tears prickle my eyes. I should’ve known that it’s impossible for a
With a person to keep a secret. God, I’m such a fool. And now I’m screwed.

to end this whole thing with Jason and get out of here. But where wi
o I saw It’s too late to end the pregnancy. My tummy is already protruding s
ne too.

Richard that I can't wear tight clothes any longer. I pick up my phone from the stand and dial Jason's number. He picks on the first ring.

"Fiona."

His voice sounds like he's saying so many things at once. Like he's saying, 'I'm sorry.' Like he's saying, 'let me fix this.' But there's also anger? *The* he'll hurt the person who published the article if he ever finds the name whose throat closes.

secret. "You saw already, didn't you?"

ing room. His voice cracks.

follow "Jason, I don't think I can do this anymore. There's no point. The whole reason I came here was for discretion and to hide from my parents' hands. There's no point if everyone already knows."

how I lose "No. No. I can fix this. Please. Don't make any rash decisions with your input. We'll make a decision together. Just hang in there."

Richard's phone rings and he stands and paces, placing the receiver to his ears.

"Hello, Mom."

Oh, God. He moves away from the living room to the balcony, lowering his voice. I strain to hear what he's saying, but it's difficult to make out.

re mere "Fiona. Are you there?"

comes one Jason's voice brings me back to my call with him. I forgot he was on the other end of the line.

famous "Yeah. But Jason, It's time to make my own decision."

. I need "Don't do anything stupid, dammit. Seriously. Just wait until I get home. I'll be getting off work in a couple of hours."

so much My mind races with all possible solutions, but the only thing that's coming to me is that I need to leave this house. There's no point any

the TV miss Jason. Whatever we had was great while it lasted, for the most part. I can't. I just can't. I sniffle as the tears fall. "No. Don't cry. I'm so sorry. I have to deal with this. I'll fix it, I promise."

saying, "You can't do anything about it. It's too late."

er, like I end the call, cutting him off when he starts to say something. I don't want to. My mom. My mom to try to change my mind.

He calls back but I ignore the call. He calls again. I drop my phone and run as Richard approaches me. He looks me over and wipes the tears off my face but they keep coming. My sobs get louder and he takes me into his arms, entirely holding me in a gentle embrace.

its. But "I'm so sorry, Fiona."

He exhales deeply, keeping his hands steady around me.

out my "Mom's on her way home. Someone called her to ask about the article. It says her phone's been blowing up. She asked me to stay here with you until she gets home." I look up at him.

"You don't have to."

"You're like family to me. I want to."

ring his Oh, Richard. The sweetest person in the world.

My phone vibrates, drawing my attention to it. It's probably Jason calling. I walk over to it and look at the screen through the tears. It's a bit blurry, but it's not Jason. It's Mom.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

I wipe the sweat off my palm and pick up the phone.

me. I'll "Who's that?" Richard asks.

"My mom."

It keeps "Shit."

ore. I'll Richard rubs his mouth, and takes over, pacing all over the living room.

art, but “Mom?”

Worry you “Fiona, where are you?”

I shut my eyes, willing my racing heart to slow down. She didn’t even

I’m doing okay like always. She definitely saw it.

It’s not what I want. But what if I give myself away only to find out she hasn’t seen it?

she’s calling about the loans.

I stand I nibble on my nails.

My face, “What do you mean, Mom?”

She crosses her arms, “Don’t even try to lie to me. Tell me exactly where you are this instant

“Uhh... Mom, is everything alright?”

“Just tell me where you are right now!”

“But you already know where I am. Why are you asking that?”

She rolls her eyes. “I know where you are?” She scoffs. “Are you in New York?”

“Fuck. I sink into the sofa behind me. My mind is blank. What do I tell her?”

My breathing is labored and my insides quiver.

I clasp my shaky hands together, placing the phone between my chest and my shoulder.

“Mom, what’s with the questions?”

She says again. “Is the magazine story true? Please tell us it’s not. Please. Pastor Vi

My daughter saw it first and showed it to him. He just left the house. We’re

embarrassed, but I told him it must’ve been a misunderstanding.”

I break down, sobbing deeply. The tears blur my vision.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“How could you, Fiona? I am so disappointed.”

Her voice cracks, and the faint sound of sobs emanates from the other

end of the phone. I strain to hear her words, but they are barely intelligible, d

out by her tears. A murmur comes from Dad, but I can't hear
should've known he was there too.

n ask if "Fiona?"

It's Dad now. I stay silent.

Maybe "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad." I swallow. "I can hear you."

"Listen, you need to come back home."

My mouth goes dry. How can I ever face them? I want to leave this pl
:" not because I want to go back home. I want to hide somewhere else.

"Dad..."

"You just do that so we can talk better. A phone call won't do. Do y
me?"

"Okay, Dad."

ell her?The call drops. My head feels like a thousand people are screaming in
it, complete with drums and lots of dancing. I need to get out of he
ear and how do I get rid of Richard?

"How'd that go?"

"Take a wild guess."

ncent'sNo need to mention that they want me to come back home. He's be
were so not knowing there's a possibility that I might leave.

"What do you want to do now?"

"I think I should just rest. This whole thing is super overwhelming fo
don't think it's healthy for the baby too."

I rub my tummy, avoiding his gaze.

end of "Do you want me to stay here while you —"

rowned "No, don't worry about me. I'll come over to your room later."

"You're going to go to sleep?"

him. I nod and walk past the opening that leads to the bedroom. The door
room opens and closes. I'm alone. I do need to rest, but not before I find
way out of here.

The thought of Jason comes back to me. I want to stay with him. For
But I can't.

But it's his baby.

It's mine too.

place, but

you hear

inside of

there. But

matter off

for me. I

I nod and walk past the opening that leads to the bedroom. The door to my room opens and closes. I'm alone. I do need to rest, but not before I find my way out of here.

The thought of Jason comes back to me. I want to stay with him. For him. But I can't.

But it's his baby.

It's mine too.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Jason

Eva!
Her name rings over and over in my head as I tap my feet under my desk. She's the owner of *The Tea*, and there's no way this story would go viral without her knowledge. How did they find out? And why would she tell it out to the public? I've tried calling her, but she's not taking any of my calls. Not that it's surprising.

I grind my teeth, eyeing the stopwatch on the far right of my desk. It's 3:05 pm, and I have two extra hours of work time before leaving. I'm not leaving the office for non-work related purposes. I glance at the clock and see 3:05 pm. For God's sake, why's time so slow today? The figures on the monitor screen jumble up the longer I stare at them. It's a review of a new proposition about what features should be available to users on our new App. The blue light isn't helping my concentration right now. My phone vibrates. Thanks to the stupid published article, this will be the thirtieth call I've received all day. I fold my shirt sleeves and rub my forehead, still trying to see my phone screen. *Nope. I'm done with calls today.*

I move out of my work desk and stand between the coffee table and c

in opposite directions, running my hand through my hair. I should leave now. I have to face Eva. I stare at the stopwatch again. 3:20 pm.

Fuck it.

With that, I pick up the keys to my BMW and storm out of the building. Everyone's awkward as I step out. Of course, they've all seen the car stalk toward my car, enter and drive out of the HQ without saying a word to anyone. Fortunately, Eva's house is also in Trousdale. The drive from Davidson Mansion is short but grueling as my phone constantly vibrates with all the calls. Everyone is moving around on the sidewalks like they're racing with time, and the sun is unusually hot. I look over at the current speedometer. 70mph. At this rate. I won't get there as soon as I need to. I hit the gas pedal and speed past the red light, swerving right into Davidson's Mansion. I pull into a car garage filled with four cars, but now's not the time. I halt the car in the middle and dash out, wearing a frown. Tom, the buff guy in charge of security, rushes toward me, stopping in his tracks when he gets closer.

"Hello, sir."

"Where is she?"

"You mean Ms. Davidson? She's not—"

I ignore him, charging toward the brown mansion that looks like it was built during the medieval ages. It's huge and lined up with flowers beside Kavia's sidewalk. The rest of the expanse is covered in well-trimmed grass and shrubs that almost look like a river. I climb up the steps and push the door. It's locked. I ring the doorbell on the side of the door, tapping my hand. A small uniformed guy opens the door, but I push past him before he can say anything. He doesn't hold me back. And why would he?

The living room is empty. I do a three-sixty, slowly turning in search of the couches. The living room has four medieval statues strategically positioned

ve her noticed. They're the kinds of things you'll find in Rome or in church
first one is behind a pair of couches—it's a sculpture of a woman holding
baby with an arrow. The baby's supposed to be Cupid. Two stand on the
uilding, side of the large TV—they look like kings or emperors of a kingdom.
rticle. The last one is just beside the staircase— it's the sculpture of a
word to woman holding what looks like a scepter.

to the I'll never understand what's with Davidson's obsession, but it's none
es from business.

're in a "Eva!" I shout.

t speed. My voice echoes.

is pedal "Eva!"

There's Flipflops slap the floor upstairs like someone is walking impatiently
r in the up, and sure enough, it's Eva.

arge of "What are you doing here? Get out."

"I'm staying until you take down the article."

Eva giggles as she descends down the staircase, her eyes fixed on me.
keep my rage under control. Maybe if I reason with her, she'll listen.

"And why should I?"

as built She finally walks into the living room, closing the gap between us. F
ide the green satin robe flails as she draws them over her to cover her bra and
ses and underneath.

ie door. "I gave you the chance to tell me the truth when I asked about her
feet. A office. You thought I didn't know?"

ie even My left eye starts twitching, and I shut it for a moment, clenching my
there's something more than a pounding heart, that's where my head
of her. and it's making me dizzy.

l to be "How did you find out?"

es. TheShe struts to the white sofa directly facing me and lowers herself into
olding awritten all over her face. Does she think this is fun?

on each“Answer me!”

“Jason, if you’re going to barge into my house uninvited, I think the le
i prettycould do is not scream my head off.”

She leans back, relaxing her head on the sofa.

e of my“Bertha.”

I scoff. “You’re lying. My mom wouldn’t do that.”

She giggles again and crosses her legs, exposing her thighs.

“Actually, I’m not. All I had to do was ask. Apparently, you forgot to
that you were keeping it a secret from me too. She thought I knew. Is
. I lookjust wonderful?”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I cover my mouth with my fist, pacing. The floors are wooden b
expensive finishings, and the soles of my monk-strap land with a soft
I try toI move. I should’ve told Mom ahead. But how would I have know
would show up and somehow see Fiona? She always told me before
over, so I had some time to make sure Fiona was out of sight. I l
ier sea-convince her to remove the news or declare it false.

l shorts“I’m hurt that you’re more concerned with taking that down witho
bothering to apologize to me. You got a girl pregnant and then lied
at yourThat’s how this marriage conversation is going to start out?”

"Take it down, Eva or so help me God, I'll —"

jaws. If"You'll what?"

rt is at,I grind my teeth and stand still, facing her. Her pale skin makes h
almost sick. It's always been her signature look to appear fragile.

"You'll do nothing, Jason! Nothing." She shifts in her seat and leans f

it, glee "I still can't believe you haven't apologized for lying to me. You had a baby mama behind my back and kept deceiving me? Do you know how it feels, Jason? How it feels to be betrayed?"

Just you My head swirls, her words swirling along with it. Her voice fades into the background. This isn't happening. It wasn't meant to turn out this way.

"Answer me." Her voice draws me back.

I tilt my head, glaring at her.

"What?"

"Don't make me say it twice. Do you love her?"

tell her I blink. Love? That's absurd. What has love got to do with having a baby mama?

"Stop being absurd, Eva."

If Eva's going to listen to me, I have to find another way. Fighting with her will yield nothing but resistance. As a business expert, I've learned that through negotiation finely. Let's see what works.

Even Eva "Taking it down will be in the best interest of the both of us, Eva."

coming Maybe I can get her to think about a future with me as a reason to stay with me.

She leans back again, bringing her hand to her chin. Now's my chance. I walk closer to her sofa, leaning in. "You're hurting yourself too."

Her gaze flickers. Did it work? She clears her throat, and her lips part. She stares at me. Our faces are at close range. I think I got through to her.

Her look "Think about it, Eva."

I straighten and turn to leave, but not without giving her a piercing stare. It's the kind that I've often used to hypnotize any woman. It always works. Finally

a whole walk out in slow motion, the feel of her eyes boring holes in my back now that to get back to Fiona and figure out what to do next.

A thought crosses my mind. She said she had to make a decision on how to get to the mansion. My heart skips a beat. What did she mean? What if... No, that's impossible. I should dash outside the building and into my car, speeding off. I should be there in about fifteen minutes. My heart drops once I drive out of the Drive and into the Mansion and onto the road. Traffic.

It makes my stomach tie in knots, probably more than all the phone calls coming in. Today's the third worst day of my life. The first was when I was a baby, the second was when seniors in boarding school, and the second was when Dad died. The headlights are so loud, and I grimace, rubbing my temple. At this rate, I won't make it here on time. Movement is slow, and the cars crawl forward at intervals. Why is it so hot in here? I glare at the car AC, resisting the urge to smash it.

Finally, the gridlock clears out. I sigh in relief, hitting the pedal and speeding off.

Thankfully, all the traffic lights are on green as I speed past. Even though the trees move past me fast, from the trees to the houses, to the ice cream shops, to the cycling kids, to the skating teenagers.

As I approach the house, I stare in disbelief at the sight just outside the gate. *Fuck. Journalists.*

"What are they doing here?" A swarm of people hangs around the gate with cameras and microphones. I slam my steering wheel, cursing under my breath. The last thing I want is a bunch of people who can't mind their own business, forcing themselves into my space, my life, and my story. That's just disrespectful.

I take out my shades and put them on, driving past them as they surround my car. Flashlight after flashlight goes off all over the place. Finally, I think the world did they find this place? My heart won't stop palpitating.

. I have chest as I drive past them, watching from the rearview mirror as prevented from going further by the gate.

er own. I drive straight to the driveway, bringing the car to a halt, before rushing into the house.

come in "Fiona!" I shout before even getting into the house. I rush past the lobby into the living room. There's no one here.

"Fiona!"

he calls I hurry up the staircase, heading to her room. Stopping in front of the door, I knock. There's no response. Placing my ears on the door, I listen for a moment. There's none coming from in there. Wiping my already sweaty palms on my pants, I push the door to her room open, and it gives way. It's not locked. I step in slowly, my eyes darting to the left and right.

"Fiona? Where are you?"

I walk past her living room area, moving to the bedroom area. The bed is neatly made but the room is empty apart from the cushion by the side window.

No.

I march to the closet and halt halfway in. It's empty. She's... she's gone. The thought is difficult for me to accept. I barge out of the room, dialing her phone number. It doesn't connect. Did she turn her phone off?

My twitching eye gets worse, and I rub it as I hurry over to Richard's door. Before I get there, his door opens, and he steps out, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Jason, did you fix it yet?"

"Where's Fiona?" I say, attempting to speak in a low tone.

His face scrunches up.

"What do you mean? She's in her room."

they're "She's not! Her closet's empty. How did she leave when you were
How?"

ing out His eyes go wide, and he dashes past me toward her room. He comes
almost immediately, a distraught look on his face.

by and I sink to the floor, my mind racing faster than I can catch up. Where
world did she go? She surely couldn't have gone home; that's the last
she'd want to go. Not that I know her house anyway.

room, I run my hands through my hair, shuffling it. She can't just go around
sounds. that. People will recognize her. What if she falls into the hands of the
on my person?

ed. Richard walks toward me and stops in front of me.

"What are we going to do now?"

I wish I knew.

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"She's not! Her closet's empty. How did she leave when you were here? How?"

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I run my hands through my hair, shuffling it. She can't just go around like that. People will recognize her. What if she falls into the hands of the wrong person?

Richard walks toward me and stops in front of me.

"What are we going to do now?"

I wish I knew.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Fiona

One of the things I've always despised is how slow my life's been since high school. As I walk into Eleanor's comfortable apartment, I'm reminded again that I haven't done much for myself in almost ten years. I crown it all up, I ended up getting pregnant. At this point, I think that in my past life, I must've been a really cruel person. That's the only way to explain why things always go south for me. After high school, my parents' money started to dwindle, so they couldn't afford college for me. I tried all kinds of scholarships, but none worked. I even tried one for a couple of weeks, but still nothing. Then, there's this pregnancy that could've been avoided. I scoff as the tears pour uninhibited.

"Hey, c'mon. Your life's not over." Eleanor says, but it's difficult to believe. I mean, look at her apartment— white walls with fancy colorful paintings hanging from the ceiling, her tasteful mustard yellow sofa, and a brown center carpet with an abstract image. She doesn't have a TV yet, but I'm sure she will soon. Her apartment isn't fancy or high-end, but it's beautiful, a signal that she's headed somewhere.

Unlike me.

I sigh.

"People stared at me on my way here. I almost thought their eyes were to fall off. I know they were trying to figure out if it was me in the machine. I guess my bulging tummy made it easier to guess."

Eleanor presses her lips together and stands from the floor, where she was seated beside me.

"You should eat something before heading to your parent's place."

I shake my head.

"I don't think I can eat anything right now."

She plops back down to the floor on the center carpet.

She asks, "Has Jason called you yet?"

I nod. "I'm sure he has. I turned my phone off."

She exhales and runs her hands through my hair.

"Are you sure leaving was the right thing? You know... it's kind of weird running off with his baby. Plus, you said a spark was starting between you two."

"I don't know. I don't know anything about anything right now. My feet hurt, my head is throbbing, and I'm tired of crying. I just want everything to end, and I'm not even sure what that would mean."

I stay silent.

"It's okay, Fifi. I think you should face your parents sooner than later. Let's drive you. Let's go."

She stands, walking to her bedroom. In a few minutes, she's changed into black sweatpants, a white crop top, and black sneakers. The keys dangle from her hands, clanking as she walks to me.

"C'mon."

She places her hand beneath my armpit and lifts me until I'm on my feet.

Next, she wipes a tear from my eye and puts stray strands of hair in place going. Staring into my eyes, she exhales. "You ready?"

"No. They'll kill me."

"You know they won't. Granted, they're mad. But they're also in shock. The way you have to do is explain everything to them, and they'll understand."

"You think they will?"

"They'll be mad at first, but they'll understand and accept it. They'll be mad at their parents, Fifi."

I draw in the air and nod.

"Let's go. I'm going to leave your bags here. I'll bring them over to your house once you let me know that the coast is clear."

We step out of the house, and she locks the door. Turning to me, she fixes her eyes on my tummy. "Stairs or elevator?"

I offer a tight smile. I'm tempted to choose the elevator, but Jackie's words ring in my head: *"if you ever have to choose between the stairs and the elevator, choose the stairs."*

"Stairs."

"Shocker."

Eleanor rolls her eyes as we make for the elevator. We climb in, and I press the *descend* button.

In no time, we're downstairs. There's a small car park to the side of the apartment, and as we walk to it, I take in the size of the apartment complex. It's slightly smaller than ours.

"Fiona!" she calls. "Come on!"

Startled, I walk to her white Toyota Matrix and step in.

The drive to my parent's house is short and quiet. Occasionally, I tap my feet with my fingers and chew them. The anxiety in my chest settles

ace. unbearable weight making breathing laborious.

The city is vibrant as everyone hurries home. A few teenagers gather at the corner of a building, smoking pot amidst loud horns and crowded pavement. My stomach knots when we get to my street, and my lungs all but cease to function. The wheezing sounds get louder as I struggle to breathe in, fighting for air. My head swirls, and I shut my eyes.

re your" Fiona. Fiona. It's okay."

She stops the car a few blocks from my parent's apartment and grabs my hand.

to your The tears are pouring again, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

She doesn't say a word and the car is silent for what feels like an eternity. Finally, I wipe the snot off my nose and straighten. El starts the car and approaches the apartment that is home to my parents.

s voice "I'll drop you off and leave. I think you guys need some privacy."

or an "Doing this alone is the worst thing ever."

El shuffles my hair as we arrive at the green apartment complex.

Taking my hand again, she looks at me.

"You've got this."

she hits "That's not true."

She raises her arms in a *come-here* manner, and I melt into them, sobbing. "You've got this," she says again.

complex. We break away, and I step out of the car, turning to wave goodbye.

"Call me if you need anything," she yells as she speeds away. I look up at the apartment complex, my heart in my mouth.

Here goes nothing.

twiddle I walk into the building and take the stairs, grimacing. The long climb is like an painful for my already swollen legs. Stopping at intervals, I bend and

deep breaths. Finally, I'm on our floor. I walk toward the door at the apartment.

When I reach it, I lift my hands to ring the bell but roll my palms inward instead and bring my hand down. This is more difficult than I thought. I fight my hand up again to the doorbell and push the button.

Everything else is quiet except for my heartbeat. The door opens up, the first pair of eyes I see is Dad's.

He steps aside, holding the door as I walk into the house with my head bowed. I turn to him when he shuts the door. What should I say? What should I do?

Dad stands at the door, watching me.

"Keith, who was —"

Mom halts as she steps into the living room. The tension in the living room is a mix of love and disappointment, the kind of feeling that grazes you and makes you want to disappear.

A tear escapes mom's cheeks when her eyes land on my stomach. She turns toward dad, placing her arm around him.

Dad motions for me to sit on a couch and takes Mom's hands, leading her to another couch. We sit in opposite directions.

Dad rubs his hands together and clears his throat.

"When did you find out you were —"

"Why did you lie to us?"

My breath hitches. El said to tell them everything. But what if they don't understand?

Dad turns to Mom, squeezing her hand. She stares at the floor.

"When did you find out about the... the baby?" He continues.

"About six months ago. It was around the time when I got ill and we

of ourtest."

"You told me it was an infection!" Mom shouts.

to a fist This is going to be harder than I thought. The ache in my chest throbs.
I bringtear it apart.

"I lied. I'm sorry. I was scared and I didn't want to disappoint you."

and theDad holds his head in his hand, shutting his eyes. When he opens th
continues.

ly head "And when you found out, what did you do?"

should "I didn't know what to do. I was scared. I hoped I'd meet Jason again
did, about a month later, when he came to pick up some pet food at the store.
I spoke with him and he came up with an idea to bring me over to his house
until I gave birth. He needed an heir."

room is "And you told us you got a scholarship. Do you realize how embarrassing
is this? I went around telling everyone you went to New York for school."

Just then, a tiny whine comes from the lobby. My heart picks up its pace.
e walks I turn to find Moon wagging his tail as he walks toward me.

I smile, my eyes watering. It's already been six months since I left n
g her to buddy. I don't say anything, but I stoop to touch his back. He rests his
my leg.

"I'm sorry, mom. I didn't know what else to do."

"Fiona, there were a thousand other things to do. But you chose to s
instead. To lie to our faces. All the phone calls—all lies. And all along
y don't were pregnant?"

Mom stands, pacing.

The tears prickle my eyes and drop easily. I sniffle, wiping the snot
nose. Mom looks at me one last time and walks out of the living room.
nt for a " No, Mom! Mom, I'm sorry. Please. "

But she doesn't stop. She doesn't even turn back.

"Give her a little more time. It's a lot for her."

tears spill on my denim dress. I should've told them. Maybe things would have turned out better. Maybe I wouldn't have appeared in one of the most popular gossip articles in the United States.

Dad watches me in silence with his hands clasped. Finally, he stands up, his feet and walks toward me. He pulls me to my feet and into his arms. My tummy gets in the way, but he doesn't mind. He holds me gently, rubbing my back.

My sobs are louder at this point.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you and Mom."

"I know, honey."

When he tears away, he sits on the couch next to me, my hand in his.

"We're sorry if we ever made you feel like you couldn't come to us with your mistakes."

"No, Dad. Don't put this on yourself."

I wipe the tears, sniffing again. "It's totally on me. You already have so much to deal with. There's the loans and all."

Dad lowers his head, pressing his lips together.

"About that." He inhales. "We might be losing the Pet shop."

The news hits me like a ton of bricks. It can't be. They've worked so hard to build Pet Star for years, and for what? To have it taken away from them?

"No. This isn't happening."

He says nothing. How much worse can today get? I'm all over *The T* for good. My parents are disappointed with me while battling the loss of their business. I haven't even thought about how I'm going to take care of myself all on my own. And what's going to happen to my dream career now?

"Just in case you're thinking that the loan thing is your fault, it's not
was no way you could've helped with a sum as large as that."

ould've I sigh. "Maybe if things had turned out differently for me, it woul
popular happening in the first place."

The throbbing in my head intensifies, and I can feel the blood poun
s to his my ears. My vision swims, and I realize with a sinking feeling that I ar
ns. My to pass out.

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"Just in case you're thinking that the loan thing is your fault, it's not. There was no way you could've helped with a sum as large as that."

I sigh. "Maybe if things had turned out differently for me, it wouldn't be happening in the first place."

The throbbing in my head intensifies, and I can feel the blood pounding in my ears. My vision swims, and I realize with a sinking feeling that I am about to pass out.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Jason

It had been a week since Fiona and I became the subject of wide scrutiny, and she had vanished into thin air. The nightmares had r with a vengeance, and I had been unable to sleep more than six hours entire week. My head throbbed constantly, and I found it difficult to concentrate, no matter how hard I tried. Fiona's face haunted my thoughts, sometimes a sweet vision, other times a twisted nightmare.

In moments of desperation, I would sneak into her room at home, search for some sort of solace. There was a strange comfort in being surrounded by her things, as though she was still present in some way. Last night I curled up in her bed, clutching one of her pillows to my chest as I struggled to find some peace amidst the chaos. For a few hours, the pain in my head had receded, and I had slept a little better than usual. I got at least three hours of sleep and woke up feeling much better. There's so much to do at the moment but with the decline in everything, it's getting difficult.

My office is a little cooler because I get hot and uncomfortable easily and I fold my shirt sleeve and power my laptop. One of the first things I do in the morning is to check the stocks for Consco, but the day the article

published, every Consco establishment stock began to crumble - from Constructions to Consco Bank and even Ruthless. Now, I dread the but I still have to do them.

When my laptop powers up, I go straight to the charts. As expected, all doing badly. I slam my fist on the table, cursing as if the numbers could be low enough.

Picking up my phone, I dial a number.

"Hello, sir?"

"Send the customer charts over."

"Yes, sir."

espreadIn less than a minute, a notification pops up on my screen, and I head returnedto my mail to check it out.

s in theIt's the third time this week I'm asking for the customer record because cult toalso losing customers at Consco Bank.

dreams,I zoom into the document, and sure enough, the customer decline is ma

"For God's sake."

archingI lean back in my chair and shut my eyes, my mind reeling. So faded byarticles have been published about me and my business.

; I hadThe most ridiculous one was from yesterday. The heading read:

ruggled**The Downfall of the Greene Empire.**

ny headI've never been more upset about an article in my entire life. I took a r e hoursto glance over it, and words can't describe the magnitude of fear that e officeme. I began to believe it was really my downfall. Good thing I snapped it quickly.

now. I pick up my phone. Am I still trending on Twitter? I launch the a o in thecheck the trends. Sure enough, I am.

le wasI've been on the trends the whole week. It would've been a good t

Conscopeople were saying *good* things. But it's been one vile tweet after the charts, People have accused me of child trafficking and women trafficking, all than a week.

they'reThe worst part is Eva didn't take down the article.
couldn'tThe telecom startles me out of my thoughts.

"Yes, Emma?"

"Ms. Eva's here. Do I send her up?"

My breath hitches, a twinge of hope stemming up in my heart. What come to apologize for the damage she's caused? What if she's planned it down? Without wasting another breath, I speak too fast.

straight"Send her up immediately."

I rub my palms against each other, adjusting my shirt and sitting up. e we'reneed her to see me appear dejected. She has to see that she didn't ge with her silly little drama. I put my hair in order and clear the stock assive. and emails from my screen. I'll appear to be doing some serious wo having a full-blown meltdown in my office. In a few minutes, a knock r, moreon the door.

"Come in," I say, my full attention on the screen. The door opens squint, pretending to read something off the computer. When I look u seated in front of me.

noment"Nice of you to knock," I smirk.

grippedShe doesn't smile, and there's a determination in her eyes I've nev d out ofbefore. I say nothing. If she came to see me, then she has to let m what she's here for. But she stays completely silent; her lips pressed to, upp andThe quietness in the office quickly becomes awkward for me.

"Why are you here, Eva?"

thing if"Why is it so cold in here? Christ."

the other. I say nothing. I can't tell her it's a way for me to cope with the collapse in a less downward spiral.

"Answer me. Why are you here?"

"To tell you something really important. But you have to move your ass away and listen to me carefully."

I scoff. "You didn't exactly listen to me when I came by your house to get you to take the article down. I hope you're happy now, by the way. If she's She stares at the floor, biting her lip. She's repentant. Who would've thought to take But seeing her look remorseful doesn't make me happy. Surprisingly, it angers me.

"I'm not interested in a marriage with you any longer."

I don't The words hit me like a fast-moving train. I'm completely still. That's not possible. She's always dreamed of marrying me. And what's going to happen to Consco now?

work, not "Did you hear me? I said I'm not —"

she comes "I heard you perfectly."

The office is quiet again, but my mind isn't. Consco is already in trouble, and to add a loss of an opportunity with Eva is like adding salt to the wound.

"Because of the baby mama thing?"

"I've thought about it, Jason, a lot actually. You're not that interested in marriage, are you? We're being honest. And I don't want to get married to someone with a questionable character. I couldn't trust you, and it'll be bad for my business. So, I'm dropping it."

How do I feel about this? Relieved or scared? What if I don't have to tell her to secure a deal with Andrew? I don't know... given the circumstances, it might be an uphill task to get him to still see value

constant partnership with Consco. We haven't spoken since the news, and frankly I've been dreading a conversation with him. There are only two ways it could come out — good or bad. Right now, it seems bad is more likely. And I'm sure that laptop business person would call off the deal. As dad told me while he was alive, *Part of the things you're selling in business is your reputation.*

Trying to "Are you sure about that, Eva?"

"She doesn't flinch. "Yes."

Thought? It's so final. So certain. I've never been rejected before. Especially not by someone I didn't really want. Not in business and certainly not in romance.

This is all so new to me. I lower my head, flustered. It's all too embarrassing.

"We have a pretty reasonable friendship, let's leave it at that. I'd rather not stay friends."

happen "And you're still not going to take down the article?"

She stays silent, her jaws clenched.

"Well, if that's the case, then I don't have use for your friendship anymore, Eva Davidson. I'd rather not be friends with someone who's quick to ruin my life."

It to the "I didn't ruin your life, you did that all by yourself!"

"You're a cold woman, Eva."

"And so are you."

in me, if She stands to her feet, straightening her nude pantsuit. She makes to leave but stops at the door, turning to me.

and and "If it makes any difference, I didn't mean for it to get that bad. I was angry."

to marry "Get out, Eva."

current The moment she leaves, I let out a loud pained grunt.

ue in a "Aaaaargh!"

dy, I'veI couldn't take it anymore. The pressure, the stress, the overwhelming
an turnof loss and despair - it was all too much. I slammed my hands down
y sanedesk, over and over again until they hurt. It was a physical manifesta
was stillthe frustration and anger that had been building up inside me for a wee

When I couldn't bear the pain in my hands any longer, I buried my
them, hoping that the world would just stop for a moment. But it did
weight of everything that I was losing came crashing down on me all
not by- Fiona, my child, my partnership through marriage, and my busine
mance.was like a storm, raging inside me, threatening to tear me apart. The t
assing. rings again. I clear my throat before picking up.

her just"Emma."

"A man is here to see you. He says his name's Douglas."

"Douglas?" I wrinkle my nose. "I don't know a Douglas."

"He says you struck a deal with him in Haiti."

ymore,I grunt. I met Douglas in Haiti, and he was looking for an inves
ruin mybusiness. Now's not the time to deal with this.

"Please tell him to return next week. I'm caught up in so much
moment."

The call drops, and almost immediately, my phone vibrates. My hear
into my mouth when the name appears on the screen. Andrew Davidson
ave but*Oh God, this is it.*

I stand to my feet and pick up the call.

was just"Hello, Mr. Davidson."

"Yeah, Jason. How are you?"

"Err... good, sir. And you?"

"Great. So straight to the point. Uh.. Businesses are fragile, Jason, yo
that?"

feeling I swallow. "I do."

on the "That means what was built for twenty years can come crashing down on top of you today as a result of just one careless move."

ok. I shut my eyes, tapping my temple without saying anything.

head in "You there?"

ment. The "I'm here Mr. Davidson. I hear you."

at once "I've been thinking about our deal and from all indications, it really looks like it's not going to work. It's going along with it will be business suicide for me. I respect your desire to get the deal done, but I'm unwilling to go through with a deal."

His words pierce my heart, and I sink into one of the couches by the window.

"I'm sorry, Jason. Maybe sometime in the future, this will work out, but for now, I think it's best we lay it to rest."

An angry tear escapes my eye, but I wipe it off immediately. I can't feel anything for myself. I have to do everything to prove to everyone that I don't need their support. I can do just fine without them. Consco can soar without them.

"I understand, Mr. Davidson. Thank you for taking the time to have this conversation."

"One more thing," he says. "I hear Eva's no longer interested in the merger. I want you to know that I had no hand in her decision. It was all her."

ment. "It's alright."

"Okay, I think that will be all. Stay strong, Jason. And I know you've heard it, but never give up. You hear me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Okay. Bye."

As the call drops, I feel a flicker of hopelessness wash over me. But I don't know how to give up just like that. I rise to my feet again, determined to find a way out of this mess. I can't afford to lose everything. There has to be a solution.

My mind races as I consider my options. Maybe I should try and find
in oneBut where could she have gone? And even if she went back to her
I'm not sure how I can reach her. The image of her pregnant belly fla
my mind, and I feel a pang of pain. That's my child in there. I have
her.

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My mind races as I consider my options. Maybe I should try and find Fiona? But where could she have gone? And even if she went back to her parents, I'm not sure how I can reach her. The image of her pregnant belly flashes in my mind, and I feel a pang of pain. That's my child in there. I have to find her.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Fiona

Gazing into the mirror has become an odious ritual for me, for my reflection unveils a figure that is twice my size and swarthy complexion darker than my own. Despite the undeniable truth of my metamorphosis, I stubbornly refuse to acknowledge this new form that emerged after seven months of unrelenting bodily transformation. Ever dark shadows beneath my eyes, etched from long bouts of sleeplessness, are a constant reminder of my anxious state. My mind is in a perpetual state of disarray, my worries multiplying and compounding at every turn.

The piercing stares of passersby as I walk the streets only add to my mounting distress. One would assume that the novelty of my predicament would have faded by now, but alas, even after a full week has elapsed, I must mask my identity with a flaxen wig and a pair of sunglasses - all to Eleanor's suggestion. Though I cannot deny their efficacy in keeping prying eyes at bay, the absurdity of my new appearance only serves to augment my insecurity.

As if that weren't enough to contend with, the notion of raising my child without the guidance and support of a father figure looms ominously

mind. My meager earnings render me incapable of bearing the financial burden alone, and the mere thought of having my parents assume responsibility is unbearable. The impending closure of Pet Star, a crushing weight of loans, merely serve to compound my already considerable burdens.

In the night, tears come unbidden, their source inexplicable. By day, my mind is in an endless churn of anxieties, and the weight of the world seems to rest squarely on my shoulders.

My mind drifts to Jason. He's been calling me every single day since I left my house. I've never picked up once, but my heart tightens whenever my phone vibrates and it's him.

Before me, the reflection in the mirror reveals a figure adorned in my hoodie, unencumbered by the constraints of trousers. As I brush through my hair, my gaze falls upon my own likeness, and I cannot help but compare myself to the character Winnie the Pooh. I release a heavy sigh, my body wilting with the weight of my emotions, and slump back onto the bed with my back to the door.

A knock comes on the door.

"Come in," I say, almost in a whisper.

The door pushes open, but there are no footsteps. I turn my head, and my eyes lock with Mom's. She stands at the door, biting her lip. My heart sinks. Talking with Mom has been the most difficult thing. Every time she looks up at me, there's a stab in my chest. And when she replies to questions in monosyllables, a part of me dies. It's been like this for a while.

She doesn't move from the door.

"Hi, Mom."

I avert my gaze to the dressing table with the mirror on it, holding my breath.

financially. Finally, she walks into the room in tentative steps and sits directly on the edge of the bed on the dressing table.

and she asks, "Is everything alright, Mom?"

She exhales, looking directly at me.

"Try not to hate your body. It's doing an amazing job housing and taking care of another human."

I blink. That's the longest sentence she's spoken to me in weeks. Tears well up in my eyes, but I blink them back and stare at the floor.

"It will also do a tremendous job of introducing a new human into the world." The woman's body is a super machine if you ask me.

She chuckles.

The room is silent again. What's going on? Mom hasn't come into my room since I got back. She's also avoided me like the plague. Of course, it's not entirely possible, given our small apartment.

"I missed you," she says, and the tears I've tried so hard to keep at bay start pouring. Mom's talking to me again. The tightness in my chest eases as she moves from the dressing table and sits beside me on the bed, taking me in her arms.

The sobs come like a broken machine fighting to stay alive. Mom holds me tight.

"Oh, Fifi. I'm sorry about my coldness. I was grappling with it. You've been a problematic kid, and having to move from that to this took quite a bit of mind work. I've gone through anger, resentment, disappointment, and everything else, but I finally realized that you're hurting too. I can't imagine how tough it is for you to go through this all alone. I'm so sorry."

Her voice breaks. I look up into her face.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm sorry I lied."

opposite She brings her thumbs to my face, wiping my tears.

"You're going to make me cry if you keep sobbing like that."

I giggle even though it ends up sounding like a sob. Sniffling, I break from the embrace and straighten.

ng care She looks over at my baby bump and brings her hand slowly toward me. She pauses.

rs well "May I?"

I nod, taking her hand and placing it on my tummy. She inhales and runs her hand over, a gasp leaving her lips.

"It's so big. When I had you, my tummy wasn't *this* big."

"I know, right?"

y room "I'm going to have a lovely grandchild," she says mostly to herself, giggling.

wasn't "Do your joints ache?"

"All the time. It's like I can't even catch a break. Plus, the baby's also always coming to move."

up. She "Do you know its gender yet?"

me into "Nah, we chose to find out at birth."

Mom's nose wrinkles.

ds onto "You modern kids keep ruining the tradition. We always found out a

gender as soon as possible so we could have a gender reveal and buy the clothes. I never bought boy or girl clothes." She tilts her head. "Did you already get any clothes for the baby?"

nt, and Bertha did. But now that I've left...

magine I sigh. She also got everything else, from diapers to bottles and other things. She even got this cute brown baby stroller. Bertha was definitely on a shopping spree.

"Yeah, but..." I shift on the bed. "we might have to get new ones."

"What? You're not going to get in touch with the baby's father ever?"

I lower my eyes. I miss Jason and a deep longing forms in my heart as I look away about him. No. It's all in the past now.

"I don't know, Mom."

She Mom shuffles closer, taking my hand.

"I don't think it's a good idea to try to raise the baby alone, especially if you know the father, he's willing to do it and he's wealthy enough. Raising a kid is a lot, Fifi. But if you already made up your mind, then Dad can support you."

"Jeez, Mom. You can't do that. You still have the loan hanging over your heads."

"Yes, we can. We'll do everything to help."

I shake my head. That's not going to happen. Maybe Mom's right. Maybe I should contact Jason again and raise the baby together. But the agreement was that I'd leave the baby behind. My stomach churns. I can't do that anymore. I can't just abandon my child in that house.

Two more months to go.

Mom stands to her feet.

"Gotta go take a nap. I'm glad Dad's the one at the shop today."

She makes for the door, stopping at the entrance.

"Fifi?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Come to me if you ever need anything."

She smiles and winks. I nod.

"Yes, Mom."

The door shuts, and I'm alone again. I stretch out on the bed, pulling the white blanket over me. It's like the dark clouds over my head's ears.

slowly. Now, Mom's talking to me. That's a good sign that things will
I think look up.

I yawn, my eyes watering. I should get a nap too. Just when I shut m
my phone vibrates beside me. I lean up and pick it up from the bed. M
stops. It's Jason again. It's been one week, and he hasn't given up or
y when tired of calling me. I glance at the clock on the dressing table —12
aising a should be on a work break. My fingers hover over the screen. Shoul
d I will the call or not?

Before I'm done making a decision, my finger hits the receiver.
er your *No. No. No. What was I thinking?*

I stay silent. There's no sound on the other end except for his breathin
calm, almost like he's sleeping.

Maybe I "Are you just going to stay silent?"

initial I'm not prepared for how much his deep, dreamy voice shakes me to m
can't do I haven't heard his voice for a month, and I've missed the sound of
tunes he speaks. It tingles my skin.

"Talk to me."

"There's nothing to say, Jason."

"Fine. Let's start with this. Where are you?"

Do I want to tell him that? What if he finds the house?

"I need to know you're safe at least. Please."

"I'm safe. And I'm fine too here."

"So you're not going to tell me where you are?"

"No."

He exhales and sucks his teeth.

the soft "Okay. When are you coming back?"

sing up I scoff. "Coming back?" I sit up, moving the blanket away. "Jason, I

start to coming back.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, my heart sinks. I don't know if my eyes mean that or if I'm just saying. The truth is, I want to. But there's no way my heart can't leave the baby at the house or stay there six months after I'm grown wouldn't have a reason to unless Jason and I were a thing. We're not, and he makes it complicated.

And I take “That's not fair, Fiona. I...” he inhales. “I miss you.”

My heart races, and I hold my chest to make it stop. It doesn't.

“I want to meet my child. I want to be our baby's father. You know we need an heir. Please, don't do this to us. Please.”

But he says—“I hear you but I can't.”

“Dammit, Fiona.” The sound of his palm slapping the table filters through the room. If I were to guess what he's doing currently, I'd say he's pacing with a helpless look on his face—the kind from the night when he told the story of the low his boarding school experience. My heart tightens.

“You can't...we had an agreement. You can't just...the deed's done, even if you already knows. There's no point hiding anymore. It's ruined some things but at least I don't have to hide the news of my baby any longer. They can't legitimately take over from me too.”

He pauses.

“I have so much to give to the baby. Do you not want the best for the child? Do you not want wealth and a good life for our kid?”

I bite my lip. He's right. I want nothing less than a good life for my child. What if I try to convince Jason to provide the resources for the child if he/she stays with me? Maybe he'll listen when I tell him the child can make their choice to leave when it's eighteen.

I'm not I chew my nails. Would that be a good idea? It seems pretty solid to

clear my throat.

ow if I “If you want to provide for the child, you still can. But I'm not coming
point. I to the house.”

birth. I “That's just...” He exhales. “Think about this carefully, Fiona. This
and that baby we're talking about. I suggest we meet physically and talk about it

I smile. He's searching for some way to see me. Jason's a smart man. I
really miss me as much as I miss him, though?

A voice calls from the background.

✓ I also “Is it Fiona? Fiona! I miss you!”

Richard.

My eyes start to water again. I want to call out to him, tell him I miss
ough. I too. I blink the tears back.

with that “I have to go, Jason.”

story of “What? No, we're not—”

“Bye, Jason.”

✓ everyone I end the call immediately and shut my eyes, rubbing my cold palms to
ings, but What do I do?

they can

the child?

my baby.

and while

can make

to me. I

clear my throat.

“If you want to provide for the child, you still can. But I'm not coming back to the house.”

“That's just....” He exhales. “Think about this carefully, Fiona. This is our baby we're talking about. I suggest we meet physically and talk about it.”

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A voice calls from the background.

“Is it Fiona? Fiona! I miss you!”

Richard.

My eyes start to water again. I want to call out to him, tell him I miss him too. I blink the tears back.

“I have to go, Jason.”

“What? No, we're not—”

“Bye, Jason.”

I end the call immediately and shut my eyes, rubbing my cold palms together.

What do I do?

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Jason

A knock on the door rouses me from sleep. My eyes tear open as rays of sunlight spill over my eyes. I look over at the table clock. My eyes widen. Shit! I'm late for work. Oh no! This is bad. The knock comes again, louder this time.

“Jason! Are you in there?”

I grunt, shuffling toward the door. I pull it open and rush into the bathroom. Richard enters my room.

“Where are you in a hurry to?”

I peek out of the bathroom, my eyes flashing at him as he walks into my bedroom from the living room.

“Isn't that obvious?”

Richard sinks into my bed, bouncing.

“Errr...no?”

“Work, idiot!”

He scrunches up his face, but his confused expression turns into an angry one in a moment. He throws his head back and bursts out laughing, slapping his belly.

I love my little brother, but he can sometimes be a thorn in the flesh, jokes out of serious situations. He collapses into my bed, rolling from side as he holds his belly, unable to stop laughing.

I roll my eyes and shut the bathroom door.

“Jason! It's Saturday!”

Wait, what? I blink. Wow. I open the door to find Richard convulsing between bouts of laughter. He wipes a tear from his eyes and sits up.

“You really do need help, big bro.”

I sink into bed beside him, pinching the ridge of my nose. I haven't been able to think straight with everything that's going on—business failing, the company as tiny with Davidson lost, nightmares making sleep a dreadful thing, Fiona's death—8 baby missing. I suck in bouts of air and exhale, running my hands through my hair.

Richard watches me in silence.

“You look like you've not slept in a week.”

My room as *Because I haven't.*

Right now, I can only get a reasonable amount of sleep in Fiona's room, and it's weird to do that often. I haven't gone to her room in five days, and I've had a nightmare every day in those five days. Altogether, I've slept less than three hours. The excruciating pain in my head won't stop, and soon my vision gets blurry.

“How're you *really* doing, Jason?”

I shift on the bed, lowering my head. Even though Richard and I are siblings, I've never been one to share anything with him except just surface stuff. Amused right now, there's the urge to be open with him, to tell him everything I'm holding strange. I've never done that with anyone who isn't my therapist or Fiona. Fiona changing me?

making “I’m not alright, obviously. It took just one week for everything to fall
side to If Richard is shocked that I’m opening up, he doesn’t show. Instead, h
to face me.

“I can imagine. It’s not even my name in the papers and yet I’ve
benched all week. So, I can imagine how much tougher it is for you
sing in bad is business?”

I rub my lips. Laying with my back on the bed, I place my arms behind
support my head.

en able “Trash. Everything is burning down. The stocks are horrible, it’s never
he deal that low in all of Consco’s history. Customers are pulling out of the bank
and the Davidson called me to cancel a deal.”

through “Dang,” he says.

I shrug. “Not to mention, Eva is calling off a marriage that never happened.
He chuckles and folds his arms.

“I don’t think that part made you sad.”

“I was relieved honestly. It was a lot having to deal with that. We ended
om, but dissolving the friendship anyway, which didn’t make me too happy, but
and I’ve everything she’s done, it’s probably the best.”

for less This is the first time my brother and I are having a personal conversation
netimes this. He tried to do it a few times by opening up to me about the stuff
on with him, but it only made me uncomfortable. It doesn’t feel as awkward
anymore. I really did shut out the most important people in my life. A
iblings, forms in my throat.

iff. But “Jason, you’ve always been great at negotiations. I think you can convince
ng. It’s Davidson. I’m sure he’ll look past the whole ruckus.”

iona. Is It’s possible. Eva was born that way, too, from a woman who wasn’t h
I’m sure I can convince him.

apart.” “You’re probably right. When did you get so smart?”
He shifts. “I watched you.”

He grins.

“Now that’s just corny,” I smirk. “I appreciate it. And thanks for asking me. How do you miss Fiona as much as I do?” His voice is sober.

“I do. So much.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

“What? No...I mean...” I throw my hands in the air.

Richard chuckles, a smirk on his face.

“Hey, what’s going to happen with her and the baby now?”

No matter how often I try to avoid this conversation, it keeps coming back. I don’t know what’s going to happen. It’s unusual for me because I usually know what to do.

“Do you have any other way to find her physically, at least?”

“I don’t know where she...”

Wait, Fiona’s mom has a Pet shop. That’s it! Why didn’t I think of that earlier? I jump to my feet.

“Richard, you’re a genius.”

“Wait, what?”

“I have to go somewhere immediately.”

“Err.”

“I’ll explain everything later.”

I hurry over to my closet and throw on a pair of sweatpants and a sweater. Rushing to the mirror, I put away stubborn strands and pick up the hairbrush.

Richard watches quietly, his face scrunched up.

When I’m done, I spritz a generous amount of my favorite woody cologne. I pick up my car keys and rush out of the room. I race downstairs, but

into Mom in the living room.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Jason, I need to—”

g.” “Not now.”

I rush past her, out of the house, making straight for the Audi.

Starting the car, I zoom off. What’s the address again? Shoot.

I don’t remember. I take my phone out, struggling to keep my eyes on the road.

I search for it. Mom sent it to me that day.

It’s obvious I’m the only person who didn’t get the *laid-back* memo
day because everyone else on the street is waltzing around, and I’m sp
ing up. I like it’s not Saturday. The sunny morning gives the streets a colorful

always and there aren’t as many horn sounds today, which means no traffic. G

ten minutes, I’m at Rodeo Drive. The shop was somewhere on the left

down the car, looking up at the signposts. What’s the guarantee that

here? Maybe she didn’t even go back home. What if she did? That

t? possible. If she didn’t, then her mom wouldn’t know.

I inhale. I didn’t consider that her mom might be unwilling to talk to r

knows I’m the one who got her daughter pregnant. Shit. I didn’t thi

through.

The huge signpost catches my eye. That’s it. Pet Star. As I appro

building, I squint. It looks like the building is closed. I turn off the

step out, walking toward it. Sure enough, it’s closed. My heart shatters

atshirt. I’m about to walk to George’s Food Court when a sheet on the door

comb my attention. I pick it up to examine. This is a bank foreclosure doc

They got a loan from a bank and couldn’t pay up. Oh, man, why didn’

ologne, tell me about this?

umping I turn around, watching people stroll on both sides of the streets. M

them go over to George's Food Court. The smell of his hamburgers fills the air, and my tummy growls. I look over there. I should sit there for a while to process my thoughts. I walk over to the Food court and place an order. "Hamburger and Fries, please."

"Coming up!"

The place is packed, especially with young adults and elderly folks. The chatter fills the air, mixing with the sounds of frying. After a few minutes, the server places a tray with a plate of burger and fries in front of me.

"Any drinks?"

I shake my head. "Just water. Thank you."

"Got it."

He tosses me a bottle of water, and I pick up my tray, making my way to a seat. I slow down as I see a man sitting at a table.

Stopping in my tracks, I turn to George.

"Do you know what happened to the Pet Shop folks? I'm looking for them."

George presses his lips together, a sad smile on his face. "Ah, the Manne. The bank shut their shop. They had trouble meeting up with the payments. How long has it been shut for?"

"Barely a week, I think."

I nod and make my way to my seat. Placing my food on the table, I look back at the closed Pet Shop. There's no way Fiona didn't know her parents were losing their business. Why in the world didn't she tell me? I reach for my hairbrush to run my hands through my already organized hair.

This means there's not even a chance to see her again.

I take the foreclosure paper out of my pocket again, examining it closely when an image on the paper catches my attention. My heart stops. It's United Bank. That's Davidson's bank.

fills the Davidson's bank is responsible for the closure. I sit up. I might be able
mile and a way to change his mind about the closure. Even if he doesn't
partnership deal with me, I'll figure that out. But Fiona's parents' b
can't go down the drain just like that. It's too much.

Taking out my phone, I dial Davidson's number with my heart in my
A quiet He might ignore my call because he thinks I'm calling to tell
utes, here consider the partnership deal. But this is more important.

It rings, and I hold my breath. He picks on the first ring.

I clear my throat, straightening up.

"Hello, Jason. How are you?"

Oh, he sounds pleasant. That's good.

y to the "Great, sir. There's something I would like to discuss with you. It's
important."

There's silence on the other end, apart from his breathing. There's th
hem." of a young female in the background. It doesn't sound like Eva. Righ
icCalls. why he sounds pleasant. I grimace.

nt." "Okay. Go ahead, I'm listening. But make it short."

"Oh, no sir. Not over the phone. If you don't mind, would it be ol
dropped by your office?"

look up "I'm currently not at the office."

parents *Of course, you aren't.*

sist the "When would you be available at the office? "

I would've suggested showing up at his house, but the last thing I wa
run into Eva.

closely, "Mmmm, let's make that Monday. Any time on Monday is fine."

. Dame "Great. Thank you."

When the call drops, I throw fries in my mouth.

to find I get to do something for her.

sign a
business

hands.
him to

s really

e voice
t, that's

ay if I

nt is to

I get to do something for her.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Fiona

I'm starting to think these scholarships are not for me. Staring at another rejection mail deals a blow to my heart. At least if I got it I'd be able to study my dream course. I already thought it through. I'll work and study while Mom helps me care for the baby. Now that the shop's closed, we have to find a way to provide the money and get my career moving forward. Going to take care of a baby and my parents, I have to make major changes. One of the changes would be that I can't give up. It sounds good in theory, but I'm tempted to forget about the scholarships. But if I don't get the scholarship, how do I handle the study bills, raise a child and help my parents?

The overwhelming thoughts sit like a weight in my chest. Maybe it's pointless to keep trying. But I can't stop. I stand up from the sofa and walk to the floor beside the coffee table. The baby's coming in two months and we don't have a solid plan yet. My heart skips a beat. The last thing I want is for the baby to be born into all of the struggles that we're experiencing. Maybe I should just get a job and work my ass off while saving.

I scoff. What kind of job would let me save enough for college while

for a baby? I inhale.

A knock on the door draws me out of my thoughts. I turn to the door and find it locked. Standing to my feet, I make my way to the door and unlock it.

I pull it open to find Eleanor.

“Hey, Fifi!”

She has several bags in her hands.

“Where in the world are you coming from?” I say, stepping aside as she walks into the room.

She drops the bags on the floor in the middle of the living room and sits on the sofa.

“What with all the bags? Did you go on a spending spree today?”

She giggles. “Open it.”

I angle my body away, glaring at her. What’s with her today? I shut the door, and walk to the bags on the floor. I open the smallest bag and gasp.

Immediately. Pulling out the colorful fabrics, I hold out one of them to her hands. It’s a rainbow-colored baby coverall. I pick up the second one,

theory, baby coverall. There are blue, pink, and white baby socks, a few baby towels, and one yellow hat. I move to the next bag as Eleanor watches.

It’s a set of baby feeding bottles. There’s a navy blue burp cloth.

Another bag has grooming items from combs to hair oil, lotion, and a washcloth.

My eyes start to water. I look up at Eleanor, who’s smiling like a mad scientist. I stand to my feet with my hands up. She stands, her hands out too. We

lock in an embrace, the tears come pouring.

No one comes through for me the way my best friend does. She always does. Maybe every single time. Eleanor isn’t wealthy, but she’d give her last dime

for me. She always does things like this when I least expect them.

We tear away, and she wipes my tears.

“Stop crying. Don’t do that.”

Her voice is broken. She’s trying so hard not to cry but a stray tear escapes.

“Why? Why’d you do all this? El, you should be using your money for things.”

“Seriously? You’re important to me.”

She takes my hands and sits on the sofa, pulling me beside her.

“Thank you. This means so much to me.”

She smiles and brings her hand to my face, moving a strand of hair from my forehead.

“How are your parents dealing with the shop closure? Must be a lot.”

“It is. The worst hit yet. Mom’s trying to get a job somewhere else. Dad’s a little weak these days. I told him to rest for a while before jumping on the job.”

“What about you? How are you holding up?”

I look down at the shopping bags. “Jason called again.”

She shifts in her seat, turning to face me.

“Did you finally take his call?”

I nod.

“Tell me everything.”

I knew she’d want that. Eleanor loves stories, including gossip. Uncle John, though, she’s the one who tells all the stories. Unfortunately, I’ve had a lot of drama in my life lately.

“Well, he asked me where I was, but I didn’t tell him. He asked when I was going to return to his house. I may have told him that I was never returning. Her eyes widen. “Oh, dear. Did you say that? Are you sure about it?”

I bite my lip. “Honestly, I’m not, but I don’t want to give the baby up. It was the initial agreement. I was supposed to stay at his house until six

after birth, after which, I was supposed to leave without the baby. I can't
conceive it in my mind right now."

or other "You do realize you could've just modified the agreement instead, right?"

"Well, I told him that he could still support his child, but the baby lives with me instead."

She leans forward. "And?"

"I don't think he was pleased with that."

on my "Do you have any plans for raising the baby? I mean, considering the
Shop's closed. You'll need a reasonable amount of money."

"Well, that's what I'm trying to figure out."

Dad's a Eleanor stands, making her way to the kitchen.

if to get "Do you have any food? Snacks? I'm starving."

I giggle.

"There's some leftover pizza in there, I think."

She walks to the refrigerator, takes out the pizza box, and returns to the
room. She drops it on the coffee table, rubbing her palms together. I
in, she takes a piece.

"Want one?"

"No, thank you. Right now, I'm craving Thai food, especially shrimp
usually, El grimaces.

l all the "Are you sure the only reason you can't be in Jason's house is because of
baby thing?"

n I was I lean back into the sofa, stretching my legs out. They're swollen again
urning." "What do you mean?"

"Could it be that part of the reason is that you're starting to have feelings
p. That him and trying not to get hurt?"

months I laugh uncomfortably, shifting the position of my legs. El thinks she

It's not even me, but she doesn't. I don't think I have feelings for him. It was just good and great conversations, nothing more.

it?" *Nothing more, and I can't stop thinking about him.*

She says with "I want to fight you right now. But I haven't thought about that before. Eleanor laughs. "I'm always right, mostly because I know you like my own self." She throws the last pizza morsel in her mouth and frowns as she's deep in thought.

the Pet "I don't want you to sabotage yourself and your baby unknowingly. I know that at Jason's is going to be good for the baby and maybe you, it's best to listen to your heart and stop fighting the thoughts because you think it makes you weak."

I stare at the empty pizza box. She's right. I should call Jason and tell him I'm considering returning. But the agreement has to be different.

"Thanks, El. I'll think about it."

Her phone rings, and she puts it on her ear.

Digging "Hello?"

"He's back already? Okay, on my way."

She stands to her feet just as the call ends.

soup." "I gotta go. Duty calls."

She hurries off, and I follow behind her. At the door, she stops and looks back at me of them again, her gaze softening.

"I love you girl. Please let me know if you need anything else."

1. "Thanks."

I wave and shut the door.

Eleanor is super perceptive and really thoughtful. I sit back on the couch holding my head. I have a lot of thinking to do.

The door opens again. It's Mom.

reat sex“Hey, Mom.”

Just then, someone else appears at the door, just behind her. Dad.

As they enter, the look on their face tells me there’s trouble. Mom’s
.” are clasped together, Dad’s hands fall stiffly beside him, and his
I knowbowed.

uns like“What’s wrong? What happened?”

They both sit on the sofa beside me, and I sit up, looking from Mom
f beingmy heart pounding.

o follow“Dad? Mom? Someone, say something.”

ou lookDad takes Mom’s hands, avoiding my gaze.

“We have good news and bad news.”

him I’llWhat kind of good news makes people look like their world is about to

I swallow. “Let’s hear it. What’s the good news?”

“We might have found a solution to the money issue.”

“Okay, that’s great. And the bad news?” “The solution is putting
apartment up for sale and moving back to Tennessee.”

It takes a moment for me to grasp what they're really saying. My
hitches. Move back to Tennessee? No, this can't be happening.

“Did you say Tennessee?”

ooks atHe nods.

Oh, God. How can we move back just like that? It’s too soon. The
room swirls. I want to protest, but I understand that they've exhausted
options. I sigh. The least I can do is be supportive of this. Leaving eve
behind is going to be extremely difficult. I've been in LA all my li
ie sofa,moving back is a lot. And there’s Jason. I’ll be far away from him.

“Fiona?”

Dad’s call draws me out of my thoughts.

“Are you concerned about something?”

“How soon will this happen?”

“Dad shifts in the chair. “As soon as possible. There's no other way to head is living here. We just have to sell the apartment first; that part won't be a problem.”

“So...we have barely a month.”

Even though Mom's been here, she hasn't said a single thing. Mayt still in shock.

“Mom?”

She jerks and looks up with her lips pressed together.

“You agreed to the whole plan?”

She shrugs. “We don't really have the most palatable options to work with. We're in a really tight spot, Fifi.”

“But why do we have to move back? Can't we sell off and just stay here?”
Dad shakes his head. “If we stay here, we'll end up almost spending all our money on rent. In Tennessee, there are your grandparents, so we won't have to worry about rent. That's a huge burden off our chests. If we spend some time there without incurring as many expenses, we can rebuild faster. It doesn't exactly make me enthusiastic, but we're trying to do what's best for everyone.”
Drawing in a deep breath, I try to quell the tightening in my chest. I know I'm living through I am cognizant of the reasons behind the current predicament, but I can't do anything to alleviate the overwhelming sense of anxiety that has consumed me. This feels like a never-ending nightmare, one that I desperately want to wake up from.

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“But why do we have to move back? Can't we sell off and just stay here?”

Dad shakes his head. “If we stay here, we'll end up almost spending all of the money on rent. In Tennessee, there are your grandparents, so we won't have to worry about rent. That's a huge burden off our chests. If we spend some time there without incurring as many expenses, we can rebuild faster. This doesn't exactly make me enthusiastic, but we're trying to do what's best.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I try to quell the tightening in my chest. Even though I am cognizant of the reasons behind the current predicament, it does little to alleviate the overwhelming sense of anxiety that has consumed me. This feels like a never-ending nightmare, one that I desperately wish to awaken from.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Jason

Climbing the steps of the Davidson Mansion makes me grimace to face those weird-looking statues again. After fixing the r time for noon on Monday, Davidson called over the weekend to ask me to come over to his house after working hours instead. It wasn't the most pleasant thing to hear, considering Eva is the *last* person I want to see. She'd better be on a shopping spree or pool party somewhere far away. I've tried so hard to bury our last conversation in my mind, but it comes back occasionally. Right now, I need to focus on convincing Davidson that I need to help rescue Pet Star.

I knock on the door and look around. The grass carpet surrounding the building is a little unkempt. Did the gardener travel? The door opens, and a young uniformed staff member gives a slight smile.

"Welcome, Mr. Greene."

I throw a cursory glance his way and step past him into the living room. The first thing that catches my attention is the new statue. This time it's a woman playing some kind of violin. My jaw drops. I knew Davidson

weird kinks but this? Jesus Christ! No wonder his wife left him; she wanted to.

“Are you here to see Eva?” the young uniformed staff asks.

“Mr. Davidson, please.”

“My apologies. Please do have a seat. I’ll inform him that you’re here.

“Thank you.”

He gives a slight bow and walks up the stairs, lifting himself with an impressive gait.

As soon as I settle into a couch, loud laughter comes from the kitchen and my heart drops. Eva steps out, holding a silver plate with a pearl earring—time between her ear and shoulder. She stops in her tracks when she sees me meet-up “Hold on. Let me call you back, Kev.”

What the hell? Couldn’t she have gone out this evening? I grunt.

She walks up to me in a pink sweatshirt and smiles awkwardly. My stomach tightens.

“Hey.”

I give a slight nod to acknowledge her presence and look away, pretending to study one of the statues beside the TV.

“How are you, Jason?”

I scoff. “If anyone should be asking me that question, it surely would be you.”

How can she ruin my life and business like it means nothing and casually ask how I’m doing? Is she crazy?

“No need to be rude.”

“Just stop.”

She stands still, holding the plate in silence.

“Mr. Greene, Mr. Davidson says to come up,” the young staff says

as rightme.

Thank God. I jump to my feet and follow him as we make our way stairs. It's a C-shaped staircase with maroon finishings that open up wide lobby. We walk to the first giant oak door, and the staff knocks.

"A faint voice inside calls.

"Come in!"

The young staff pushes the door open and steps aside, motioning for walk in. He shuts the door behind me when I do. I've been to Dav an area, study a few times, but I never get used to the strange medieval paint . phonenude men and women. In one of the paintings, they're having some e. orgy. I avert my gaze from the grey walls and turn to face Davidson. T long-haired man looks impeccable in his black and white checkered Even though Davidson is almost twice my age, he hardly looks a da ly jawsthan I am. I always thought it was astonishing, but I soon learned h home gym around the backyard where he spent most of his evenin wonder the females flocked around him.

iding to "Jason! Long time no see. Have a seat."

"Hello, Andrew."

"He takes off his reading glasses and smiles at me."

dn't beHis office is freezing. I rub my palms together to generate some heat.

"I'm so sorry I moved this meeting. An urgent matter came up at id thenUnited. I needed to go sort that out."

"No, it's fine."

He stands to his feet and walks toward the large see-through refri beside the maroon bookshelf.

"What drink are you up for? Scotch?"

behind "Yes, scotch is fine. Thank you."

He places two glasses on his maroon semi-circle desk and pours into them. He hands one to me and takes a sip before sitting again, this time with his legs crossed.

“I should be at the gym, but I promised I’d see you. So, talk to me.”

“And I thoroughly appreciate it. I won’t take so much of your time about the news. It’s true that I got a woman pregnant, but what they told me to add is that I...” I clear my throat. “I also love her.”
Fiddson’s *I didn’t plan to say that.*

He angles his body away as if wondering what that’s got to do with him. “The thing is, initially, I was going to meet you to talk about reconciling the partnership deal. But then I discovered that Fiona’s parents’ business had been shut down. I found out they took a loan from Dame United, and their shop was shut because of their failure to pay. I know it’s strictly business—that’s all they have, and I can’t imagine what they’re going through—now. It must be hard for them.”

He rubs his scanty beard, his gaze completely fixed on me.

“I came to ask that I take on the debt payment instead. I’m not in the best financial state right now because of the smear from the article, but please, can you save that business? Please reopen it and let me take the debt. I’ll pay it. I’m willing to work on a different agreement with you.”

He takes a sip from his glass and stares at it for a while before dropping it.

“You’re willing to shoulder the expenses?”

“Yes, I am. Really.”

Andrew exhales and places his index fingers together.

“Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a selfless act of love. You really care about her, don’t you?”

“I do.”

each of He leans backward. “Did the smear article hit Consco badly?”
ne with “Yes. It’s probably the worst hit in Consco’s history?”

“What news outlet published that?”

“It was The Tea.”

2. So... His nose wrinkles.

7 didn’t “That can’t be right. The Tea belongs to Eva. She’d never do that aga
own friend.”

I take out my phone and search for the article. It pops up in seconds. I
n. over to him, and his jaw drops.

sidering “I heard the rumors, but I didn’t see the original article. I had no idea
ess had must have been a reasonable explanation. Did she say she had no idea
and the they ran the story?”

ess, but I shake my head, pressing my lips together. “It was all her. She said s
h right mad at me for getting someone else pregnant.”

He lets out an uncomfortable chuckle, unbuttoning the top of his t-shirt

“Is that a joke?”

greatest “It’s not. We’re no longer friends. I ended my friendship with her.”

ase, can He gulps the last of his drink. I haven’t even touched mine. I pick it
hand let take a generous gulp.

“On behalf of the Davidsons, I’m truly sorry about this. I had no idea
g it. all her. I’ll make sure she’s held accountable for her careless and utter
actions.”

He stays silent, staring at nothing in particular.

“Your business is suffering so much because she was mad? I raised her
lly care than that.”

His ears go red. It’s the first time I’ve seen Davidson get angry. He’s
so calm and soft-spoken. It’s not surprising he manages to stay calm

when he's mad.

"This needs to be addressed as soon as possible. To make it up to you, I'll consider opening the girl's shop again."

A smile forms on my face.

"Really?"

"Yes, but that's not all. You won't have to pay for it. I'll make sure it does."

I can't believe it. I clasp my hands.

"That's so kind of you. Thank you so much."

"I'm not done."

What does he mean by that?

"I'll sign the partnership."

My eyes go wide. I resist the urge to scream, but my hand fist pumps. I realize what's happening.

Davidson chuckles.

"I hope the partnership helps improve your numbers again. I'm embarrassed by Eva's actions. She's better than smearing someone for no reason."

"I'm short of words, sir."

He smiles. "Don't be. You've earned it. I also didn't realize you were a really silly, compassionate gentleman willing to shoulder a bill to save someone's business. That's rather noble. There aren't many people like that these days. I stand."

"I think I've taken so much of your time already. I'll be on my way. Thank you once again for your kind consideration."

He stretches his hands for a handshake, and I take it. My heart is even bursting with excitement.

I walk out of his office, and warm air envelopes me immediately. Hi
you, I'll was so freaking cold I can't even feel my fingers anymore.

I rub my palms vigorously and make my way downstairs, humming
William's *Happy*. It's the only way to describe what's going on in
right now.

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days."

Thank

nearly

I walk out of his office, and warm air envelopes me immediately. His office was so freaking cold I can't even feel my fingers anymore.

I rub my palms vigorously and make my way downstairs, humming Pharrell William's *Happy*. It's the only way to describe what's going on in my head right now.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Fiona

“I think you should take a break, Fiona. Mom and I will take it u
here,” Dad calls out.

“Don’t worry, Dad. I can handle a couple more.”

The house is almost empty as we put all our stuff in a box. Dad was get a buyer for the apartment in less than two weeks, and we put up s the home items for sale. I don’t quite remember what Tennessee loo We went there all the time to see grams, but as I grew up, we went l less. Grams came over here every year instead. I haven’t seen her th though. I guess I’m going to tomorrow because we’re leaving LA fir in the morning. As the thought of leaving tomorrow gets clearer in m dread washes over me.

I look around my room, now only covered in a pile of boxes of d sizes. Placing my hands on my waist, I take in a breath.

Mom knocks and peeks through the door.

“All done?”

“Yup. Now I need food.”

She chuckles and walks into the room, looking around.

“Are you anxious about moving?”

“I am. Are you?”

She bites her lip. “I’ve been so anxious for months. I don’t even know how it feels like to be normal anymore.”

I stretch my hand and place it over her shoulders.

“We’ll be good, Mom. Okay?”

She raises her eyebrows. “Hard to believe if you ask me.”

I know. It really is hard to believe that we’ll bounce back from this with an extra human joining us. A tiny kick on my tummy makes me

“It kicked again?” Mom turns.

I nod. Did it read my thoughts?

The doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it!” Dad says, his footsteps slapping the floor.

Whispers come from the living room moments after.

“Honey!” Dad calls.

“Honey!”

Mom rushes out, and I follow behind.

He’s laughing excitedly, and a man in a blue T-shirt stands at the

There’s a familiar image crested on the breast pocket. That’s the

United Logo. What are they doing here? We already paid off the loan

apartment, and they have already closed the shop.

“Someone paid the debt! Someone paid the debt!” Dad jumps.

“What?” Mom says. She’s just as startled as I am.

Paid the debt? I look from Dad to the Dame United staff at the door

does he mean by someone paying the debt? What someone?

He brings the letter to us.

“Here, take a look at this. Miracles do exist!”

Mom and I study the letter:

This is to inform you that your debt has been paid, and the bill is yours now. It has officially been reopened.

Courtesy,

Eva Davidson

This letter is even more confusing. I scratch my head. That doesn't make sense. Eva was the one from Jason's house. Why in the world would she cancel the debt? And how did she know about it?

Mom turns to Dad.

"Who's Eva Davidson?"

"I think I know who it is. I just don't understand why." I pipe in.

I chew my nails, and Mom stands awkwardly. Dad's the only one who doesn't care about the details of the debt clearance. He's laughing like he just got a new present. It's the first time in a long time I've seen him like this.

I turn to the staff.

"Why would Eva Davidson pay the debt? This doesn't make sense."

Dad shrugs. I don't expect that he'd know much anyway. Maybe I should ask Jason to find out what happened. I sigh. After the way our last conversation went, it might be best not to call him up again. What would he think about this?

Maybe I can call Richard.

"Who's she?" Mom asks me.

"A friend of Jason."

She scrunches her face up.

"Your Jason?"

She says it in an awkward way, with her lips twitching. We haven't talked about him so much at home. Mom usually gets weird about it, and so

don't think she will ever get over her daughter getting pregnant
ding iswedlock and for a man who wasn't even interested in a stable relations

“Yes. But I don't know why she'd do that or how she even knows ab
of this.”

I take my phone out of my pocket and dial Richard's number. He p
ake anyimmediately.

uld she“Fiona? Oh my god.”

He still sounds the same, like a warm child who gives everyone a
school but teases them first. I've missed him so much.

“Hey, before you ask any questions, I wanted to find out something.”

He's quiet for a while.

o really“What's that?”

ie a kid“Do you have any idea why Eva paid off my parents' debt?”

en DadHe exhales.

“Oh, about that. Jason went to see Mr. Davidson, the owner of Dame
Bank. His plan was to pay off the debt himself, but Mr. Davidson ma
pay when Jason told him Eva was the one who released the article.”

uld callI blink. “Did you say Jason?”

ersationHe chuckles. “Hard to believe, right? I think he really cares about you.

bout it?My throat closes. Jason is responsible for this? He was going to pay th

My heart starts to race. I want to believe Richard's statement, but it
too good to be true. Things don't happen like that with just a finge

Well, it's not like Richard would be lying about that anyway. If ther
thing about him, he's as blunt as it gets.

“But how did he find out about the loan?”

t talked“He went over to your parents' shop to see if he'd find you. He found

o do I. Ibut there was a small slip on it from the bank.”

out of Wow. I stay silent. This is a lot to take in. I need to see Jason. I have a relationship with Jason right now.

out any “Richard...can you come pick me up? I need to see Jason. Don’t tell Mom please.”

icks up “On my way. Send your address.”

“Okay.”

When the call ends, my fingers fly over my screen as I type the address. I hit the *send* key. I exhale and put my phone away, looking up at Mom and Dad, who are staring at me like they’ve seen a ghost.

“So Jason...” I look over at Mom. If she flinches at the mention of the name, she doesn’t show it.

“He’s the one behind it. According to his brother, he went to the sheriff’s office and saw that it was closed. That’s how he found out about the loan. Apparently, he knows the owner of the bank. He went to him directly and it was confirmed. The owner made his daughter pay for it as a consequence of the article I published about Jason and me.”

Their mouths drop.

“I have so many questions. But let’s start here—you’re telling me Jason has a personal relationship with the owner of Dame United?”

“I smile. I completely forgot how out of my league he is. He knows people who sounds like influential people. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knows Beyoncé on a personal level too.”

“So his daughter was the one who released the news? I wonder why, Mom,” she says.

“Err...excuse me. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

We completely forgot the Dame United staff was still standing at the door. He waves awkwardly and turns to leave, but he stops halfway.

to see “The place is open. I did that before I got here.”

Dad rubs his fingers together, beaming. “Thank you so much! Thank you so much!”
Finally, he takes his leave, and Dad turns back to me.

“How can we show our appreciation to this young man? I’m so relieved.”

“Me too, Dad. I just spoke to Richard. He’s on his way here. I’ll go see him myself.”

“What? You’re not going to go without us. We’re coming with you.”

“We?” Mom asks.

Of course, she still doesn’t like Jason. It might take a while for her to get used to even the mention of his name. Dad, on the other hand, seems like a truly simple man.

I check my wristwatch; Richard should be here in fifteen minutes.

“You’re not coming?”

Mom looks away, and Dad shrugs.

“Well, you can go look over the shop if you’re not coming. But I personally think we all have to go there to see him.”

“Why is nobody asking why he wanted to do it himself? What’s in it for him?” Mom says.

Dad looks at me, amused. “Is it possible he did it because he truly likes her? Maybe Fiona won his heart?”

I laugh even though it’s an awkward conversation. Dad doesn’t seem to notice it’s awkward, though—he speaks freely.

“Fiona, does he like you or is he just a kind man?”

When I first met Jason, I didn’t consider him the kind of person I would categorize as kind. He was cold, stiff, and awkward when it came to expressing his feelings. He softened, but still, paying an entire debt is a big deal.

“I don’t know, Dad. We’ll ask him all of our questions when we get there.”

Just then, my phone vibrates. It's Richard.
"You!" "I'm downstairs."

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Just then, my phone vibrates. It's Richard.

"I'm downstairs."

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Jason

Standing in front of the mirror, I button my white t-shirt and tight belt. Kavia invited me out for a runway show organized by her. Even though I'm not as enthusiastic about fashion, I'm excited escaping my thoughts these days.

I put on my brown leather jacket and look at my sleeves. They're loose now. Have I lost that much weight? I pick up the comb from the table and comb my hair backward, taking a strand out of my face. I've spent most of the Saturdays either sleeping in when I can or escaping to work, I'm frankly tired of working, and I'd rather avoid another nightmare.

I pick up the black matte cologne on the table. Soleil Brûlant is my favorite Tom Ford perfume. Spritzing a generous amount all over me, I finish with Creed Viking. I take one last look in the mirror and pick up my car keys and phone before making my way downstairs.

"Where are you off to?" Mom says.

She's seated on the sofa in the living room.

"I don't know. Some runway shows."

"You're not in haste, are you?"

“Not really.”

She taps the vacant space beside her, looking up at me. I exhale and plop down on the sofa, plopping down on it.

“Mmmm...another fragrance. At this point, I’m convinced you have a hundred fragrances in your closet.”

“Just ninety, actually.”

“Right.”

She studies me in silence and crosses her legs.

“Jason, you’ve lost a lot of weight. I’m starting to get worried.”

I rub the back of my neck. “It’s the stress, Mom. But I’ll recover as soon as the partnership deal with Davidson takes off. I’ve also noticed that your sister has circles under my eyes.”

I notice Mom’s brows furrow. “Have you heard from Fiona yet?”

Well, how do I tell her the last time I did, Fiona said she wasn’t coming back? Mom was really looking forward to meeting her grandkid at the table. Greene Empire heir.

“I did, but it’s not positive.”

but I’m “Stop trying to mince words. Tell me.”

“She might not be coming back.”

I’m not prepared for the tears that prickle my eyes. I blink them back, but I’ve never missed anyone as much as I miss her. I spent only a short time with her, yet thoughts of her consume me like she’s been part of my life for decades.

“I miss her, Mom.”

Her gaze softens, and I look away to hide my eyes. I’m not prepared to be that helpless in front of Mom. I should be strong for her. But the thought that I might never see Fiona again shakes me to my core.

Just then, Richard appears at the living room entrance. He's grinning.
walk to "What?" I say.

"I have a surprise for you."

over all roll my eyes and stand to my feet.

"I don't have time for your games today. I have a runway sh—"

Richard steps aside to reveal three people at the entrance. One of them is
Fiona.

Fiona! My eyes widen. What? How? When?

"Fiona?" Moving closer to her, my arms extend in an eager embrace.
soon as bodies connect, my eyes well up with tears, and I permit myself to cry
ie dark In all my life, the only time that tears have escaped my eyes was when
father passed away. But Fiona is different, and in her presence
overcome by emotions I never knew I could feel - an amalgamation
coming love, tenderness, and anguish, all at once.

and then I break away, looking from her to Richard as she laughs, her cheeks wet
tears.

"How?"

"Well, she found out someone cleared her parents' debt, and she called
picked her up."

ok. I've I grin and turn back to her. I had no idea she'd figure it was me. I just
ne with to do something to show her that I really cared about her. I bring my
life forth to her face and wipe her tears.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too," she says, cheeks flushed.

to look "Fiona, come here."

ght that Mom takes her into an embrace, rubbing her back as they sway from
side, even though Fiona's belly comes in the middle.

“Let me tell you, when you left, no one was the same. The boys were I think Richard missed you more, though.”

Fiona giggles as they break away. She turns her attention to the two individuals who have lingered at the entrance, observing the man with blue eyes that resemble her own. His gaze roams the expanse of the room, his mouth agape in wonderment. This reaction is hardly unexpected, for those who visit here for the first time are invariably awestruck by the magnitude of this abode.

As our “Jason, Bertha, meet my parents.”

freely. The man takes the woman’s hand, though she seems hesitant, and then my toward us.

, I am “This is Keith, and that’s Elizabeth. They insisted on coming with me out of fear, the person who handled their debt.”

I stretch my hands out to shake them; first, her dad, who’s more than a little reticent with and then her mom, who gives a flaccid handshake. I frown.

She must not like me.

I don’t blame her. Some would say I ruined her daughter’s life. I told me. I “I’m very sorry about what happened with Fiona and me, and I’ve taken full responsibility for it. It’s my child, and I’ll never abandon it.”

wanted “We truly appreciate that. And thank you for handling the debt. It can’t be helped.” I thumb shock this morning when a Dame United staff knocked on the door while we were packing up our boxes to relocate.”

He laughs.

Relocate? They were planning to move away from LA? My breath hitched. “Relocate?” I turn to Fiona, who walks back to me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“Yeah. We sold the apartment. We were meant to leave tomorrow.”

so sad. My heart stops. "And now?"

"I think that's for my parents to decide."

older *No. No. No.*

I can't let her leave again. I already lost her once. I'm not prepared to lose her a second time. I have to find a way to make sure she stays in my life for those We'll raise the baby together. No more silly agreements. I look at my fiancee That's it!

Turning to her, I grin.

"Jason, why did you handle the debt?"

"Instead of telling you, what if I show you?"

Her brows furrow. "What do you mean?"

I go on one knee and take the ring out of my left finger. It's a knuckle I've worn for over five years. I'll get a proper ring.

Her hands fly to her mouth.

"Jason? What are you doing?"

"What I should have done way before now."

I inhale. "Fiona, when I first met you, I didn't know I wouldn't be able to live without you. From that very first night at Ruthless, your beauty captured my entire essence. You were stunning, and you still are. If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have this any other way, with you carrying my child."

Gasps come from a few people in the room, but Fiona's and Richard's are the loudest.

Is Fiona laughing or sobbing? I can't tell. I can barely see through the tears in my own eyes. There's desperation burning in my heart for this woman. "You somehow get me. You listen to me. You care about me, and you give me your attention in a way no one else has ever done. You've made me learn to be vulnerable around the people I love."

"Definitely agree," Richard whispers, and everyone giggles.

"I know people have all kinds of thoughts and theories around love and long things like this should take, but I don't care. All I know is that every single day I wake up, my heartbeats spell your name. I've fallen deeply in love with you, and I never want out. I can't live without you, and I don't want to let go of your fingers."

I pause and exhale.

"I guess all I'm trying to say is, Fiona McCall, will you marry me?"

The entire room is silent, like everyone's holding their breath. My heart is racing wild. Everyone has their eyes on Fiona, whose piercing ocean blue eyes bore deep into my soul. She raises her hand and runs it through my hair. "Say yes," Richard whispers. "Say yes. Say yes."

Mom and Fiona's dad do the same. Her mom has her hands over her mouth.

"Jason Greene, I love you too. And yes, I'll marry you."

Screams pierce the room, and surprisingly, Fiona's mom's screams are the loudest. She won't stop clapping.

Fiona pulls me to my feet and into her arms, holding me tight. I can't believe it. Everything worked out; I found love and have a child on the way, and my partnership with Davidson is expanding Consco. I'm the luckiest man on earth.

When Fiona and I break away, Richard rushes over to embrace me.

"Congrats, man. I never thought this day would come!"

I laugh as he pats my back.

A tap on my shoulder causes me to turn. Mom's grinning with her arms open.

"I'm so proud of you."

I roll my eyes. "Of course you are. You're a happy mom now, aren't you?"

"Yes!"

and how Fiona's mom takes my hands in hers next, staring at me. She's probably the happiest person here with how wide her smile is.

reply in "Thank you for everything."

I don't want "No, thank you. You raised a wonderful young lady."

Her father appears beside her mom and takes my hand too.

"Congrats!"

"Thanks."

My heart is I look over at Fiona and the graceful way she throws her head back and laughs with Richard in a corner. That's the love of my life. I'm sure of my hair.

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you?"

"Yes!"

Fiona's mom takes my hands in hers next, staring at me. She's probably the happiest person here with how wide her smile is.

"Thank you for everything."

"No, thank *you*. You raised a wonderful young lady."

Her father appears beside her mom and takes my hand too.

"Congrats!"

"Thanks."

I look over at Fiona and the graceful way she throws her head back as she laughs with Richard in a corner. That's the love of my life. I'm sure of it.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

Fiona

I stand before the mirror, gingerly adjusting my gown, reveling in the sight of my reflection. It seems incongruous, a pregnant bride. Yet, I stand, draped in a long satin wedding dress, my chestnut brown hair smoothed straight, cascading over my shoulders. Today, unlike other days, I do not harbor any disdain for my body. In fact, I adore how my figure looks in my bridal ensemble, and I cannot help but smile at the reflection of me.

I press my lips together, admiring how bold the red lipstick makes me look. A soft knock comes on the door. It's El. I grin as she steps in, holding a glass of wine.

"Look at you!"

I do a curtsy as she claps.

"You look amazing."

"Thank you. You look equally stunning."

"I take my bridesmaid duties very seriously, thank you very much."

Eleanor could pass for a bride in her long teal-colored sleeveless gown. Her hair is packed neatly in a ponytail with long earrings to go with it.

"I have to say, this beach resort really is everything. To think I've wanted a beach vacay." She says.

Jason insisted that we do a beach wedding and spend our time at the resort, like a family vacation of some sort. Everyone's here; Mon Bertha, Richard, and of course, Eleanor. It's a resort in Mexico that frankly, looks like heaven. I've never been to such a fancy place with finishings.

My suite, for example, is a sprawling expanse, with an oversized bed and bathroom that seem to dwarf everything else. The glossy marble floors and upholstery in a regal golden hue leave me spellbound, and I find myself struggling to take it all in. The highlight of the room, however, is the hot tub here Jacuzzi, where I while away countless hours, immersing myself in the grand magnificence of my surroundings.

One day, I wanted a simple wedding, and Jason agreed to it, but how in the world does it look like flying to a different country simple? The thought of his dark smoldering eyes and wavy hair makes me grin. I can't believe we're getting married after all these difficult times. The one question I still can't figure out is this; why is it that I'm everything. It's cute, but it's not a comprehensive answer. "By the way, you didn't tell me Richard was a dashing young man."

I giggle. "I mean, his older brother looks like Adonis. What did you expect?" Her cheeks go red.

"Wait, don't tell me you already have your eyes on him. Eleanor! Alright, alright. C'mon. We had lunch together yesterday, and he's just refreshing. I haven't even had my hopes up yet, but a girl can dream."

A knock draws me out of my reverie, and the door opens. It's Mom. She comes in too. I spread my arms and spin around slowly when she pauses in the middle of the suite.

always “Such a beautiful bride.”

“I know right?” Eleanor says.

2 beach Mom turns to her. “Could you please give us one minute alone?”

1, Dad, “Sure,” Eleanor says and walks out.

t, quite Mom sits on the bed, clasping her hands.

th elite “Things have a way of working out, don’t they?”

“They sure do.”

edroom She pulls my hand and motions for me to sit beside her. Rummaging t

looring her tiny black purse, she brings out a little package and hands it to me.

myself “I got this for you.”

e grand “Aww, Mom.”

e sheer “Go ahead, open it.”

I open the small silver box to find a silver necklace inside. It has
world is pendant with a pony crested into it.

ng eyes “It’s beautiful. I love it.”

er such Mom beams. “Do you want me to help you put it on?”

ne? He I nod, handing it to her.

wer. She stands, moving behind me as she takes the necklace out of its box.

“You know...my mom died before I got a chance to walk down the aisle
spect?” glad I get to see you do this.”

Now that I think about it, Mom simply wanted the best for me. She
ady?” want me to be a single parent, to go through the emotional turmoil as
I don’t work of raising a kid alone. She just wanted the best for the baby and I

I respect her for it. Now that she’s certain I won’t be alone, she’s gone
to make sure I’m happy. She insisted she’d handle the wedding deco
ddle of and Bertha offered to manage the event. They’ve become best friends :

Another knock comes on the door, and it opens. It’s Bertha. She smile

and blows a kiss.

“You look stunning. It’s time for the reveal. Jason will come down after that, the ceremony begins, which means you’re walking down the aisle and exchanging vows. There’s a small party right after. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

I stand, and Mom stands beside me.

“You ready?”

I inhale, nodding.

The next knock that comes on the door makes my heart skip. I know Jason. What if I’m not pretty enough? What if my additional weight scares him off?

“You have to go to the living room, Fifi.”

The door opens up, and the soft thuds of his shoe fill the living room. My heart pounds in my chest. Mom nudges me forward, and I shuffle awkwardly.

Oh god. Oh god.

When I step into the living room, Jason has his back facing me. In his impeccable blue suit, he’s the exact image I have when I think of my ideal man. Charming. His curly hair falls slightly below his collar, and his hands are tucked into his pocket.

The photographer stands at the corner of the room, near the door, and I’m ready. I inhale one last time before tapping Jason’s shoulders.

Slowly, he turns to face me. He takes in the sight of me, his eyes raking all over me until our gaze meets. His smile is tender. Are those tears in his eyes? He bows and takes a handkerchief from his pocket, dabbing his eyes so fast. putting it away again.

“You look stunning.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

n here. He takes my hands and spins me for a moment before holding my waist

he aisle “Are you ready to be stuck with me for life?”

if you “The real question is are *you* ready?”

“I was born ready.” He winks at me.



“Does Jason know about that?”

ow it’s “I was kind of embarrassed, to be honest.”

it turns “I think you should tell him. I mean, I’m also willing to help. If you

be a vet doctor, then it’s only fair you get the chance.”

But that’s the problem. Jason has already done enough for me, and
m—my want to burden him. The tuition is a lot. Plus, I still have to wait for the

e away to be a little older anyway. I know the baby will have a big family with

help out with babysitting, but for now, I think I should handle it. Maybe

consider my education and career again in about a year.

In his Just then, a wet sensation gushes out from between my legs. My waist

Prince broke. I swallow, looking up at Richard, who’s watching TV with me

s are in room.

“Richard.”

camera- “Mm?”

He turns, and slowly, his eyes fall on the wet area between my legs.
oaming Greene pants are soaked all the way down.

es? He His mouth falls, and he stands to his feet immediately.

before “Oh gosh. I need to go get Mom.”

He rushes out of the room, and the door bangs behind him.

His loud screams come from the staircase.

st. “Mom! Where are you?”

A dull ache begins in my lower abdomen in less than a minute.

Oh god.

I pick up my phone. I need to call Jason now.

I dial, but he doesn't pick up. The pain comes again, sharper this time my lip. My breathing is loud, and the wheezing sounds are the only so the room.

I dial Jason's number again. He picks this time.

want to “Hey babe. How are you?”

“The baby. It's coming?”

I don't “What? Who's with you?”

the baby “Richard. He went to get Mom.”

lling to “Have Richard text me the address of the hospital once you're on yo
e I can I'll leave immediately.”

“Mmm.” That's the most I can utter as the pain enlarges, spreading
iter just back.

e in my Richard barges in with Bertha.

“Let's go!” Bertha says. “I'll get the bags. Richard, help her down the

She turns to me.

“Did you already call Jason?”

gs. My I nod and look at Richard. “He said to text the hospital address.”

“Okay. We're going to Dr. Jackie's.”

Putting his arms under my armpit, he helps me up. My hand rests
shoulder.

“Careful,” Bertha says, picking up the already packed bags.

As we make our way downstairs, the pain morphs into a monste

monster doesn't play fair. It ravages my legs and waist, making the s
journey painful.

Finally, we make it out of the house and into the car, speeding off
Jackie's hospital.

I keep zoning out on the way, but the horns stir me back until we ge
a. I bitehospital. Everything else is chaos and pain. I'm wheeled to the labo
unds inand everything commences. There are voices in the labor room. One
like Jackie, and the other like Jason. Someone holds my hands.

"Hang in there, Baby."

Okay, that's Jason.

"Fiona, it's Jackie. Can you hear me? You have to push. Can you do th
I do, but the excruciating tear between my legs makes me shudder. I l
piercing scream.

ur way. Am I going to die? What's that pain? Is this how birth feels? Is this no

I try a few more times, with Jackie urging me on. Finally, a shrill cry
; to myair. The baby's out.

"Oh wait, there's another!"

Another what? Baby?

stairs." "It's twins! It's twins! Fiona, you have to give one last push!"

Twins? No, that's not—

"Push, Fiona. C'mon, a little more, and it'll be over."

I muster the final strength and push, a screech escaping my mouth. A
shrill cry comes.

on his "Congratulations Fiona and Jason. You have a boy and a girl!"

I pass out.

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taircase

to Dr.

t to the

r room,

sounds

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rmal?

fills the

Another

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Epilogue

“Babe! Can you get the door please?”

“Okay,” I call out, heading for the door.

I used to think that the perfect and joyful lives I saw on social media were for me. I thought I was going to die a lonely, sad man. Who would have thought a pregnancy from a one-night stand would lead to the life I thought I could have?

I pull the door open to find Mom, Richard, Eleanor, and Donnie. I take his shades off, a smirk on his face.

“Missed me?”

He lifts his hands, and we embrace, laughing. When we tear away, Mom pulls me into an embrace too.

“I missed you, Mom!”

“I know, but Richard and Eleanor insisted that I stay longer.”

Two years after Fiona and I got married, Richard and Eleanor did. I wanted a grand wedding, and that’s exactly what she got. They insisted Mom move in with them for a while, and she was happy to.

Mom pushes past me, looking around the house.

“Where are my babies?”

She does a three-sixty. Just then, Peter and Anastasia come downstairs.

“Grandma!” They scream in between giggles.

“Hey, no running on the stairs!”

They completely ignore me. The twins—they drive me crazy, but I would have it any other way. Interestingly, Anastasia looks just like me, and Peter looks like Fiona. His eyes are a bright blue, but even though his hair is like Fiona’s, they’re as full and curly as mine. Anastasia, on the other hand, has my neatly chiseled face, with brown eyes and long dark hair. They’re both best friends, but wait till they fight. It’s the most chaotic thing I’ve ever seen in the world.

“Happy Birthday!” Mom says, stooping to take them both in her arms. She would’ve waved two wrapped gifts.

I never “Grandma got you presents.”

They both hop, reaching out for the presents.

Richard “Don’t open them yet, okay? We’ll unwrap all of them at the end of the party.”

They nod.

“Peter! Anastasia!” Donnie calls to his cousins, running. Donnie is Eleanor and Eleanor’s son. He’s barely two and calls Peter and Anastasia’s names in a funny manner. The way he pronounces Anastasia’s name is especially funny so we decided to call her Ann so he didn’t struggle so much.

The twins run toward him in their bright birthday outfits. Anastasia is wearing that yellow flower-patterned dress on, and Peter is in a black t-shirt and jeans. They both envelope Donnie, jumping.

Just then, the most beautiful woman in the world walks down the stairs.

my heart skips a beat.

running *Damn.*

Five years and she has my heart still wrapped around her finger. In a black gown that hugs her body, Fiona steps into the living room. My eyes stay fixed on her, with my mouth open.

I couldn't "Wow." That's all I can say.

And Peter I take her hand when she reaches me and spin her around as I've done on a brown day for five years. Is it just me, or has she become even more beautiful in your hand, "Aww, love birds!" Eleanor says.

They're Fiona turns to her, grinning.

She's in the "Hey, you!"

She hugs Eleanor, Richard, and little Donnie.

She says. We should take some photos before the other party guests arrive.

"Who's up for some photos?"

I take out the camera I bought specifically for the event and wave.

Echoes of "Yes" fill the room as everyone starts getting in formation.

One of the "Where are the kids?"

Bertha looks around, frowning.

"Ann! Peter! Donnie!" she calls, but there's no response.

Richard "Where'd they go?"

He comes in a "They're probably outside with Tex." Richard says, making his way out of the room. A while later, he comes back with all three of them.

"Told ya."

Richard has a Peter already has a stain on his pants. I face-palm my forehead, turning my hair yellow. Fiona.

She walks to Peter and stoops to wipe the stain off. It doesn't come off. I roll my eyes. It's going to be a long day.

"Everyone get set for a photo. C'mon. Party's almost starting."

The adults help get the kids together for a photo, after which everyone goes to another. Finally, I set a timer and jump into the last photo. My eyes
A knock comes on the door. The guests are starting to arrive. I
Richard.

"You're our clown and music guy tonight."

everybody "Hey! Why me?"

"Well, duh." Fiona giggles.

"You have to get the music started now, music guy. The party's starting!
A couple of kids arrive with their parents, and in no time, there's so much
noise in the living room, I want to disappear.

From the other end of the room, my eyes stay on Fiona. My skin
tingling ever since she came down in that tight sleeveless black dress.
I lift a finger, signaling that she come over. With a grin, she walks across
room toward me. I look around. No one's looking. Everyone's too
talking, playing with kids, eating, and dancing.

I grab her hand and walk into the lobby, heading straight for the empty
room which is no longer empty like it used to be. It's the twins' room now
nothing can stop me.

I lock the door when she walks in and pull her into myself. My hands
everywhere at once. Desire wells up in my heart as I take her lips, I
my body up.

She giggles, placing her arms around my neck.

ing to "What time do you leave for your shift at the Vet hospital?"

"Much later, after the party."

"So we have a lot of time to get naked."

She bites my neck, and I start to get erect. I guess it's time to have o

own little party in here.

ie takes

turn to

g."

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ur very

own little party in here.

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MY BILLIONAIRE ENEMY (not)

My goal is to prove to him that I'm more than just an intern's experience, or not just a rich girl playing around in his company.

Julian is my billionaire CEO who looks like a gorgeous celebrity even though he's cranky... And he's got his eyes on me— in a demeaning, “I will make you suffer” way. At least, that's what I thought.

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MY BILLIONAIRE NEIGHBOR'S SECRET

My grumpy neighbor is determined to ruin my fresh start in Las Vegas. But I'm not going to let him get away so easily.

I just moved to the city after a broken engagement – so I've got every reason to throw parties and have fun, right?

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THE NEXT-DOOR BILLIONAIRE'S DECEPTION

Sins lurk in the shadows. Corruption conceals under a garn goodwill.

My goal: Ensure the company merger is successful, and fish out the ba
Then Melissa enters the picture. A thorn in my side. A next-door n
that's likely a spy.

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THE NEXT-DOOR BILLIONAIRE'S DECEPTION

Sins lurk in the shadows. Corruption conceals under a garment of goodwill.

My goal: Ensure the company merger is successful, and fish out the bad guys. Then Melissa enters the picture. A thorn in my side. A next-door neighbor that's likely a spy.

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FREE BOOK

Sign up for my newsletter and get "STUCK WITH A GR BILLIONAIRE" for free!

You know what's worse than being drunk, miserable, and pinning your ex-fiancé during a one-night stand?

..getting pregnant by a grumpy billionaire!

Of course, he had no clue...

Years later - here I am, a single mom struggling to make ends meet.

After working on the promotion for so long, I finally got it!

Then our paths crossed again.

...and found ourselves giving in to the physical attraction for each other

...and engaging in a passionate, undefined relationship.

Until a sense of love is beginning to fill the air between us.

But how will he react when he finds out about his son I've been keeping in secret? Will our intense attraction for one another be enough to keep us together?

Only one thing is certain: my son will change everything.

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