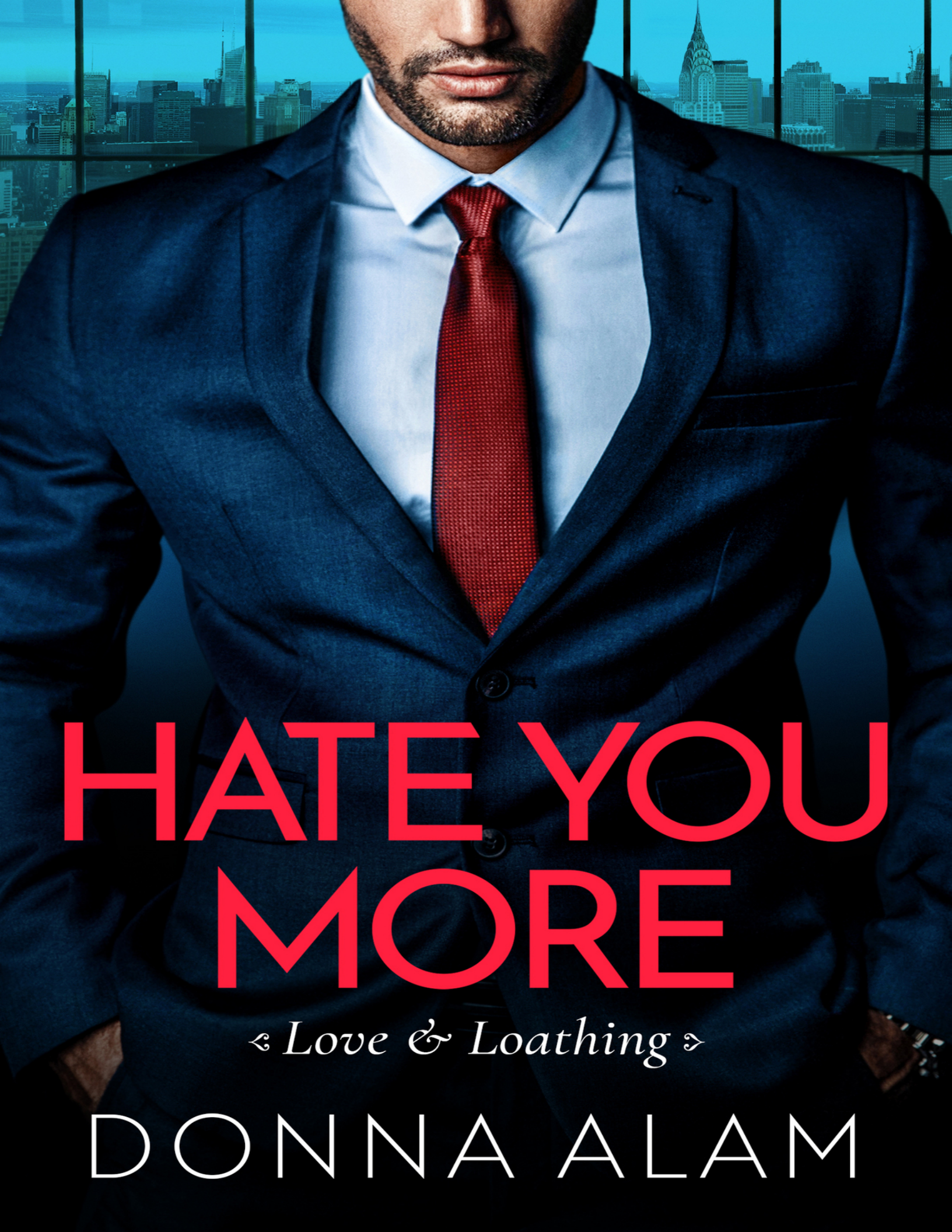
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Love & Loathing
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HATE YOU MORE

« Love & Loathing »

DONNA ALAM

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
PREVIEW: *TO HAVE & HATE*!
I'd always expected . . .
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Love is unselfishly choosing for another’s highest good.
—C. S. Lewis

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Chapter 1
CLARA

Breathe in calm, and exhale all that other stuff . . .

But it still feels like an elephant is sitting on my chest as I grab the tray of canapés, laughter and conversation swelling as I bump the door open with my butt.

Please, God. I cast my eyes briefly heavenward as I turn. *I know we don't often talk, but if I could get through this shift without seeing anyone I know, I'd be so grateful.*

It's not that I expect to see any of my old friends here. Those trust fund babies are probably sipping cocktails at Chez Margaux after an arduous afternoon in Prada. Or maybe on their way to the Hamptons to top up their tan this weekend. Where they're not going to be is in the offices of a Tribeca-based fintech company.

Their fathers, though . . .

I quash that thought before it grows legs and paste on a smile as I see Chelsea coming toward me.

"What's with the glasses?" my fellow waitress asks.

"Couldn't face my contacts," I lie as my hand lifts to the black frames. They're just a prop, part of an old Halloween outfit. *Sexy Velma.* I'd also considered a wig, a fake grill, and a pebble-in-the-shoe-induced limp for this shift before deciding this tray and apron were disguise enough. Eyes glide over the waitstaff like furniture in swanky buildings like this.

"Better get on," I say, catching the gimlet glare of Shanti, our supervisor.

"Time and tide wait for no man." Chelsea rolls her eyes as she repeats the closer of Shanti's earlier team talk. "Especially when that man is a member of the one percent!"

"Tell me something I don't know," I murmur, moving in the opposite direction. For real. Once upon a time, I used to be one of them.

I straighten my spine as I make my way through the white-walled venue full of pale wood, glossy plants, and primary-colored furniture. Past

the ubiquitous chill-out zones with pull-up bars, bongos, and foosball tables in a workplace where both the tech and the vibe are high.

The place is full of suits and designer-jean-wearing tech bros. Six-figure salaries and even bigger bonuses, I guess, as I pause periodically to offer my wares. It looks to be mostly employees tonight, and those who aren't—the money men and the investors—seem like new money, not old. It's not that I'm a snob, but it does make me relax some.

"Tater Tot?" I pitch the question in keeping with my name badge, Sunny. Sunny is who I choose to be when I'm waitressing, even when I feel like an Agnes or an Edna, a crotchety old sourpuss with a sore back and an aching wrist, courtesy of this tray aggravating an old gymkhana tumble. But Sunny endears herself to people, and waitressing is all about the tips.

"You'd think the boss would've sprung for something a little classier, given the money he just made," the heavyset man in navy TOM FORD sharkskin mutters, staring at the canapés.

"*Caviar*-topped Tater Tot," I amend, still in (perky) character.

"Try saying that after a couple more of these." One of his companions lifts his glass, and Sunny agrees with an easy smile.

When I'm tending bar three nights a week, I'm Gretchen. I've found there's something suitably serving-wench-y about the name that seems to appeal to the clientele. Gretchen is harder than Sunny. Sharper. She makes people think twice before messing with her. I'm sure my former therapist would have a field day with my alter egos, but they get me through days like these.

"Caviar, huh?" Shark Man—the title works not just because of his suit but also because of his flat, beady eyes and the distance between them—isn't staring at the canapés, I realize. He's staring at my boobs. *Great.* "Well, hey there," he says once his eyes have meandered upward to meet mine. "You look like the kind of girl who could ruin my life. And I think I'd enjoy it."

Don't tempt me, I think with an internal sigh.

"What time do you get off, sweetheart?"

"I'm sorry?" That's polite speak for *hell no*.

"Why don't you let me take you home later." He makes a grab for my wrist. The *audacity*. "Keep you out of this cold."

"Oh, sir, it will never be cold enough." I'm a combination of my alter egos as I ignore the prickle of rage that runs through me, but not the reality

that I need to make rent.

"What was that?"

Waitressing is tough. Worse than bar work, where you're insulated somewhat by the bar itself. But men in an Inwood dive bar know better than to upset the chick pouring their drinks. They even expect to take some level of shit from their bartender. And Gretchen wouldn't deny them that. But client-facing finance bros wearing Swiss watches and $2,000 suits? Their egos are a little more fragile. Which is why I hope my gritted teeth might pass for a smile as I say, "Sir, please let go of my wrist."

"I drive a Porsche." He gives a leering grin, and his grip tightens instead. "She's a real comfortable ride."

Urgh.

"I am *so* happy for you. Now, let go, or the only thing I'll be ruining is your chance of fatherhood." Sunny has left the chat, and Gretchen is about to rip him a new asshole.

I know, I know. It's not his fault. It's evolution. The way he's wired. It's cultural conditioning, the male instinct, and boys will be boys. Meanwhile, the female instinct in me is screaming that I should kick him hard in the balls.

"What'd you just say to me?"

"I think she said fuck you, Ed," someone mutters. Someone else snickers.

"Let her go, man," another puts in.

My impulse control hanging on by a thread, I open my mouth to suggest he listen to his friends when a burst of laughter from across the room pulls at my attention. The sound is so warm and buttery, I'd know it anywhere.

Troy?

God, the things I'd say and do just to hear that man laugh because it felt like the biggest prize when he did. *It can't be him, not now, not here,* I think as, in front of me, someone steps left and, oh, my heart. There he is in profile. The floor beneath my feet seems to tilt.

He looks the same, and yet not. He's larger, his shoulders are broader, though his hair is still leonine. In the place of jeans and a tee, he wears a three-piece suit, thunder gray and beautifully cut. The gleaming white of his shirt is such a contrast to his dark-colored tie and matching pocket square.

He looks expensive—like one of the people he used to despise. But then, I'm not the girl I once was either.

"Set your sights a little higher, huh?" My stomach is still tied in complicated knots when my attention is dragged back to Shark Man and his audience, their eyes glassy with champagne and a spiteful kind of delight. "Pity for you the boss only dates supermodels, short ass."

The boss. Well, good for him.

"That shut you up." The ass gives a malevolent grin.

"Gosh, I love how you don't let your height get in the way of your confidence."

"What?"

"A bad attitude *and* that hairline, yet your delusions of adequacy remain."

"Fucking bitch." Spittle flies from Shark Man's mouth.

"That's bad fucking bitch." I yank from his grip, mindful of an expensive Tater Tot spillage. "Just ask your boss," I add in a mutter. The soles of my cheap shoes squeak against the polished concrete as I pivot and hurry away. You see, Troy Templeton might be the first boy I ever loved, but he's also the last who'd ever want to set eyes on me.

I make for the exit, my heart hammering against my ribs. *God, why have you forsaken me—done me dirty like this?* As I reach the door, I know I shouldn't glance back, but I find myself doing it anyway. I am *so* unprepared for his tawny-gold eyes meeting mine. They narrow, and I give a little yelp as he makes a preemptive motion, but I'm not hanging around. I hurry across the mezzanine space like the devil is hot on my heels. But there's no way Troy Templeton would ever chase me. *Unless he wants to kill me.*

"Oh, thank God." Spotting Chelsea, I grab her hand.

"Hey, sis. What's going on? You hustled over here like your tampon string was on fire."

"There's someone . . ." I glance over my shoulder, and my stomach dips like a roller coaster ride. Troy's strides are long, and they may seem unhurried, but there is murder in his eyes. "I need to hide."

"For real?"

"It's my ex." It was so long ago, maybe there ought to be a statute of limitations.

“Here?” Chelsea’s spine straightens. “Which one?” she demands, scanning the room with concern. “Damn.” I see the moment she spots him, and I swear I see dollar signs light up in her eyes. “The blond? *Girl. The aura.*”

“The what?”

“That man is giving rich villain who ruins your life but pays for your therapy.”

“I don’t want therapy.” I’ve already had plenty. “I want to hide!”

“And I want to be a stay-at-home rich person. That isn’t a boyfriend, Clara. That is a retirement plan.”

I glance back again. I’m pretty sure Troy looks like he’s about to help me skip retirement and move straight to death’s sweet embrace. *He moves like a vengeance-seeking missile.* But maybe I’m the only one who sees that in his expression as he touches the shoulder of one man, then shakes the hand of someone else. He smiles at a brunette, then says something to make her chuckle.

“You do realize you’re running away from Table’s CEO?”

“Table?” I glance back at Chelsea, who frowns.

“This company? You’ve heard their slogan, right? ‘Table it for later!’ They’re like Klarna, only better.”

Great. Another buy-now-pay-later immoral financial trap.

“I overheard one of the suits say they just had a unicorn IPO, whatever that means.”

“It means the company went public.” I answer, feeling a little ill. “That they’re worth billions.”

“No shit? So you’re running away from a billionaire.” She sounds less than impressed.

I want to tell her there must be some mistake. That I know billionaires. Or I used to. But as a shadow falls over me, it’s too late to say anything. I look up, and my heart does a painful two-step. I’m somehow shocked by the hardness in his eyes. I see the moment he forces it away. Watch as he opens his mouth, and—*oh no*—remember how his voice should come with a warning label.

CAUTION: MAY CAUSE PANTIES TO SPONTANEOUSLY DROP.

“Well, if it isn’t Clara Fairfax Forbes.”

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Chapter 2
TROY

". . . Clara Fairfax Forbes." I draw out her name and probably overdo it by adding a little wide-eyed wonder along with the slow shake of my head. My eyes drop to her name badge. Sunny. Surely *Firework* or *IED* would have been more suitable. Something unpredictable and dangerous. "I'll be damned. I thought it was you."

"How are you, Troy?" The tremble in her voice catches me off guard. I mean, I saw her hustle, but I'd hustle from me, too, given our past. *Given what she did.*

"I'm all the better for seeing you," I answer smoothly, despite the problem in front of me. Not that I always thought of her as a problem. If I had, I might've been more prepared.

"I doubt that," she murmurs as her gaze skates away.

Remorse? More likely she couldn't get away quick enough. Guilt never was her strong suit. Glasses that I doubt are real, the name badge, and the server's uniform. Whatever she's doing here, whatever her motives are, it looks like poverty is her costume of choice.

The fucking irony.

"I'd better . . ." The blonde to her left, an actual server, takes a step back as though she'd like to slip away.

"Wait!" Clara grabs for her wrist, which makes things about as awkward as fuck. "I need you to help me with that thing, remember?"

The blonde's attention moves my way, but I keep my expression open. "I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. Don't tell me you've got to rush off, now."

Clara flinches despite the fuck ton of congeniality I force into my tone. But Jesus, I thought I *was* seeing things. It threw me off for a minute. For several minutes, judging by Hannah's comment at the bar: "If you don't relax, people are going to start asking who fucked your gift horse in the mouth."

It didn't stop me storming after Clara like the kind of shithead who harasses waitstaff. Though I managed to get a hold of myself and slowed

my roll. Found my equilibrium. Greeted people and made small talk on the way. But never took my eyes off Clara or her tray.

See, most people think charm is innate. That it's a manner you're born with, a kind of softness that rounds out a character. Not in my case. Charm is a learned behavior and a useful weapon to wield, which is something I learned back when others' homes were safer places than my own.

To me, charm is a tool for influence. It's persuasion. Appeal. A double-edged sword that seduces and deceives. Dominates, even. Things I'd do to this woman in a heartbeat, I'm reminded as I look into her elfin face.

Christ. I thought I learned my lesson all those years ago.

Seeing Clara Forbes again should feel anything but nostalgic.

But she looks good. Really good. Paler. Maybe a little thinner. Her hair no longer cascades down her back, instead cut blunt at the chin. I always used to think she looked like she stepped from the pages of an X-rated fairy tale. The observation still stands. She's just less Rapunzel now. Maybe more like a sexy sprite.

The kind that fucks up your shit just because she can.

Which is probably why my shoulders feel tight and my heart is beating like a drum. All the times I pictured seeing Clara again, this was not how I saw it go down.

"How long has it been?" I give a tiny shake of my head as though I can't believe my luck. *Right.*

"A long time." Her dark lashes flutter with unease, not flattery. *Good.*

"Must be, what? Seven, eight years?"

"Something like that."

Nine. Not that I'm counting or anything. "I almost didn't recognize you." A lie.

"Same." Those dark-blue eyes flick behind me. "It looked like you were being nice to people over there."

I smile. Reluctantly. This is more like it. Here's the Clara Forbes I know and . . . don't love.

"Cute." Two can play at that game as my eyes skate over the tray. The uniform.

I guess the shock of seeing her must've made my brain a little slow. Nine fucking years, and it looks like things haven't changed. Attention seeking must still be her raison d'être, her reason for being. Shameful at her age. I guess Daddy's money just fucks some girls up for good.

Clara never did do a thing without an audience. She liked her rebellions theatrical and the noise loud enough to stun. *Usually her parents.* She never seemed to need a reason, either, not as I recall. But this is not playing out her way this time.

"It's *so* good to see you," I begin, reaching for her elbow. "You don't mind if I steal Clara away, do you?"

"S-sure," says the blonde, seeming to come back to herself.

"No!" Clara jerks away as my fingers make contact, but the tray is another matter as it rains down canapés, making an almighty racket as it meets the concrete floor.

Talk about a needle-scratch moment. The room has gone so quiet, you could hear a pin drop, and I can feel eyes literally poking at the back of my head. *Fuck.*

"Now look what you've done," Clara mutters, making to drop to her knees. Though my cock seems to like the idea of that, the fucking ingrate, I tighten my grip on her.

"Leave it," I command through clenched teeth.

Her head whips up, and she pins me with a glare. "It's my mess."

"Usually is." Are they fuckin' Tater Tots? At the top of my game, and I still can't escape poor-people food? *I guess I should be grateful they're not in a casserole.*

Just what I need: people saying Troy Templeton, Table's CEO and fintech's newest billionaire, serves GMO slop while harassing waitstaff. Billionaire on paper, given we're only days post the year's biggest IPO. My stock is locked up for months, my wealth largely illiquid. Not that it makes any difference as I have no intention of selling. Table is my baby, born of my experience. I guess I'd better clear this mess up if I want to keep it.

I paste on a gosh-darn-it expression as I address the crowd over my shoulder, thickening my accent to something a little more Southern. "And that's why we can't have nice things."

There follows a collective chuckle, though Hannah gives a narrowing of her too-perceptive gaze. *Tennessee?* it seems to say.

I lived there less than a year, not that Hannah knows about my life back then. But we moved so often that one accent didn't really stick. A year in Virginia followed by another in Long Island as we tried to stay ahead of my no-good dad. When we got to the Hamptons, we were able to stay, thanks to a little trouble the old man got himself into.

I turn away from Table's chief of strategy and fellow founder, and my longtime pain-in-the-ass friend, unwilling to give her further cause for questions.

"Please just go away." Clara screws her eyes tight like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum, her companion having melted away.

"Not this time, darlin'." *Because this time, you're on my turf.*

Fuck being here. I should've listened to my body and gone home to sleep for a week. Tonight was Max's idea, a little thank-you to the crew. *Another thank-you.* It's mostly Table staffers and a few of our early investors. *Wasn't Max being interviewed by a journalist from* Bloomberg *this afternoon?* Shit. That's all I need.

It's hard to keep track because the last few weeks have been manic. Two grueling weeks for the pre-IPO road show—Boston, Hong Kong, London—then back for the stock launch. More prep. Then the ceremony, the absolute fucking highs of the day as we surpassed the heights we'd set ourselves. Company-wide celebrations across the globe. Champagne and more champagne. Hangovers and headaches on private flights home.

Going public only happens once in a company's life, and it should be celebrated, but I'm bone tired. Bone tired and now fucking tense because of the woman in front of me.

"Get up." I take a firm grip of her upper arm.

"Leave me alone, Troy."

"If you don't get up off this floor, I swear . . ." I pull her up anyway and turn us in the direction of the door, making a mental note to ensure the blonde gets a decent tip. *It's always the poor who get fucked over,* I think as I practically drag Clara along with me.

"Are you *trying* to cause a scene?" she mutters as she tries to keep up, her steps two to one of my long strides.

"I thought I was preventing one." A smile fixed in place, I make for the elevator bank at the kind of pace that doesn't invite conversation along the way. "You lose a bet or something?" I demand as my eyes flick coldly over her.

"I thought it was Halloween. Oops."

"Not cute." What gives? Not Clara Forbes. Unless those gifts are heartache and strife.

"Believe me, Troy, I had no idea you'd be here."

“And believe me, Clara, I can’t trust a thing that comes out of your mouth.”

“If you don’t want people asking questions, you should slow down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

From the corner of my eye, I watch her chew the inside of her lip. “Do you have any idea what this looks like? You can’t just—”

“I can.” I nod at a board member and widen my smile, hoping it doesn’t look as fake as it feels. “And I fucking will.” My expression turns mocking as I glance down at her.

“Fine, let people gossip.”

“Maybe we’re in a hurry. I could be escorting you to replenish those Tater Tots.” Like she cares. She could pull away—it’s not like I’d chase her down. Not in public, anyway.

“Looks more like you’re making a citizen’s arrest for stealing the caviar topping.”

Caviar. Well, I suppose that’s something. *Something to do with Hugo’s bougie tastes.* “Maybe I’m rescuing you.”

“From what?”

“Could be who.” I glance down pointedly.

“That’s ambitious,” she mutters. “Saving me from myself.” I fight an unwise but real smile. “Kidnapping the waitstaff isn’t going to do your rep any good.”

I make no reply.

“I never had you pegged as a bully.”

“CEO, darlin’. Thanks to your dear old dad, you know those two are adjacent.” The old bastard had more money than Croesus and thinks the world revolves around him.

“Only my dad never frightened me in public.”

I refuse to bite. Whatever that meant is not my concern.

“Could you slow down, at least?”

“No.” The elevator bank is in sight.

“You’re behaving like a crazy person.”

“I have been called way worse by much nicer people.”

“That I believe.”

“You’ve got some nerve,” I say on an unhappy chuckle.

“I do, one in particular screaming in the base of my spine—” Her posture suddenly changes, and her sudden smile reminds me of a beauty

pageant contestant. “Oh, hey, Shanti!”

“Where’s your tray?” The woman frowns before her gaze flits my way.

“There was a little accident,” I begin smoothly as her eyes dart between us. “Totally my fault. I was a little excited, I guess.”

“Is everything okay?” The woman’s attention dips to where I’m holding Clara’s elbow.

I give my own version of a pageant smile and slide my arm around Clara’s shoulders instead. “We’re old friends, me and Clara.” I give her shoulder a squeeze. “Right?”

“Yes, friends,” she says with a grimace.

“I was so surprised to see Clara, I guess I knocked the tray plumb out of her hand.” *Plumb? Jesus Christ.*

But Shanti looks torn, like she’s trying to guess what’s going on while also weighing up my importance.

“Where are my manners?” I put in, all forehead-slapping gosh-darn-it. Like the accent isn’t enough. “I’m Troy.” I offer her my hand. “Troy Templeton. Table’s CEO.” *C-E* . . .

“Oh!” Shanti’s eyes fly open wide. Suddenly, she looks like she’d rather be anyplace else but here.

“Me and Clara, we’ve known each other since we were kids,” I say as I give her hand a firm shake. It’s better than admitting she’s responsible for one of the worst times of my life. “I hope I’m not gonna get her in trouble. I just wanted to steal her away so we could catch up.”

“Of course!” Shanti steps back. “Not a problem. Take all the time you need. We’ll see you back after your break,” she adds, glancing Clara’s way.

Yeah, no offense, Shanti, but there’s no way she’s going back to that room, I think as she hurries by without another word.

“So much for girl code,” Clara mutters. At the elevator, I swipe my security pass when she angles her attention sharply my way. “And you just cost me a catering gig.”

“You wanna go there?” I utter icily, pinning her with a glare. “What’s your angle, Clara? What are you doing here tonight?”

“Working.” Tone flat, her gaze drops to her shoes.

What happened to her freckles?

I shut that shit down. Or I try to, but the vision of her that first time at the pool stirs a memory that’s hard to ignore. It wasn’t exactly the first time I saw her. Every summer for four years and some weekends in between,

she'd come back to the house with her folks. But she was a kid—two years younger than me. I might've been her housekeeper's son, but she was beneath me in interest terms. She was just a name I heard from time to time, my mother repeating this snot-nosed kid's antics.

"*Poor Clara got such a scolding for rolling her eyes at her daddy during brunch.*"

She was grounded for the week after flunking a school assignment. Grounded in a house with a pool, tennis courts, and a home theater. Boo-fucking-hoo.

"*Such a commotion at the house last night after Clara disagreed with her father in front of dinner guests.*"

There was the time she added red dye to the swimming pool, then floated in the middle like she was dead. And my mother's deep frown as she recounted Clara's dad poking her with the leaf skimmer instead of jumping in.

As the summers passed, the transgressions changed.

"*Clara got caught sneaking out of the house late last night.*"

Missed curfew.

Wore so much eyeliner, her father said she looked like a raccoon.

Skipped school and went shopping with daddy's credit card.

Left her car someplace she couldn't remember.

And the one my mother never reproached me for. Clara got involved with an unsuitable boy one summer.

I went home that year and took a job in the grounds of her father's house. I didn't want to be around the family that took up so much of my mother's time, but money, or lack of it, has a habit of making you do things you don't want to do.

Hot and sweaty and covered in grass cuttings that day, I took off my ball cap and pulled my T-shirt up to wipe my forehead when a delighted whoop came from the nearby Olympic-size pool. I was being watched by a bunch of girls, five or six of them giggling and whispering, and theatrically fanning their faces.

"Damn, boy, you're like . . . like a sexy bottle of ketchup!" one of them called out. She was tall and blonde, her hand pressed to her jutted hip, her accent not at all in keeping with the quip.

"Shut up!" The boss's daughter buried her face in her hands, though it took me a minute to work out it was her. She'd grown up since I was last

home. *Really grown up.* Not taller, because she'd always been tiny. But I guess she was just a late bloomer. And, boy, had she bloomed.

"Are you a sexy bottle of ketchup, Mr. Hot Gardener? Because I could just squeeze you!" The girl, whatever her name was, spun around, probably to give me a flash of her ass in her red thong bikini. "Clara Forbes," she exclaimed, "you have been holding out on us!"

I ducked my head to hide my smile. It's not like I was short on attention, but I'd never been catcalled. I enjoyed the novelty.

When I came back around with the mower later, Clara was there by herself. Her hair was wild, chestnut streaked with gold, her teeth a brilliant white against her summer tan. The sight of her draped over the sun lounger by the pool . . . and the things that followed would've made Lady Chatterley's lover reach for a high five. Kissing her that summer became as essential as breathing. And the sensation of those curves of hers pressed up against me, all soft, lush, and womanly—

The elevator chimes.

Fuck memory lane and its dangerous potholes.

The doors glide open. I gesture—ladies first.

Time to get to the bottom of whatever this bullshit is.

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Chapter 3
CLARA

His smile gutters like a candle flame as we step into the elevator car, that skillfully employed charm turning off like a faucet.

I'm not sure if it's better or worse that he's ignoring me. My skin feels prickly and hot, my emotions on full-volume blast as my head talk-talk-talks to me.

I need to apologize.

To try to explain what happened back then.

I know sorry isn't enough, but it's all I have right now.

Stop. Lord, today was *not* the day to play Russian roulette with my meds. I screw my eyes tight and try to run through a script I picked up in therapy.

Recognize: The twist in my stomach is guilt.

Restructure: I am not the same person as I was before.

Repeat: I am valid. I am worthy. I am human. And I am truly sorry.

I rub my lips together as I try to arrange my thoughts, to put the words in some order. Yet all I can think is that the one to speak first reveals a weakness.

"How is your mom?" The question spills anyway.

His answer is a look so cold, I'm surprised the car doesn't fill with frost.

So maybe I deserved that. Not that I don't want to conjure quicksand to swallow me up. "I hope she's well," I add quietly, trying so hard not to cry. *Stupid question, Clara. You don't get to ask that after what you've done*. That's not to say I don't think of her often. Or feel the weight of my guilt.

"Your party seemed to be going well." This feels like another noisy-brained white flag attempt. But I guess Troy isn't aware that a flag of truce has been codified into the Hague Convention, as not a flicker of recognition crosses his stupidly handsome face. Maybe if I waved my panties . . . I mentally slap myself for the ridiculous thought. "Anyway, it's good to hear you're doing well."

“To *hear* I’m doing well?” The velvet nap of his voice brushes at my skin. Deep, rich, sensual. Just not at all warm right now.

“Just . . . downstairs.” *Because I never ever googled your name, too worried for what I might find.* “Someone mentioned the IPO.” The doors open, but he doesn’t move. “It’s great.” My smile feels weird, like it doesn’t want to hold. “Really great. Not that I had any doubt you’d do amazing. You always were so—”

“Clara, just stop.”

Shame licks at my insides as the doors begin to close. I can’t change the past, but it doesn’t stop me from wishing once more that I could. If I had a do-over—if I knew I had the courage to do other, do better, I wouldn’t have hurt him. And then I wouldn’t be living with this sense of shame.

“No thanks to you,” he murmurs. “That’s what I’m supposed to say, right?”

Tears sting behind my eyelids as a ball of emotion lodges itself at the back of my throat. *Thanks, emotional dysregulation.* Rejection just hits so much harder when I’m not regular with my meds. “Troy. I’m truly—”

“Save it,” he cuts in, his eyes suddenly boring into mine, corkscrew sharp. “I’m not interested.”

“But I am sorry,” I whisper anyway. Sorrier than he’ll ever realize.

He presses a button, and the doors slide open once more. “Go on,” he commands.

I step out, step to the side. Troy walks ahead, ignoring my sad little heart bleeding out on the polished concrete. There’s no point in trying to tell him that the person I was bears no resemblance to the person I am today. We’re not going to see each other again. Not after this, his reckoning, I expect.

This looks to be the C-suite. It’s pretty fancy. Not old-world fancy but cutting edge with something a little brutalist about it. Lots of hard surfaces and a pale palette. Unlike downstairs, there are no catchy slogans, banners, or placards, and there isn’t a bongo or a foosball table in sight. But there is a sleek sofa setting and a matching low table flanked by a pair of mid-century wingback chairs that look suspiciously like Frits Henningsen.

The sound of Troy’s footsteps echoes as he passes an unmanned desk the size of a small sailing boat. His assistant’s? Maybe a receptionist, judging by the various doors leading off behind it.

“Clara.”

“Yes?” I snap to attention at the sound of my name, that quirky piece of antiquity. I was named after my great-grandmother Clara. Fairfax is a family name. Fun fact: I was told that had I been born a boy, I would’ve been given the name Fairfax Forbes. Bullet dodged. “Coming,” I add, then fall in line as though I’m on the way to the gallows.

Troy opens the door directly ahead and gestures me through. Manners maketh the man? He must’ve forgotten that at the elevator.

“Take a seat.”

“Thank you, but I’ll stand.” For my executioner. Maybe that’s why he’s brought me up here. To see if I can fly.

“Suit yourself.” He begins to strip off his jacket, discarding the fine tailoring to a chair, like the retail value wouldn’t feed an average-size family for at least a few weeks. “You always did.”

“Well, that is very true.” To say my impulse control was poor back then is a little like saying water is wet.

My gaze flits around a room that looks like the kind of place people don’t visit for funsies but are instead summoned to. Don’t get me wrong, it’s tasteful. Classy, even. But it’s also . . . mid, as the kids say. God, that makes me sound old. I’m too old to be playing these games, anyway.

Rain hammers against the twin walls of windows providing views over the river, the bridges, and the city’s lights spilling northward. His desk is huge, made of dark wood and positioned like a chess piece in the center of a board. *If you’re standing on the wrong side of the desk, I guess it’s game over.* Two monitors and a leather folio sit atop the shiny surface, but nothing else. A fancy Herman Miller chair takes its place on the window side of the desk, while on the door side there are a couple of three-legged chairs. Presumably to keep visitors from feeling comfortable.

A meeting table takes up space on the right of the room, and it looks like someone used a tape measure to unify the space between the ’70s-style swivel chairs. Oversize art hangs on the wall opposite, abstract in nature, and a little blah, and a door stands to the right. An executive bathroom? The door to his harem? He never was short of interested parties, even when we were together. Young women, old. I can’t see that having changed.

A veritable corner office, high-end designer furniture all the way. But the space just doesn’t seem like it belongs to him. It’s sterile. Boring. When the man I used to know had so much personality.

“What’s your verdict?”

“Sorry?” I snap back to myself, cursing that I zoned out. How long have I been staring at his furniture?

“You seem to be taking stock.” He makes a dismissive gesture as he lowers himself to the edge of the desk, stretching out his long legs. Those thighs have thickened out since . . . well, since I last sat in his lap. *Or rode it like a pony at the club.* “Really taking stock.”

“Maybe I’m casing the joint.”

“More cosplay?” His gaze skates over me, and I frown, not because he’s wrong. So much for embodying the capable Velma. “Why don’t you just cut the shit.” He curls his hands around the edge of his desk, and I ignore the way his shirt bunches around his biceps. “And tell me what you’re doing here.”

“Well, I was working.” There’s a bite to my tone as I turn up my palms and give a miniature shrug. I should’ve taken that seat, because my back is truly aching now. The weight of guilt pressing on my shoulders and compressing my spine, maybe. But I already tried an apology, and look what that got me. “But you’ve put a nasty dent in both my future with the catering company *and* my pay tonight.”

“I haven’t got time for your games, Clara.” His brows slam together. “Are you a journalist?”

A laugh bursts out of me. I wish! The pay is undoubtedly steadier. “Why, do you have something to hide?”

“Just my disdain.”

“Try harder.”

“You forget, I know you.”

“I’m sure you think you do.” My fingers move to the tiny hoop in my right ear. A sure sign of a liar, I think I read somewhere. And that would be correct because I’m not the girl he used to know. I’ve done enough work on myself not to derive any kind of enjoyment from this exchange. Though there was a time when any kind of attention felt like connection. Validation. And I know now that, in a lot of ways, that behavior wasn’t my fault. Therapy provided *plenty* of epiphanies.

But I’ve made my fair share of mistakes, and I accept my reality. This is an uncomfortable situation for both of us, but I can’t—I won’t—tell him what he wants to hear just for my life to make sense in his head.

“So you’re not a journalist. And you didn’t know I was the CEO because you’re not here doing a piece.”

“Correct.” Threading my fingers together, I hold them in front of me. “I have no interest in you. Professionally or otherwise,” I add as my eyes betray my words. I don’t mean to do it, but he just looks so good.

“Not a journalist, but you’re not a waitress either. So what the fuck are you doing here?”

“You saw me down there,” I retort, my palm facing heavenward in demonstration. “Did I not have a tray in my hand?”

“Try again.”

“I. Was. Working.”

“You don’t work. You shop.”

“And you assume. You know what they say about assuming.”

“You travel. You tan.” His gaze runs critically over me. “You gossip and you bitch and you partake in cocktail hour, as is your station in life.”

He makes it all sound so shallow. Maybe because it is. He doesn’t know me, so he makes me out to be a caricature of my stepmother. *A low blow, Troy. A low blow.*

“Tanning is for teenagers, and I don’t drink these days.” Stimulants and booze do not good friends make. “Meanwhile, you manhandled me out of the room like an ugly centerpiece.” I press my hand to my cocked hip. Attack being the best form of defense, provided he didn’t hear the warble in there.

“Correction, I moved you out of the room before you could fuck anything else up.”

“Charming.”

“This is the last place I expected to see you again,” he utters icily.

“Well, it wasn’t my clone down there, serving finance bros and tech geeks stupid canapés while getting hit on by sleazeballs for the grand sum of twenty dollars an hour.”

Something flashes angrily across his face, and for a moment, I swear he’s about to ask *who*—who hit on me—when he says:

“Court-ordered community service?”

Stupid, treacherous heart.

“I suppose that’s a fair guess,” I say, my disappointment and anger leaking away. “We all have our prejudices. For instance, some might easily draw parallels between an animal shelter and a fintech company.” *Because they’re both full of dogs*.

“A waitress.” He scoffs.

“I prefer server.”

“So tell me, Clara. How did you come to be *serving* fucking Tater Tots in my office?”

“First of all.” I hold up my hand like I’m swearing allegiance. “I am not responsible for the menu. Blame someone else for that atrocity. Cupcakes decorated with fondant tables? What were they thinking?”

“I thought the cupcakes were kind of cute.”

“To each to their own, I suppose.” I pluck invisible lint from my shirt.

“Clara.”

“I’m getting there.” Despite declining a seat earlier, I find myself all but falling into one. *Just as I guessed, there is no comfort here.* Pressing my knees together, I smooth my hands over them and take a deep breath. “Once upon a time, a little girl in a beautiful Park Avenue palace put a picture of an apron on her vision board.”

“*Clara.*” The grit in his tone . . . does nothing for me.

“Fine.” I cross one leg over the other, then uncross them again at the sight of my ugly shoes and a clinging schmutz of fried potato. “It’s a simple story, but a boring one. You see, I’ve been cut off.” I throw up my hands like a magician’s *ta-da!* “What you see before you is a woman humbled by circumstance.”

“You don’t look very humble to me.”

“No? Well, you don’t much look like a loan shark either. But here we are.”

His mouth curls almost reluctantly. “How long?”

“How long what?”

His chest expands with a deep breath, like he’s silently counting to ten. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Waitressing? Being poor? Or not being the girl you remember?”

“Looks like you. Talks like you. Still a pain in the ass like you.”

“Yet you seem to have lost your silver tongue.” I am *not* thinking about his tongue. Or the time in the back seat while parked at—

There was a time that Troy liked that Clara, ass and all. When he found her spontaneous and exciting. A time when he couldn’t get enough of her. In my car. The pool house. The boathouse. Once in the pantry. Anywhere. Everywhere. And it was glorious.

“How long?”

“Ten months. I’ve been waitressing for ten months. Weddings mostly. The odd corporate event.” *Whomp-whomp.* “Tending bar about the same.”

“You work in a bar?”

I wish I had it in me to laugh because, my God, his face. “I’m not sure if that was admiration or horror.” Probably disbelief. “But yes, I work in a bar. A dive bar, actually. Spit and sawdust, and . . . monosyllabic customers. I love it.” Sometimes.

“Because your dad cut you off?”

“Finally!”

“I guess he got sick of your shit.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what you would think. You’d have to ask him.”

“That wasn’t a denial.”

“I’m sorry, were you under the impression I owed you one?”

“Oh, Clara. You owe me plenty.”

I wince because that one lands close to a nerve. But then my mouth is off and running again. “You’ll have to get in line. My landlord comes first. Living under a bridge isn’t on my bingo card for this year.” I hope. “And after my landlord comes my pharmacist—”

As his expression twists, I grasp how that sounded. How he took it. But I meant what I said—pharmacist, not dealer. His opinion of me could hardly get any worse.

“And then, of course, I have to eat. Tiresome, I know, but—”

“What about your trust? The one your grandmother left you.”

“I don’t come into it for another ten months.”

“Thirty, right?” I nod. “So you’re what? Treading water.”

An unhappy huff bursts out of me. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing.” Hand on my knees, I push up to stand. “Gliding through life like a swan.” Serene on the surface, and my legs kicking like hell under the waterline. “I take it we’re done here?”

He studies my face, then gives a long exhale. “We’re done.”

My heart sinks like I was expecting more. Or something else, though I’m not sure what.

“I’ll ask Shanti if I can finish my shift in the back, and—”

“That’s not happening.”

“I’ll stay out of your way.” It’s not like I want to be here, not that he’ll hear me say so.

“You’re not going back,” he says, standing now.

“Fine.” I need the money, but I’m done fighting. I turn but then startle as I find him by my side. “What are you—”

“Consider me your escort,” he says, taking my elbow again.

“More like a prison guard.”

“Your words.”

True. And not at all well chosen.

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Chapter 4
TROY

No way I believe the line she's trying to sell me. No fucking way.

In the conference room currently being used by the caterers as a makeshift kitchen, I hold out Clara's coat.

"Thanks." As she slips it on, a plume of her perfume tantalizes my nose. It smells expensive. In a fair world, she'd smell like Tater Tots, not tuberose. Fried foods. Not memories.

My jaw feels tense, and I'm annoyed I can't work it out—that she won't say what this is. What I do know is there's *no way* a waitress wears a coat worth $4,000. The Max Mara label is a gaping hole in her cosplay, because if truly her dad cut her off, belongings worth anything would've been sold.

Ask me how I know. Then ask me who put my family in that same situation.

She's sorry. Fuck that. Sorry she had to face me, more like.

Head down, Clara wraps the belt around her trim waist, tying it in a complicated-looking loop. It's the kind of coat that only First Ladies, the rich, and the famous get to wear. I know this because, around the time Table attracted its first big investor, Hannah bought herself the same coat during her lunch break. The press was calling the four of us visionaries, labeling the company as the hottest new thing. Yet when Hannah returned to the office that afternoon, she looked like she was about to throw up. She shook the Bloomingdale's bag, said how much she'd spent, then spun around, muttering she needed to take it back.

But she didn't. We wouldn't let her. Money just takes some getting used to when you're not born into it.

And that's the crux of it. If Clara's dad has cut her off—and who would blame him if years of childhood defiance and teenage rebellions continued into adulthood fuckery—it doesn't mean Clara would be without. She couldn't know true poverty because old money and blue blood open doors that most of us can only hammer on.

She had friends. Contacts. People she could rely on for work. Transferable skills from endless charity events her stepmother seemed to be involved in. Arranging flowers. Table dressing. Social shit. She could get work as a membership manager for some stuffy club—be their events manager. Work in an auction house or get a job as one of those useless chicks you see floating around art galleries. There is just no way on this earth she'd be forced to wait tables. Or serve liquor in a bar.

Journalist was just a wild punt on my part, not that she'd find anything salacious here. This company is squeaky clean. The state regulators make sure of that.

"Well, I'd say it was nice to see you again . . ." Eyes of dark denim blue catch me off guard as she looks up at me through lashes as black as soot. Those lips, all bow. Heart shaped. She's an old-fashioned beauty, I guess.

"But you'd be lying?" I quirk a brow. "Bit of a pattern for you."

Something painful flashes in her expression before her lashes make half moons against her cheeks. I am *not* going to feel regret. Not for her.

Around us, the caterers pretend not to listen in as they bustle about. Dishes clang, and plates are scraped, all while ears strain and eyes furtively peek.

Clara swipes up her purse from the table behind her, violently pulling it onto her shoulder. "Bye, guys!"

They're too wary to do much more than murmur in response. Clara turns on her heel, and I follow her out.

"I know my way." She gives a sharp *tsk*.

"Just making sure you're really leaving."

Her pace is brisk, and she gives an unhappy laugh and a tight shake of her head.

"Are they a good crew to work with?"

"What do you care?"

"Just making conversation." Fishing for holes in her story, more like.

"They're nice people. Salt of the earth." Her gaze slices my way. "Unlike some of the assholes that work for you."

"Meaning what?"

"Just that one or two of them might benefit from a visit from HR. Maybe some sexual harassment training. Or a course on how not to intimidate waitstaff."

“Intimidated, you?” I slide my hands into my pockets, my brows pulling tight. “Not possible.” Her sigh sounds weary. “All right, I’ll bite. Who?”

“Again, what do you care?”

“I’m asking, aren’t I?” If there’s truth to this, the idiot won’t be working for Table for long. “What’d he look like?”

“Generic nouveau riche.” She bites each word out.

“Like me, then?”

She shoots me an unflattering look.

“Ouch.” I press my hand to my heart.

“Just some asshole who drives a Porsche, okay?”

“That narrows it down,” I mutter.

She draws to a stop and pivots to face me. “Please don’t tell me that’s what you drive.”

“What’s wrong with a Porsche?”

“But whatever will you buy when your midlife crisis hits?”

“Maybe I’ll just ask your dad.”

“That kind of ride is a heck of a lot pricier than a Porsche.” She spins away, back straight, eyes strictly ahead.

“O-kay.” I must’ve hit a raw nerve. She turns left, heading for the service elevator, I belatedly realize. “Wait,” I say, catching her elbow.

“Will you stop doing that?” She jerks from my hold, her expression a mixture of pissed and hurt.

I lift both hands. “You’re going the wrong way.” *I will not feel bad,* I think bitterly. Not after the hell she caused my family. And yet . . . “The guy you’re talking about, was it the one I saw you with downstairs?”

“I wasn’t *with* him. I was being harassed by him.”

That motherfucker.

“And I’m going out the way I came in. And no, that’s not a ‘That’s what she said’ joke.”

“There’s a car waiting downstairs. The main entrance.”

“Of course there is.” She gives a sigh but turns in the direction I indicate, though pauses at the top of the escalator. “I wasn’t planning on sneaking back in, if that’s what you think.”

“I think the customary response is to express thanks when someone arranges your transport home.”

“That’s not what this is about.” She steps onto the elevator without waiting for my response.

I nod at the one guy left behind the reception desk, then pull on the nearest glass door. Outside, the rain has eased from a torrent to a fine mist, and the car I ordered idles by the curb.

“This is you.” In the Mercedes’s darkened windows, I watch her glance my way. Notice her nervous swallow and the way her eyes briefly shutter.

“Thank you,” she says quietly. “You didn’t need to order me a car, and though I appreciate it’s hardly from the goodness of your heart, I am still grateful.”

I open the door and give a jerk of my chin. *Get in.*

She inhales, then seems to change her mind about speaking, which is when something unfortunate possesses me. The shock on her face as I slide my arms around her shoulders is almost laughable. And maybe I will laugh. Later. When I’m over the feeling of her pressed against me and I can no longer smell the floral scent of her hair.

“It was good to see you,” I say, which feels like a complicated truth and not nearly the end of the things I want to say as something unexpected happens. Something sudden, startling, bewildering, and a dozen more versions of *what the fuck* as she stands on her toes and presses her lips to mine.

I freeze. But only for a beat because, before I know what I’m doing—before I can engage my fucking brain—I’m kissing her back. Hers was likely meant to be a peck, but mine feels like an inducement as my lips tease and flirt. Her breath is sweet, and her mouth is a warm contrast to the dreary night as she begins to kiss me back.

You’d think it would be strange, kissing her after so long, but it feels as easy as picking up a book you’ve just set down. The sensation is as enjoyable as sinking into a warm bath. *Or a hot one,* I think, as her tongue makes a tentative pass. I suck it into my mouth, and she gives a tiny whimper, and then we’re suddenly slipping, sliding, relishing the burn.

My hand slips into her coat unbidden, fingers grasping her heavenly ass. Hunger roars through me as I drag her closer, her soft pressed to my hard. I want to say something, remark on the sensation, but that would mean moving my mouth from hers. I make a low noise, keeping her there, my cock pulsing against her as my left hand slides up her rib cage, my

thumb finding her nipple over her shirt. She gives a little gasp that I fucking inhale.

I want this—I see it happening before it does. Tumbling into the car, awkward and desperate as I kiss her senseless. Pressing my teeth to her neck to hear her frantic *yes*. My weight over her, my lips on her neck, and my hot breath in her ear as I spell out my plans. The sweet and the filthy. The promises and threats. I'd kiss and suck and bite. I work my way lower to that little piece of heaven between her legs. We were no strangers to the back seat, but I like to think my skills have leveled up. I could show her a thing or—

What the fuck am I doing? I gave this woman my heart, and she stomped on it.

My hands curled around her shoulders, I set her back. This is wrong. Kissing her wasn't my intention. Or even my idea. I do not need the trouble that Clara Forbes is seeping under my skin.

My pulse pounds in my ears as I stare at her, those blue eyes a languid midnight now. The night feels fresh, yet, between us, there doesn't seem to be a breath of air to be had.

"Don't take this the wrong way." My voice sounds rough. Like I've been running. And maybe I should run quickly away. "But I really hope I don't see you again."

Her lashes flutter, and I see the moment she comes back to herself. There's no satisfaction to be had in knowing she was just as lost in the moment.

Clara nods, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. I turn my brain off to the sight. She takes a step back, stumbling over the curb. I hate myself in that moment. A split second of regret. But I don't say anything, because I wasn't expecting to feel like this. Cognitive fucking dissonance right here on the street as she slides into the darkened interior like a lady in no need of a footman.

It's only natural, I reason as I rub my fist over a sudden twinge in my chest. We have a history. *We've fucked*, I mentally amend. She's still hot, and it's been months since I last got laid. These feelings, the need prickling at my fingertips, and elsewhere, it's all just chemicals. *Stop freaking the fuck out.*

The cool of the metal roof under my fingers brings me back to my senses. And I tell myself the damp beading on her lashes is not my problem

as I press the car door shut.

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Chapter 5
TROY

I twist my neck left, then right, a fresh cup of coffee in hand, laptop open on the table behind me. I slept like shit and woke annoyed. It doesn't matter that the sun is shining, that it's a beautiful day. The minute I opened my eyes, my first coherent thoughts were the same ones as I had before I turned out the light last night.

What the fuck was she doing in my building?

Why the hell did she kiss me?

And why the fuck did I kiss her back?

Okay, so I kind of have the answer to the last one, and it's nothing to do with Clara Forbes's pretty little face. I kissed her back because life doesn't come with a "Clear History" button. But damn if that means I'm gonna allow her to derail my life again.

I turn from the window and my view over the Hudson, and the smell of sawdust makes me sneeze.

"Ah, shit." I wipe coffee from my bare chest. Then my shorts. It looks like I've pissed myself. "Fuck!" I grate out as I stand on a stray nailhead as I make my way over to the kitchen for a towel.

What the fuck is happening in my life right now? Yesterday, everything was fine—I was on top of the world. I achieved all I set out to do with Table and my life. Success, respect, safeguarding my mother's future. I have more money than I can spend in one lifetime. And I'll be keeping it that way, thank you. I'm not going to let Clara's tomfoolery fuck up my life plan.

I give a shake of my head and take the remains of my coffee over to the open-plan kitchen. *Tomfoolery. I guess I'm really old now.* My cup hovers over the $10,000 Calacatta Viola marble sink, but I don't immediately tip out the liquid. *Did the contractor say it had already been sealed? Marble is supposed to stain, right?*

Fuck it, I think as I dump it, then flick on the faucet to rinse away the potential blemish. I could afford to install a new sink every day of the week

without putting a dent in my wealth. Yet I still use my hand to sluice the water spray from the edge as a memory begins to unfold in my head.

“Oh, that’s cold!” Clara’s voice, her deep-blue eyes widening in shock as I lift her to the countertop.

We’re both wet from the pool, and no one else is home as I set my palms on either side of her thighs. Leaning in, I use my teeth to untuck the towel at her chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Just makin’ my mouth water.”

“Troy!” She sounds scandalized. Looks fuckin’ delighted.

“Baby, I’m not thirsty for soda anymore.”

“What is it you want?”

“Just a little taste.” I ghost my knuckle over the hard pebble of her nipple. Swallow her sigh as I pinch it.

“Here?”

“Well, yeah. If you want my mouth on you.”

“You take it off, then.”

“The beauty is in watching you do it. For me.”

There’s nothing coy in the way she arches as she reaches back. The tie comes loose, and the tiny triangles of fabric fall away.

Like metal shavings to a magnet, my hands mold to the shape and heavenly weight of her. She stifles a moan as my thumbs glide across her hard nipples and the way she looks at me . . . like flint to tinder.

I bend, my tongue a hot lick to the pale underside of her breast. Her moan echoing through the space as I press my teeth there, then suck the hardened bud into my mouth.

“Oh, God . . .” She anchors her hands in my hair as I deliver a languid lick, a sharp suck.

“You’re gonna let me fuck these,” I whisper.

“H-here?”

“No, baby. I told you, I’m thirsty.” My fingers skim lower over the softness of her hips, down to the V of her bikini. “I love your tits, but this piece of skin right here”—I circle the inside of her thigh—“it drives me crazy.”

“My leg?”

“So pale and so silky. It’s like a secret you keep.” I hook my thumbs into the bikini bottoms and pull the damp fabric down her legs. She makes a

tortured little noise I could bottle as I ease her knees apart. “You’re so pink and perfect.” I give a low hum of appreciation as I press my thumb to her, exposing the soft rise of her clit.

“Oh Lord.” Clara falls back on her palms, her wet hair almost touching the countertop. My mouth fucking waters for a taste as, like a penitent, I drop to my knees in front of her.

At the first brush of my tongue, she cries my name, her body bowing.

“So fuckin’ thirsty,” I growl, loving her clit with my tongue. One last look at her beautiful face before I bury myself in the velvet depths of her.

“Fuck!” I drag myself back from the past, and I push away from the sink, ignoring the tile samples, the brochures, and the swatches laid out on the island. “Motherfucker.” I swipe my hand through my hair, then yank open the fridge. Reaching for the milk, I guzzle it from the carton like the heathen I am. *Like the heathen she made me.* I stomp across the space, back to my laptop.

I don’t think about her in those terms. Not anymore.

This is *not* the start of an obsession. Not again. I just know that Clara Forbes was not born to serve beers or hors d’oeuvres. Not in this universe.

So I pull my laptop closer and do what I always do when I can’t figure something out. I run scenarios like a threat model. I’m not saying I consider Clara a threat exactly, but her appearance is an anomaly that warrants investigation.

Tech isn’t my area of expertise, but I’ve hung out enough with the tech geeks to have gathered the gist of this. The questions to run:

What is she doing?

What could go wrong?

What am I going to do about it?

Then circle back to see what I’ve missed.

So what could she be doing with her life outside of waitressing and journalism? *Gossip or news?* I can’t see her doing either, quite honestly.

Lacing my fingers together, I push them out in front of me, giving them a sharp flex. Then type:

Scenario 1: She came to fuck my shit up.

That she woke yesterday morning and thought to herself, *You know whose life I haven’t ruined lately? Troy Templeton’s.*

A smile tugs at my mouth. That would be a little random, but still.

I begin to type again.

Scenario 2: She wants something from me.

But what? I sit back in my chair.

My body?

Well, she sure shook. But not with excitement. *Until we kissed.* I'm not going down that line of thinking.

My cash?

She didn't ask for anything. She didn't bat her eyelashes, flatter me, or stick out her tits. And the Clara I knew and . . . whatever, she was never much into subtlety.

My influence?

She didn't pitch me anything or tell me about her fabulous idea for a new product line, which happens more often these days than I'd like. Plus, she seemed happy for me, happy for where I am with my life. Also, her family has more money than God. So . . .

What else could she want from me?

Maybe my ass on her wall like a hunting trophy.

I huff out a laugh. That should probably be the other way around.

Moving on.

Scenario 3: Pure performance.

This one still hits. Kind of. The glasses. The getup. The humility cosplay. But can I believe she'd be that tasteless? Not intentionally. She never played into the rich-stuck-up-bitch archetype. She was always kind. To doormen, to waitstaff, and she fucking loved my mother. *Obviously not enough.*

Also, what good is a performance for an audience of one? She didn't play to the room or cause a scene, not that I gave her much opportunity, and I've seen her cause a few of those. Now that I think of it, she avoided looking at me until she could do nothing else. *Because I loomed over her like a fucking tool.*

Performance. I run my index finger across my lips. Maybe. I'm not ruling it out, even if I can't fathom a reason right now.

I'll circle back to this one.

Scenario 4: She's actually broke.

I watch the cursor blink before the night begins to play out in my mind like a reel of security footage.

She worked that tray like she knew what she was doing. And she looked tired. Pale. Her uniform was clean but cheaply made. Her right cuff was stained, and her shoes were worn. They were also as ugly as fuck, and that thought irritates me more than it should. If last night was indeed cosplay, Clara was fully committed, because the girl I knew would rather die than be seen in anything but cute shoes or boots. She was always stylish. Pulled together. *Fucking edible.*

But the coat. If I frown any deeper, I'll give myself a headache.

How could she need money? The earth will probably implode before her family runs out of the readies.

Unless she *has* been cut off.

But that begs the question, Why? *A form of punishment?* A knot forms in my stomach. She did a lot of crazy stuff way back when and suffered none of the consequences.

Not willing to skip down memory lane again, I move swiftly on.

Scenario 5: Pure coincidence.

No such thing.

Next question: What could go wrong?

Fuck if I know, I think, minimizing the page and moving to the internet at a sudden thought.

Clara Fairfax Forbes. I type her name into the search bar.

No Instagram account. No Facebook presence. No sign of social media whatsoever under that name. I find this weird, given that she used to have and use them all regularly. Her phone was always glued to her hand. It seemed as though she couldn't fart without telling her followers and posting a selfie back then.

And there was a time I used to stalk her socials. After. After Mom lost her job. *Fuck that.* After Clara got Mom fired. Back then, I sold it to myself as keeping an eye on the woman who wrecked my life. The truth is that

creeping on her ’gram from my tiny dorm room became a compulsion. I watched her vacation and date and use #blessed every other fucking post. I forced myself to check in on her, not through jealousy or hatred. It was more like punishment for allowing myself to be sucked in.

I won’t say I used these feelings as fuel, but I won’t deny it either. But maybe if I’d concentrated more on myself in those early days, I might’ve achieved my goals sooner. Lifted my mother from her sore knees earlier. Not that she had to wait too much longer.

The four of us founding members were barely out of college when we took the company to seed stage. First thing I did was hire someone to wash my mother’s floors.

Shut it down. There is no peace living in the past.

As I scroll through the pages, I see Clara does have some internet footprint. A few tags in old social media posts. An obscure mention in a newspaper article about women’s rights. And her name as a footnote in an *Architectural Digest* feature about her stepmother’s kitchen refit.

Maybe as she’s gotten older, she’s become more private. Which wouldn’t work in terms of—

My phone begins to dance against the French oak as Hannah’s name flashes on the screen.

“What are you up to, Troy Boy?” she asks in a tellingly bored tone.

“Oh, you know. Living the dream. Bedding starlets. Bathing in champagne. Stubbing my fucking toe on unfinished floor tiling.” *Totally not thinking about kissing women I have no business kissing.*

“I told you to move out while the contractors are in,” she says with a soft laugh. “Get a hotel suite or something.”

“Nope, I like my place.” I fucking love it. “Where else would I get a view of Fifty-Six Leonard—”

“You’ll miss the view of the Jenga Tower?” She scoffs.

“Fifty-Sixth Leonard and One World from one terrace and the Hudson from another. Plus, I don’t know whether I told you,” I say, giving in to a smile as I hook my elbow over the back of my chair, “but I have an outdoor shower on yet another amazing terrace.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she mutters, “your ugly nineties outdoor shower. Hugo says he fully expects to see it on Pornhub one day with some Spice Girl wannabe getting pounded in it.”

“Nice,” I reply. You know who I’d like to not bang in my outdoor shower? Clara Forbes. *Why am I thinking of her again?*

“Come on—the pun! Wannabe?” she demands.

I force myself to tune back in. Wannabe what? Fuck if I know. “Y’all just jealous.”

“No one is jealous of your outdoor shower, dude.”

“Lies.”

“Also, y’all? You didn’t live in the South long enough to earn the use of that term.”

“Shows what y’all know,” I drawl.

“Your building is an ugly piece of glass and steel, though it has a certain charm.” I know what’s coming next. “It’s like a . . . a giant ornamental phallus. You should have it made in miniature and sell them to the porn Oscars people. They could award it to dudes who couldn’t keep it up for the whole shoot.”

“Your mind is a strange and wondrous place. And this building is beautiful. It’s a piece of history in the making.”

“And none of that would change if you moved out for the renovation. Why put yourself through it?”

I give a theatrical-sounding sigh. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” How could she when she hasn’t lived my life? When she wasn’t compelled to live in shit-box houses in the shithole towns, being grateful for a roof over my head while worrying it all might still be ripped away. “What do you want, Hannah-Banana?” As if I didn’t already know.

“I want to know who that girl was you were talking to yesterday?”

“Jealous, my love?”

“Totally,” she deadpans. “Gimme. Information. Why were you looking at the cute waitress like you wanted to fuck and strangle her at the same time?”

“Because I’m a deviant like that.”

She makes a noise like an unhappy buzzer. “Try again, hotshot.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Han Solo.”

“Ew. Han Solo is a rude, sexist, arrogant pig. I am none of these things.”

“But you are resourceful, courageous, and very cool under fire. Plus, your best bud is a hairy dude.”

“I’m not sure. See, best friends tell each other things.”

“Our friendship boundary stops at toenail painting, braiding our back hair, and airing the shit we don’t want to talk about. Remember?”

“I must’ve missed that note in the best friend handbook. She broke your heart, didn’t she?”

“She did not.” I scoff. She did worse. She broke my mother’s heart.

“Well, whoever she was, she went to a lot of trouble to get your attention.”

I say nothing.

“Come on, spill the tea!” she pleads. Demands.

“I could go for some tea. And by that, I mean brunch.”

“Can’t. I’ve got Pilates booked.”

“Pie and lattes? Count me in!”

“And then I’m gonna go for my hot-girl walk.”

“Picking up or dropping off?”

“Rude!”

“You don’t need me to tell you you’re hot. You get those boys on the tech floor all sweaty just at the sound of your heels.”

“They get sweaty because they’re frightened of me.”

“And that’s the way you like it.”

“Well, I can see this conversation has come to an end. But let me tell you how hurt I am that you haven’t shared, *friend*.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“I’m not so sure Hugo and Max will.”

I feel my brows pinch. “Been talking shit about me?”

“We have a theory . . . and by that, I mean I have a theory.”

“Naturally.”

“The waitress is a mysterious woman from your past.”

“Okay.” If you swap out *mysterious* for *unwelcome*.

“That’s it? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“Yep.”

“God, you’re no fun.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll just . . . go.”

“Don’t know why the fuck you called anyway,” I grumble. “Hey, Hans?” I add before she can hang up. “How much was that coat you bought? You know, the one that made you want to vomit?”

“Why would I buy a coat that . . . oh! My Manuela. Why, are you thinking of buying one for someone special?”

“Yeah, my mom.”

“Mariam lives in Florida,” she retorts as quick as a flash. Then she sighs. “It was almost four thousand dollars. But it’s an investment piece.”

Another mark against scenario four. “And it was worth every penny. See you Monday.”

“Oh, wait. I remember why I called. You sidetracked me, droning on and on about your shower. Check the share price for me, would you?”

“Something wrong?” Something a little left of dread spikes through me. If Clara—

“Quite the opposite.” I detect a note of smugness in her tone as I roll my shoulders, my senses still prickling.

“Something wrong with your hands?” I mutter, pulling my laptop closer.

“I’m not at my computer, and I’ll bet yours is sitting right in front of you.”

I resist the urge to glance over my shoulder as I open Table’s financial dashboard and log in. As I do, it occurs to me that I haven’t checked the share price since yesterday. Probably not a bad thing. The novelty of being wildly rich hasn’t worn off yet, and I just like to check how rich. I get a little kick out of calculating the gains in the fluctuations. The losses not so much. Not that there’s been a downward trajectory in the fluctuations. It’s been pretty much plain sailing since the company went pub—lic. *Fuck me.*

“The price is up twelve percent. But you already knew that.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“We’re up two-point-four billion dollars in market cap since I last checked.” My excitement feels almost palpable.

“Lots and lots more money in our pockets. If we were selling right now.”

“Which we’re not.”

“Which we can’t.”

“Doesn’t matter.” But my mind is already spinning ahead. An increase of these levels is what the analysts might call a real event. My excitement immediately cools—I need to know what’s responsible. The chair legs protest against the floor as I stand, making for the couch to grab the TV remote.

“Oh, Troy, you speed ran to CNBC, didn’t you?” Hannah gives a laugh.

“Whatever.” I mute the TV sound. We’re little more than a week out from our public offering, so I’m looking for causation. Some kind of news responsible for the rise. Could be renewed investor confidence, but whatever’s driving the share price, I should already know about it. I flip my phone on loudspeaker and put it on the back of the sectional, arms folded across my chest as I read the ticker scrolling across the bottom of the screen. “What are the analysts saying?”

“Go back to your laptop and open up Instagram.”

“What the fuck for?”

“Just do it,” she says with a sigh. “I know you have an account, even if the last thing you posted was a picture of a hot dog seven years ago.”

“It was a good dog.”

“Open the damn thing.”

“Fine. Done.”

“Search for the Fifth Ave Files account.”

“The fuck is the fifth have files?”

“*Ave*. As in *avenue*, dummy. It’s a gossip account.”

My lip curls, but eager to get to the real business of share sleuthing, I do as Hannah says. The account looks like gossip central with more than a million followers. There have been more than five posts made over the last eighteen hours, only one of which plucks at my attention, thanks to the black Mercedes in the background.

“Is that . . .” Like an octogenarian reading a Metamucil label, I lean closer to my screen. “The fuck?”

“That’s what I said.” I hear the delight in Hannah’s tone. It’s restrained, but so is the woman herself. Mostly. “The fuck.”

I slump back in my chair. Then forward again as I open the Mercedes post and scroll through three static images of a man and a woman getting progressively closer. Then coming together in a blurry clinch. The time stamp says it was posted twelve hours ago, and the caption reads:

TROY TEMPLETON + THE ELUSIVE CLARA FORBES SPOTTED IN TRIBECA.

COULD THIS BE OLD MONEY AND NEW COMING TOGETHER?

“This isn’t what it looks like,” I say. Because what it looks like is two people on the verge of fucking.

“Want to know what I said to myself, once I’d gotten over the hurt of my best friend keeping secrets?”

“Not particularly.”

“I said that Clara Forbes must have it bad to have snuck into our offices dressed as a French maid.”

“Where does it say—” My mouth twists. “Right. Did anyone else see her there?”

“I’m sure lots of people did. But I’d be surprised if any of them knew who she was. I mean, I wouldn’t have known to pay more than a passing interest if I hadn’t seen your attitude shift. Then watch you bundle her out of the place like a toddler asked to share his favorite teddy bear.”

Hannah’s powers of deduction leave something to be desired. Then again, maybe I only have myself, my anger, to blame. Clara did say I risked drawing attention.

Another demerit for scenario three.

I thought I was okay, that I was acting like myself. Not like some past lover eager to get reacquainted. Even if that kind of happened anyway. I stare at the post, remembering how her lips parted slightly before I felt their softness. I rub my fist over the low-grade ache in my chest; how familiar it all feels.

“Of course, I’d like to know why she was there”—hell, wouldn’t we both—“but more than that, I’m hurt because all I can think is my best friend mustn’t like me anymore.”

I’m not listening to this bullshit. “The spike can’t be related to an Instagram post, for Chrissakes.”

“Well, that’s what I thought. Until I realized the post caught the attention of a journalist who then carried the gist of the story over to the dark side of the internet.”

“The dark web?”

Hannah gives a frustrated huff. “I’m talking about the platform that’s name used to sound like the noise a flock of birds make.”

“Hans.” *Jesus.*

“The platform whose name shall not be mentioned,” she warns. “Anyway, that’s how rumors start. And how rumors get mentioned in *Page Six*.”

I groan. Like I’m in pain.

“Let me save you the keystrokes. The caption read, ‘Reclusive Forbes heiress spotted with fintech billionaire.’”

“Great.”

“For the share price, yeah. Then it hit *The Mail*, and as far as I can tell, that’s when it stopped being gossip and became a market signal. A fat and juicy narrative for the financial influencer folks. They got to sharing, back on that platform, and an armchair hypothesis took flight. Which got the stock moving. And then a mention in a *Bloomberg* column.”

“All because of a photo?” I rake my hands through my hair. All because I kissed her? Wait—she kissed me. She misread the signals, and then . . . I kissed her back. *Fuck.*

“All because of a photo. Max says to tell you that if we’d known, we could’ve whored you out to heiresses before the IPO.”

I drag my hands down my face. This is all I need.

“Not that your love life isn’t helping now.”

“It’s bullshit, Han. There’s nothing going on between us, and the price will settle soon enough.” Nothing that relates to Clara Forbes comes free of cost. Without issues and bite and fucking consequences.

“How do you even know her?”

“My mom used to work for her family.” No need to explain in what capacity. Hannah already knows some of my past.

“Ooh. I’m sensing forbidden love. A poor boy from the wrong side of the tracks and a rich uptown girl with a poor-boy fetish.”

“Except I’m not poor anymore.”

“But she’s still interested, by the look of things.”

“That’s never gonna happen.” Not again.

“Say what you like, Troy Boy, but a picture speaks a thousand words. And that was way more than a friendly hug.”

“Shows what you know, which is something between fuck all and fucking nothing.”

“Testy,” she says. “Where’d Mr. Charm go?”

“He doesn’t report in at the weekend. There is nothing going on between me and Clara Forbes. I can’t say it any clearer than that.”

“Well, the market seems to think otherwise,” she retorts. “So I’m off to check my address book to see if I can’t dig up a couple more heiresses to throw Hugo and Max’s way.”

And while that’s where the call ends, it’s also where my thinking begins.

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Chapter 6
CLARA

Past

It's late, but not too late, because like a decent sort of guy, Troy is aiming to have me home at a decent time, so he says.

I glance his way, those long fingers of his looped around the steering wheel of my car. *What that man can do with his fingers is nobody's business.* A little zing of delight shoots through me, and I catch myself smiling in the darkened car window.

"Cold?" Before I can answer, he's already adjusting the climate controls. The hum of German engineering adapts immediately. He reaches for my hand again.

We take my car instead of his because, in his own words, his ride is a piece of shit. I love that his masculinity isn't attached to a piece of metal. How he laughed when the idiot on my friend Hadley's arm made it sound like it should be. Troy is so comfortable in his own skin that I envy him. When I'm with my friends, I often feel like a donkey among a herd of thoroughbreds. Not that anyone would guess, because I work very hard at hiding it.

"That was a dramatic sigh."

I shake off those thoughts and turn on my perky personality. "I was just thinking how Hadley is a little in love with herself."

"A little? Seems to be the relationship she's most committed to."

His dry tone makes me laugh. Maybe a little too loud, but that'll be the vodka I told Dad wouldn't be there tonight. *God forbid I kick back a little.*

As usual, the party was a total bore. Too much booze and too many laughs at other people's expense. The girls drooled over Troy, and the boys tried to make him feel unwelcome with their small-penis energy. Troy doesn't have small-penis energy. Or a small penis.

Wow. I'm pleased that was an inside thought or else this car might be wrapped around a pole. But Troy is like no one else I've known. He's not

like the idiot boys I've dated or the arrogant men I've grown up around. When he looks at me, it's like he sees me for who I am. I'm not an annoyance or an accessory or something to be controlled. I'm not a prize to be won either. He just seems to like me for me.

He puts up with all my crazy, and he doesn't care that my dad thinks he's trash. That he's refused to meet him, not that I've admitted this out loud. I suppose I should be happy my dad is showing some interest at last, even if that interest isn't about me. He only remembers he has a daughter when he needs an accessory to support his public persona of an upstanding family man.

"*This is my daughter, Clara. She's an English major at Brown.*"

Trying majorly hard not to flunk out, more like.

Unlike Troy, who is way smart. He's so focused and driven, I know he'll do great things with his life. He's funny and so handsome that it hurts to look at him sometimes. It hurts me in my heart and in my soul, but in a way that feels good. He makes me feel full. Balanced. Like I mean something in this world. And when he kisses me, holy heck! It's like the only time ever my brain is truly quiet. But when summer is over . . .

A heaviness sinks inside me, and I turn to the side window again. The trees and the countryside flick by like the restless thoughts that skim through my head. I try to contain them, but there's no tuning out. And I try not to shift in my seat, to maintain some sense of decorum. Dad's words, not mine.

In an effort to seem normal, I change the music. Open the window a little, then close it again when the wind messes my hair.

"You're bored." It's not an accusation, but the usual excuses tumble out of my mouth.

"No. I'm fine. Good, in fact." I give a cheek-aching smile, then press my lips to his knuckles when he isn't fully placated. Nothing to see here—Clara Forbes is a totally normal girl.

"You can be bored, you know. I won't take it as an insult."

"I'm never bored when I'm with you." My solemn tone catches even me off guard.

"Okay." But I note the tiny pinch in his brow.

"Never—not even when we're doing nothing but watching reruns of *Friends*." He shoots me an indulgent look. "Because you're my lobster."

“Your lobster, huh?” I don’t think he knows what that means because during that episode, we started kissing and then . . . yummy.

I pick up my phone and input my code before dropping it to my knee again as I sense the weight of his scrutiny. “I’m fine.”

“Bored.”

“Maybe a little understimulated?” I suggest when it’s clear he’s not giving up. What I am is stressed. I’m already questioning how Dad will be when I get home while trying to work out how to stop Troy from walking me to the door. The short answer is, I can’t.

So when the front door closes behind me, the bitching will start.

“*Is that what you want for yourself, Clara? A man who drives a fifteen-year-old car? A man whose mother cleans our toilets?*”

“Isn’t that the same thing, though?”

My brain is loud tonight. And it’s tiring. But I mentally backtrack and pick up the previous thread. “This is . . . well, it’s more like it’s internal.” Inside. Where things don’t make a lot of sense.

“That sounds expensive,” he says with a soft snort.

“Everything about me is expensive. You know that.” I paint on a smile, aiming for adorable. Maybe sexy. If only I could fix myself like a car or a computer.

Don’t worry, Clara’s due an engine tune-up—her operating system just needs an update.

“Everything about you is perfect. Even the crazy bits.”

Crazy. That’s me. Crazy impulsive. Crazy forgetful. Crazy distracted.

Crazy for him.

I think I love him.

“Did you have a good time tonight?” Forcing my thoughts in another direction, I hook my foot behind my other knee and turn in my seat to face him.

“I always have a good time when I’m with you.” The way his thumb skates over my knuckles feels so good.

“But you don’t like my friends, do you?”

“I think they’re a bunch of shallow assholes, but they’re your friends so . . .” His shoulder lifts carelessly.

“I don’t like them very much lately either.”

“Then why’d we go tonight?”

“I’m asking myself that same question.” I’ve known most of them since I was small, but the more time I spend with them, the more I don’t get them. Shallow is right. “She kept asking me if you were a model. Hadley,” I add as his brows knit. *Urgh, Clara. Keep the conversation linear, not leapy, would you?*

“And what did you tell her?”

“I said for her to get her own boyfriend.” I mentally kick myself as his mouth curls.

He hasn’t asked to date *date* me. Hadley was probably right when she said I was just a rich piece of ass keeping him entertained for the summer, that guys only like me for my tits.

“Is that what I am?” His tone is low and teasing, and when I try to pull away his fingers tighten.

“It’s just a figure of speech,” I answer softly. “I know we haven’t said we’re exclusive or anything.”

“We’d better be.” There’s a delicious grit in his tone, and as he glances my way, his eyes seem to glitter gold in the streetlight.

“I haven’t . . .” My eyes drop to my phone, glowing and open on my lap. “I really like you, but I know when the summer ends—” At the sound of the turning signal, my head jerks up. We’re pulling off the road.

“What are you doing?” My heart gives a leap, mostly thanks to his expression.

“Sounds like you need a reminder.”

The engine dies, and the car falls quiet.

In the darkness, his eyes rake over me, slow and heavy. Just like the feeling between my legs. The click of his seat belt, and my face is in his hands. His nose brushes playfully against mine, and pressed close this way, his features are hazy and sort of indistinct. My feelings for him, however, are at the absolute opposite end of the scale.

“I fucking love your freckles.” His thumbs glide over my cheeks. “One of these days,” he whispers, threading my hair behind my ears, “I’m gonna strip you bare and kiss every single one.”

“Sounds ambitious.” Lord, please. I need that to happen before I die.

“It’s more like a promise. I don’t want you going on dates with other boys. Got it?”

There is no playing this cool as I nod, trying in vain not to smile like an idiot.

“You’re mine, Clara. All for me.”

My heart. No one in my history ever really claimed me. Just my grandma, but thoughts of the very dearly departed aren’t for now. Not when all I can think about is him touching me.

“I think you should kiss your boyfriend.” He angles his head, and his fair hair falls across his brow.

“Maybe I will.” I try to move in but can’t because of the way he’s holding me.

“You are so fuckin’ beautiful.” The pad of his thumb presses my bottom lip, and his eyes turn inky as my tongue darts out to meet it. “God, Clara.” That low, rumbling sound vibrates through to my bones. “I want you so bad.” And then we’re kissing, his lips tasting and teasing, his tongue savoring my mouth like I’m the most delicious dish.

Then the little devil on my shoulder whispers an idea. The look on Troy’s face as I clamber over the center console. I shock him, sure, but he’s not going to stop me. Not as I straddle his thighs.

“I want you too.” I bite back a tiny whimper a little as I settle myself over him. *Over his cock.* The aching bloom between my legs is immediate.

Knees on either side of his thighs, I grip the headrest behind him. The angle isn’t that great—the leather is taut against my knees, and the bucket seats are way awkward, but only an earthquake or the hand of God is moving me as I arch up, pressing my breasts to Troy’s chest. They feel heavy and tingly, and I’m trying my hardest to look sexy as my short summer dress rides up to bare my thighs. I guess it must be working, judging by the look on his face. It’s like he’s died and is on his way to heaven—like he’s about to ascend.

“Just look at you.” His big hands mold to my ribs, sliding higher, higher, framing the heavy weight of my breasts. I give in to a soft moan as his thumbs swipe over my nipples. “You like that.”

“If you have to ask—oh!” At his tugging pull, fireworks burst inside me. His gaze turns kind of knowing, and, oh, I want to know all that he’s learned.

I’m not a virgin. No one I know my age is. But Troy makes me feel like I know nothing. I want him to show me everything. We haven’t yet . . . though the time is coming.

“Please.” My whisper feels hot against my lips, my tongue darting out to cool them.

“Please what, Clara?” His thumbs glide back and forth over the sensitive peaks, testing my sanity. “Come on, darlin’. Use your words.”

“Please. Put your mouth on me.”

His fingers are quick on the buttons on my dress before his head dips and his mouth engulfs my nipple over my bra. I jolt at the sensation and make a tiny noise, but he’s already freeing my breast from the cup. Perched lewdly above the lace, he takes the hardened bud between his lips.

I grip the headrest, arching into him at the heavenly pull, my breathing turning ragged as he licks and sucks. I nearly jump from my skin as he grips my thigh, but not for long.

“Yes,” I whisper desperately. “Touch me.”

His gaze flicks up, his eyes so dark over my wet, glistening nipple. I find I need to close my eyes against the sight. “Look at me,” he demands. So I do. “Not here. When I get you under me, I’m gonna want to savor you.”

Heat blooms in my core. I drop my head back, my hair almost touching my waist as his mouth returns to its magic.

“I fuckin’ love your sounds.”

“I want you.” I’ve never been so bold as our mouths meet messily, the windows fogging with our hot breath and my fingers shaking as I try to undo the buttons of his shirt. “I want to see you.” *Feel you*. Slide my body over his until I smell like him.

He growls as I press my mouth to his collarbone. Curses as my teeth graze the muscles between his shoulder and neck. I skim my hands over his pectorals as I roll my hips over him, feeling the cool air where my panties grow wet.

“Fuck, Clara. You’re so beautiful.” His direction, his praise, sends sparks through my veins. “I can’t wait to be inside you, to feel you riding my cock.”

Troy takes my hips, molding my body to his. My soft to his hard, the ride long and luxurious in the tight confines of my car.

“Your sweet little moans drive me fuckin’ wild.”

Molten waves of pleasure build and build as I rock over him. As he watches. As he whispers such words of praise.

“That’s it, Clara. You come for me, then I’m gonna set you in the back seat and lick you clean.”

I curse and throw back my head, utterly delirious, when his hand closes around the column of my neck. Starlight bursts through my entire being as he begins to squeeze . . .

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Chapter 7
CLARA

Cool air swims around my feet as my legs dangle over the edge of the bed. Under my right hand, my heart hammers frantically, though I refuse to acknowledge the residual pulsing between my legs. Because I dreamed of the past. Of kissing Troy in the front seat of my car.

And the rest.

I don't often allow myself to think back on those days, because it's dangerous to dwell. There's no joy in remembering when the memories all lead back to pain. But I'm not to blame in this instance, especially as the dream wasn't the same as the reality.

I mean, I got to climax, sure. Back then in my car, and in my dream. Which I suppose means I climaxed for real. *I hope I was quiet about it, because these walls are paper thin.* But I doubt Troy of age twenty-two would've fantasized about wrapping his hands around my neck. Troy of thirty-one, though? Well, he'd probably be into that. Without the sexual aspect.

Memory lane must be where all the freaks hang out.

I've never once before had a deviant dream, either with or without him staring. Why the hell did he have to go and hug me? If he kept his hands to himself, I wouldn't have been in his arms, and then I wouldn't have found myself kissing him.

I drop my head with a curse.

I. Kissed. Him.

Ikissedhim!

Argh!

Mortification boils and brims inside me as I put my hands to my face.

I spent years trying to forget how good it felt to be pressed close to him when it all came roaring back. I just melted into his embrace, oblivious to reality. He wasn't changing his mind. In his arms there was no forgiveness. Only hell.

But he felt so solid and warm, and just for a moment, I felt like a battery put on charge. I've been so tired, so sick of struggling and being

alone. But I did this—I allowed myself to be fooled.

"*I really hope I don't see you again.*"

And there was my hell.

I blow out a shaky breath as I fight the telltale prickle behind my eyes. My head hurts worse now. I feel all achy, like I'm coming down with something, but it's just an emotional comedown.

"Not today," I whisper, rubbing my thighs. Screwing my eyes tight, I force out those lingering tears, then scrub at their treachery.

I shouldn't feel like this over a man who makes money from other people's misery. Table it for later? It's just another buy-now-pay-later financial trap, the kind that encourages impulse buys and unnecessary overspending.

I barely knew there was such a thing until I experienced the worry of making rent.

God, I need to move on with this day, with my life, but all I can see is the look on his face as he bundled me into the Mercedes. I wasn't a problem he cared to solve, and he wasn't truly interested in the reason I was there. He just wanted me out of the way.

Out of sight, out of mind. Worse, I can't even blame him.

As the car pulled away from the building, I kept my chin high and my eyes forward. I couldn't risk a backward glance, though I ached to know if he was still watching.

So stupid. It would only have been to make sure I wasn't coming back.

I waited until the next block before asking the driver to pull over. I told him I was meeting my friend for a drink. With a bright smile, I pulled the belt of my coat tighter and practically skipped down a side street like there was even a chance Troy might ask him to report back. But I wasn't taking chances, and I wasn't leaving a trail as I caught the next A train to Inwood. While I'm sure the circumstances of my life aren't of interest to him, there was no reason to give him ammunition to gloat. Or worse, make him pity me.

I turned the whole experience over and over on the way home. Thinking and overthinking. Coming up with all kinds of excellent retorts, well after the fact. I was so caught up with it all, I almost missed my stop.

Stop. That's what I need to do.

Put one foot in front of the other, get on with my day, and consign last night to the past. Along with the rest of my Troy memories.

My room is small and overcrowded, thanks to the remains of my former life stacked in plastic boxes. Things that might come in handy. Things I haven't yet managed to sell. Otherwise, there's just a narrow bed, a chair I found on the curb, and a cheap IKEA desk that looks like it might collapse at any minute. There's also a set of drawers the last occupant left but no closet. Instead, a stack of hangers dangles from a hook on the back of the door.

There's no decoration. No pictures or artwork. Unless you count the crack that runs over two walls. It is sort of eye catching. There isn't even carpet, just cheap linoleum, which I didn't know was a thing before I moved in.

I pick up my uniform from where I dropped it last night before shoving the shirt and panties into my laundry bag. I throw the black pants to my bed. They'll do for today's shift.

Beyond my door, I hear movement, and my spirits sink a little more. I usually make a point of getting up early to get into the bathroom before my roommates. Sharing a bathroom has been, well, a challenge. But there goes that plan for today, along with the hot water, I guess, as the bathroom door slams shut.

I grab my phone from the desk and check the time, then reply with a heart to Chelsea's final text from last night.

Glad ur ok. Was legit worried abt u

It's good of her to make sure I'm okay. That I got home. Which is more than I can say for Shanti. I could've been murdered by the CEO last night, but that would've been okay, apparently. Who knows if I'll still have a job given I never went back to work after my so-called break.

Sometimes my life feels like a series of burned bridges.

All good. Talk soon.

I hit "Send." I imagine I'll have to give her some version of the events next time I see her. *So it's like this, Chelsea. The guy was my ex. The first and only man I ever loved. He didn't used to look at me like I was trash, despite being a megahot car-crash mess back then.*

Bad choice of metaphor, but whatever. I hurt him, and though I like to think I'm a better person these days, braver, at least, it doesn't matter. I'm still the villain, and there's no coming back from that.

With a heavy sigh, I pull a sweatshirt on over the leggings I wore to bed and shuffle into an apartment that smells like toast, coffee, and used running shoes.

In the kitchen, Rachel stands angled away from me. She has a slice of toast in one hand and her phone in the other. Callum ("*Just call me Cal*") doesn't look up from his laptop from where he's sitting at the table next to the living room window. *No change there*, I think to myself. He hasn't looked once at me since I told him I wasn't interested in hooking up. At least, that's what he was getting at.

"Morning," I say as I reach up to pull open my cabinet. There's nothing in the fridge that belongs to me because it's been a day-to-day kind of week for shopping. Or to put it another way, a financial stretch.

"Morning." Rachel barely glances up. Dressed top-to-toe in knockoff Lululemon, she looks every inch the fitness influencer she aspires to be.

There's also Casey, who is currently using up all the hot water in the bathroom. I think her official story is that she's studying nursing, though I have a sneaking suspicion she's really a cam girl. I don't judge. It's not like I didn't consider it myself, however briefly.

"You good?" Rachel asks, without really wanting to know.

"Yes. You?" comes my standard response and the extent of our relationship after four months. Four months in a third-floor walk-up with mismatched furniture, living with people I barely know in the wilds of Inwood. One roommate who is no longer speaking to me. One who barely speaks to me at all. One I barely see.

I pull out the last cereal bar from the box and grab my cup from the drainer. World's Okay-est Dad, it reads. Another remnant from a previous tenant. As I fill it with coffee from the ancient machine, I find myself wondering what a suitable slogan for my own dad would be.

World's Most Narcissistic Dad? Not that I'm qualified to diagnose his narcissism, but my therapist once suggested as much.

I came across an acrostic poem once that seemed to spell out my experiences to a tee.

N never admits they're wrong in any way

A their arrogance and superior attitudes
R is for raging when challenged
C their complete lack of boundaries
I instills doubts in their victims
S their sense of self-importance
S self-superiority
I in denial they're ever at fault
S for the slander they inflict
T their total lack of empathy

Maybe I can get a sampler of this made instead. Send it to him for Father's Day.

I haven't seen my dad in quite a while, which suits me perfectly. In a lot of ways, it's like being a kid again, left to my own devices and being ignored. I demonstrated a lot of attention-seeking behaviors for a while, though I eventually worked out that the pain wasn't worth the effort.

I make my way to the table and stare at Cal until he begrudgingly moves his feet from the other chair. I've been avoiding the couch after finding one of his friends watching porn and jerking off there late one night. The same friend I'd overheard commenting that my tits were big enough to each have their own boyfriend.

But it's not as though I had a lot of choices, accommodation wise, after I'd made some not-so-smart decisions in the initial aftermath of being cut off. It happened so suddenly. My dad removed access to my bank account, canceled my credit card, then my apartment lease. At least he kept up my medical insurance. For a while.

All this because I defied him, betrayed him, so the story goes. Though my version is a little different. I acted on the courage of my convictions for the first time in my life.

Unfortunately, principles don't pay bills.

After my first week in a hotel—paid for by a friend's credit card in lieu of a vacation to Paris I'd sprung for the year before—I was still certain Dad would come around when he cooled off. That he'd call me to his office and give me a lecture, and that would be that. But it didn't happen. And I wasn't going crawling back.

I had a little money put aside, so I rented a cute loft in SoHo. Nothing outrageously expensive, I thought. Blind optimism told me I'd get by. That

someone would give me a job—I have an Ivy League education and work experience! But every way I turned, no one seemed willing to help.

"*Go back to your dad,*" my so-called friends said. "*Tell him you're sorry.*"

But I couldn't. Because I wasn't. And I'm not.

I applied for jobs. Made calls. Sent out my résumé. Stalked coffee shops near galleries and offices and had stuck-up conversations with people I barely knew. And it seemed to be paying off as I got interviews—interviews that went well. But afterward, I couldn't get them to take my calls.

My dad's doing, I swear. I'm sure he thought imposing his will would make me panic. And it did. But when he counted on it making me fall quickly back in line, he didn't foresee I reached the limit. I couldn't hurt anyone else. He pushed too far, and when he did so, I finally found my backbone.

I told myself I'd wait it out, however I could and no matter what it took. Two years more, and I'd be thirty and in control of the trust fund from my grandmother. I'd come of age, reclaim my life, and be out from under his control.

I still have ten more months left.

I tamp down the threatening nausea by taking a bite of protein cardboard, forcing it down my throat with a swig of terrible coffee as my eyes slide to Cal. There is a way to speed by those ten months. A shortcut. But . . . I just don't think I could do it to myself. Besides, I'm not sure I could trust Cal as far as I could throw him.

My phone buzzes, and I jump. *Idiot,* I tell myself as I swipe my sweatshirt over the scuffed melamine. I'm not chastising myself because of a little coffee. It's more how my heart tripped with hope. *I mean, he doesn't even have my number. And even if he did, he wouldn't use it.*

Need ya to come in earlier reads the text from Irene, the owner of O'Rourke's, the neighborhood bar where I work three shifts a week. There's no please or thank-you in the text, no might-you-be-available. Not that I'd expect any of that from Irene. But more hours are always a good thing, especially on Saturday night, when the tips are better.

No problem. Let me know what time.

I take another bite of the bar and stare at Callum.

I really am desperate. But not that desperate.

My phone chimes again, this time with just a number:

6

A shift at 6:00 p.m. for the other version of me. Yesterday I was Sunny the waitress, and tonight, I'm Gretchen the kick-ass bartender. And neither of them is me.

Pushing back my chair, I make to top up my coffee. Despite my best efforts, I can't stop my mind drifting back to last night. I truly can't blame Troy for not believing me. My life is almost unbelievable. He had every right to be suspicious, seeing me there, denying the tray in my hand, insisting it was some kind of attention-seeking performance art.

I can't blame him, but that doesn't mean it didn't hurt, hence my own reactions. And my responses . . . I wasn't attempting to insult his intelligence, but what use would there have been in the truth for either of us? I doubt I could've said it without crying, and he certainly wouldn't have heard it without him making more accusations about my lying.

I could've said that I'm broke? That I've been disowned. That I can no longer afford the medication that helps me function like a normal person.

Would he have laughed?

No health care is a whole other level of poverty. But I guess the one bright side is I won't need to sleep anymore.

"What the fuck?"

My attention jerks across the room to where Rachel stands, a sheet of paper in hand.

"Have you seen this?" she demands. "I just found it pinned to the front door."

I'm up from my chair in an instant, taking it from her. I scan the text, and the news rattles through to the very marrow of my bones.

I'm holding an eviction notice.

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Chapter 8
TROY

I take a car, and I never take a car—but it's been some time since I rode the A train, and I'd like to keep it that way.

I still can't get my head around that she lives in Inwood. How does a Park Avenue princess wind up there? She should've been okay. She had friends, money, surely. An education. Transferable skills. She should've had an apartment of her own. An income from investments.

She shouldn't be living in a shit end of town with strangers.

Fuck it, I am not going to feel sorry for her.

"How long before the traffic thins out?" Up ahead, all I can see are taillights.

The driver of the Merc, kept on staff, murmurs an apology, then something about an accident on the Greenway. *The A might've been a better choice,* I think, sliding back my sleeve to check my watch. The Audemars Piguet is probably a little over the top, but in my defense, I was already out looking for ways to track Clara down.

Last night's driver was a bust—said he dropped her off not three minutes after pulling away from the building. Then he mentioned something about her lack of tip. I guess she had him fooled too.

Next, I went to the caterers. I called first, but no one gives addresses out over the phone. So I went to Brooklyn Heights to pay them a visit. But no amount of reassurance, backstory, or winning smiles would get them to give it out in person either. They wouldn't even confirm she worked there.

But a happy coincidence: There were a couple of women I recognized in the parking lot as I left. The blonde, Chelsea, let slip that Clara tends bar Saturday night. *What the fuck?* But then she refused to say anything more before slipping inside the building. Her supervisor, Shanti, was a little more forthcoming, maybe remembering the not-insignificant tip I handed over at the end of the night.

"What do you want her for?" she asked, canting her head.

"It's like I said last night, we know each other from way back," I replied, going for contrite. "We dated a long time ago, and seeing her just

caught me off guard." All true so far. "We parted on . . . not-so-great terms and I was maybe a little harsh on her last night. She didn't go back to work afterward."

"I noticed."

"I want to apologize. To make sure she's okay."

She gave a considering twist of her lips, then took a quick photo of my number plate. "No funny business," she said, waving her phone under my nose. "Or this goes straight to the cops."

"You don't have to worry about that."

"She works at a place called O'Rourke's, I think she said. Inwood, some place."

As it turns out, O'Rourke's is the neighborhood dive bar and the kind of place where a less-than-salubrious setting is made up for by the price of the beer. And it's standing room only on Saturday night.

The soles of my shoes stick to the floor as I make my way through the crowd. I don't head for the bar right away, instead finding a place to stand and observe. I know exactly what I want to say—what I have to offer Clara—but something in me wants to watch her a little first.

Because that's not as creepy as all hell.

It was hard to get my head around seeing her yesterday, and it's no easier tonight. She looks the same and yet totally different as she smiles at some random guy. Then, pushing to her tiptoes, she tweaks his ear. Something stirs inside me. It feels hard and unwelcome. It's not fucking jealousy? I push the thought away. But there's no disputing she works here.

Ambushing her in front of dozens of strangers doesn't feel right. Or sane, given the way her blue-collar clientele is eating out of her hand. Maybe she'll get a break, and I'll talk to her then. Somewhere private because this is not the kind of conversation for other ears.

What I have to say, to offer, is wild, and maybe I'm crazy for even thinking of involving myself with her again. But there's not a lot I won't do in the name of success.

I roll my tense shoulders. It's not that I'm not expecting her to tell me to fuck right off with my offer. It's got to be better than serving beer for a living. But maybe I was a prick to her last night, kissing her, then saying I hoped I'd never see her again. I don't feel bad about it. *Not bad exactly.* Not after the shit she put me through. My body sure enjoyed the feel of her. Left in charge, it would probably like to feel a whole lot more of her.

But fuck that for a plan. No way I'm getting entangled in Clara's sticky web. *Been there, done that. Scorched the fucking T-shirt.* Whatever attraction seeing her has dragged up, it's nothing but plain old horniness. And chemicals, goddamn it.

But who knows? Maybe this plan could be fun. Maybe this is where I get a little payback for all she's done. I was so angry last night. Angry at myself for my reactions and suspicious of Clara's motives. But now? All I can think is maybe everything does happen for a reason.

Music blares, and people drink, shout, and gesticulate while Clara works the bar like a pro. If I'd seen her like this yesterday, maybe I wouldn't have questioned her so hard. She pulls beer and pours liquor like an expert, prepping multiple orders at the same time all while carrying on a conversation with someone else. She yells orders, takes cash, reaches for glasses without really looking, and serves shit to the regulars without missing a beat.

"You want me to cut you off?" Hands on hips, I don't think I've seen her look quite so fierce.

Black pants like last night and a polo shirt embroidered with the bar's logo do nothing to detract from her figure. She's still all killer curves. I remember some guy, some idiot named Chip or Chad, dressed head to toe in that preppy polo-shirt-chinos combo, once remarked that Clara looked like someone drew her. It wasn't the compliment it might've seemed, because the fucker said she looked like a hentai girl. Asshole got a bloody nose for his observation.

"I paid yesterday!"

The complaint pulls me back to a man sitting at the bar. I make a preemptive motion as he throws up his hand. Until I notice Clara's unmoving stance. No need to interrupt. She's got this.

"For the night before," she retorts, unimpressed. "You want Irene to nail me to the sign outside for your problem?"

"Fine." His eye roll is a whole-body action as he pulls out his wallet and hands her his bank card. "Good thing I love you, Gretch."

Now, what the hell kind of name is Gretch?

"A good thing or unfortunate?"

"I ask myself that every night. Before I forget, Fran and the kids sent you these." He pulls out a bag of gummy bears from his pocket.

"Ah, sweet!" She snatches them up. "Tell them I said thanks."

“Get yourself a drink while you’re at it,” he mutters, still disgruntled.

“You’re a doll.” She gives a two-finger salute like she was meant for this.

So maybe I’m wrong *and* I’m right, because this might be her job, but it’s also a performance. She tends bar just fine, but the armor, the tough exterior, that’s not her.

A stool frees up at the end of the bar, so I make my way over to it. My stomach is a hard knot as my fingers drum the bar top as I wait for my turn. She looks up. Tenses. Swallows visibly. Then squares her shoulders and lifts her chin. Throwing a towel over her shoulder, she moseys over.

“And here I thought you never wanted to see me again.”

Now that was performative and not the Clara I know. *I used to know.*

“I’ll take a Peroni.”

“And I’ll take a show of manners.”

“Please.” I bite back my amusement. Judging by the regulars’ looks, there might be a universal attraction in taking shit from Gretch.

With the flick of one brow, she reaches for a glass, ignoring the fridge. She pours me a draft.

My mouth twitches as she sets it down. “Recommendation from the bartender?”

“That would be for you to drink somewhere else lest you get a nasty case of indigestion.”

The guy on the stool next to me gives a snort and a muttered taunt of “Oh, shit” under his breath.

“Shut it, Phil,” she snaps without even looking his way. “That’ll be eight dollars.”

“Put it on my tab.”

“You don’t have a tab.”

“I’d like to start one.”

She practically snatches the black AMEX out of my hand. It’s not like I expected her to be impressed. A minute later, she flips it back my way without even a glance.

Phil, a heavyset fortysomething, leans in as she turns. “Lest,” he says, his tone the kind that speaks of fascination. “Our Gretch, she has a way with words.”

“That right?”

“A way with words *and* a backstory.”

“And that’s her name?” *Fucking Gretch?*

He taps his index finger twice against his nose before turning back to his beer. And that’s the limit of my conversation for the rest of the night. When my glass is empty, someone else fills it as Clara keeps to the other end of the bar. I guess she thinks it’s no more than I deserve after my parting shot.

I can’t say Sunny makes much sense to me, not in the past or now, but Gretch I watch. She’s a take-no-prisoners kind of gal. But finally, the crowd begins to thin. Phil staggers off with a backward wave, and the other bartender goes for her break. It’s not exactly privacy, but I’ll take it.

“How long have you worked here?” I catch her as she clears glasses near where I sit.

“I don’t share my life with customers.”

“Smart.” I give a pause. “Aren’t you curious why I’m here, Clara?”

“It’s Gretchen,” she grates out, her cheeks turning an angry pink. “Long story,” she adds quite suddenly. “Don’t ask. And no, I’m not interested.”

“Liar,” I say in good humor.

“So you said yesterday.”

“Yeah, about that. I’m sorry.” While I can admit to myself I acted like a prick, I’m not really sorry. But an apology can be a bridge.

“Which part?” There’s a hardness to her tone that’s not going to give.

“For the way I behaved. For saying I didn’t want to see you again.”

“You said ever.” Her dark eyes flick angrily over me. Linger briefly on my lips. “Yet here you are.”

“Here I am.” I sit straighter and grip the back of Phil’s recently vacated stool, almost inviting her to take a better look.

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes. “Say whatever it is you need to say. Then you can leave.”

“Maybe I’m just curious.”

“So this is a little poverty tourism?”

I give a huff of a laugh. “Been there. Done that. And have no interest in going back.”

Her expression softens. “If I could undo—”

I hold up my hand. “I’m not here to rehash the past.” What happened between us is a topic I have no interest in touching. I am uninterested in her apologies.

“So talk,” she says quietly.

“My company stock was up twelve percent today.”

“Congratulations.” She swipes up a cloth and begins to wipe down the bar top.

“Don’t you want to know why?”

“I’m not looking for stock tips,” she says without looking up.

“Gretch, I’m dyin’ of thirst over here!”

At the shout, she turns away. Pours a beer, grabs a highball glass, and adds ice, rum, and Coke. There’s an economy in her motion, a grace. Something fluid and concise. Though I get no joy in watching her work, because it tells me she’s been doing this for a while. Doing it tough. And I remember what that feels like.

“You should have investments,” I say as she returns. I’m strangely relieved that she does. That she chooses to. *Curiosity, see?*

“I’ll let you know when I have some spare cash.”

“You should have it already.”

She wets her lips, rubs them together. “Maybe I did.” She gives a quick shrug. “So your stock. Table, right?” This she adds a little quieter, glancing around as though to make sure no one overheard.

Worried for my safety? I’m not at the level where I need to travel with security. Yet.

Folding my arms, I lean closer, and she steps in too. “Yeah. And like you said, we went public last week. Twenty-two billion,” I add, tempering my inevitable smile. It still feels like a dream, and I don’t know why, because it’s been years of obsession and hard fucking work.

“That’s amazing, Troy.” Her big blue eyes are so earnest, the rim of indigo so distinct. “I mean it, I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks, but the lift in the share price followed a photo.”

Her brows take a lower perch. “What kind . . . a photo?”

“One of you. And me. It did the rounds on social media.”

“An old one? Why would—”

That’s when I see the penny drop, but I’m already pulling out my phone. She takes it from my hand, but before she can get a good look, a loud voice cuts in from the other end of the bar.

“Aw, fuck! Gretch does have a type, and it’s pretty boys. Look—she’s givin’ him her number.”

“What’s the matter, Pete?” she asks without looking up. “You a little hormonal tonight? A little testy?”

His friends heckle, and Pete shrinks into himself, picking up his beer as though he could hide in it.

“My friend here is a surgeon,” she adds. “Maybe if you ask him nicely, he’ll graft you a better personality. Idiot,” she mutters under her breath. “This could be anyone.” Her gaze slices upward. “I know it has our names, but . . .” With a shrug, she hands the phone back.

“But it was us. And then there’s this.” I pass it back again, open to the platform Hannah prefers not to name, and the thread full of shit from financial influencers and so-called stock market gurus.

“Today’s social media posts are tomorrow’s metaphorical kitty litter,” she says, still unimpressed.

“How about an article in *Bloomberg*?”

“Stick it on a blimp, float it over Manhattan—Clara loves Troy. It doesn’t mean that it’s true.” *Clara loves Troy, not the other way around.*

“It meant something to the share price.”

“And it sometimes says Broadway on the buses, but they’re not all headed that way.”

“That’s true, though I kind of like the idea of a blimp. For advertising, I mean.” I join Pete and hide behind my beer.

“It doesn’t mean a thing,” she insists, slicing a blade of her hair behind her ear.

“But it could.” I don’t look at her as I set my glass down. “What time do you get off?”

One elegant and highly defined brow lifts. “Why do you want to know?”

“I have a proposition I’d like you to hear.”

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Chapter 9
CLARA

“Drink? Actually, I only have terrible coffee or water.”

What the hell was I thinking, bringing him here? Oh, I remember. He turned up in O’Rourke’s, looking like he stepped from a *GQ* shoot, took a seat at the bar, and said in that sexy voice of his, “*What time do you get off?*” While there were absolutely no sexual undertones, my ridiculous brain teleported me there anyway.

“Thanks, but I’m good,” he says, sliding off his jacket.

So good. My mind could take this many, many places. *If I had less sense.*

“Let me take that.” I reach for his jacket. I may live life in a dump, and I might likely be forced to move into an even bigger dump, but I still have manners. I hang it over the back of a stool, resolutely ignoring how the softness of his T-shirt highlights the shape of him.

“*I have a proposition for you.*”

I do not need to mentally fan myself as I drop my laundry bag on the countertop—a fun Saturday afternoon activity—and shrug out of my own jacket. The bag of gummy bears falls out of my pocket.

Be calm, I tell myself as I swipe it up. *Just take a moment. Troy’s only here because he said “somewhere private,” and you very sensibly thought sitting alone in a darkened park with him was not the best idea.* Mostly because I remember what happened between us in dark spaces.

At least my roommates are all out this evening. Must be nice to have a social life.

I push out a quiet breath and turn to face him, and my chest tightens as I catch him examining the general malaise of the place. The sparse furnishing, the mugs and candy wrappers and other crap my dreamy housemates have left lying around.

Clara Forbes does, indeed, live in poverty—are you not entertained?

Maybe that’s the real reason I brought him here. Not because he might react like poverty is something you catch—not for his pity either—but

maybe for vindication. To prove I have nothing to hide and that I haven't the time nor the inclination for playing games.

Poverty games. Can't imagine that book, game, or movie would gather much traction.

"It's not really what you might call prime real estate," I say, shoving my hand into the back pocket of my utilitarian pants. I thought I'd gotten used to the stains and the god-awful orange carpet, but the place seems crappier than ever.

"I've seen worse."

"Not for a while, I'll bet." Look at us. How the tables have turned.

"What's with the gummy bears?"

The packet is still in my hand. I shove them on the counter behind me. "I've babysat for his kids. They know I like gummy bears."

A frown ripples across his face.

"A bag of gummy bears is the best kind of company. Once I bite their head off, they stop talking." *Oh, God, shut up before you find yourself telling him a voyage into candy land is at the top of your reward system pyramid. That a sugar hit is the nearest thing you get to an orgasm these days.*

"Right." He makes a motion, not quite a shrug, as he begins to lower himself to the couch.

"No!" Panic surges, though it's quickly replaced by discomfort. "Not there. And please don't make me explain." Or I might spontaneously combust.

"Okay."

Spinning away, I upend my laundry bag and begin to jerkily fold the contents. I bet he leaves—I bet he decides I'm a bona fide fruitcake. Gosh, my skin is burning. It feels like my soul is trying to claw its way out.

"So what's this proposal?" *Ack.* "Proposition. Whatever."

I'm amazed at how nonchalant I sound. I've gotten good at hiding my emotions and swallowing my reactions over the years, but at work tonight, I had to hold on to myself so tightly in Troy's presence that my shoulders still feel tense. After all the things I've been through, seeing Troy again is the nearest I've felt to falling apart. And now I have a sense of what's coming. And it's not me, obviously. No matter how my slumbering internal world might paint things differently.

I can almost hear my grandmother. *If ifs and buts were candy and nuts . . .*

Troy would still have more sense than to get involved with me.

“Clara.”

I give a tiny sigh. My name always did sound good from his mouth.

“Can we just sit down for a minute?”

“Nearly finished,” I say without turning. We can sit at the table by the window, Troy in my seat and me in Cal’s. But I need a little space to decompress first.

“I am sorry about last night.”

“Me too,” I say just loud enough for him to hear.

“It’s been a manic few weeks, and I guess seeing you, just tapped into all of that stress.”

“I wasn’t exactly Miss Manners myself.” Troy used to bring out the best in me. Maybe this is just another way the tables have turned.

“I’m still trying to get my head around it.”

Oh, friend, me too. How could it make sense to him when I can hardly make sense of it myself? “I get it, but this is not performance art.” My answer sounds more like a gibe as I lift my hand to indicate my surroundings.

“You should’ve had other options. Other routes,” he says, appearing at my side. Tall, solemn, and kind of delicious. I mean, annoying.

I angle my attention sharply his way. “You think I chose to live like this?”

“Shit, nobody does, Clara. Or should I say Sunny? Maybe Gretchen?” The faintest smile catches his lips.

“Don’t.” I pluck up a pink sock and fold it inside a yellow one.

“Gotta admit, it makes me curious.”

“Clara doesn’t fit in around here.”

He falls quiet for a beat, then presses his palm to the cheap laminate. “I am sorry I jumped to conclusions, but I guess this wouldn’t be your first rebellion.”

I pause in the action of folding a T-shirt to send him an uncomplimentary look.

“Come on,” he coaxes. “I didn’t even realize emo was your thing until you went to some fancy ball in combat boots. And what was it again? A tutu?”

“I was sixteen,” I say, jerkily adding my T-shirt to the pile. I swipe up two more random-colored socks, refusing to look at him. I get he’s trying to make light of things, but there’s a side to my adolescence no one else saw. “That’s just a piece of shit family lore. You weren’t even around then.” I remember seeing him from time to time, watching him while my heart went pitter-pat. He was older and kind of aloof. And so far out of my league.

“I still heard about it. Along with the underage drinking at the country club.”

“I was impulsive. Seeking attention—validation.” I was lost. “And I was unmedicated.” I cringe at the slip, not that it stops him in his stride.

“What about the time you lost your car? Story is you were angling for a new one.”

“Fine, I was that spoiled little rich girl, but as you can see, those days are long gone.” I give an angry flourish before I realize what I have in my hand is a pair of pink panties.

What’s the point of arguing? I think, shoving them back into the unruly pile. It was just what my father wanted people to believe. It was better than the truth, which was that I just wanted him to notice me.

“Then there was the time you took an unsuitable boy to a parent’s anniversary party.” Troy can’t keep the bite from his words this time.

“That was a mistake,” I say, the fight and my heart seeping out of me.

“Something we can agree on.”

“I’m not living in some shitty share house as a crusade against my father.” It’s more like the other way around. “He cut me off.” I hold my hand like a stop sign, warding off Troy’s response. “And maybe you think I deserve it, but I am *not* that girl anymore.” Maybe I never really was. All I seemed to do was pretend back then.

“I guess that’s what makes it hard because you sure look like the same girl.” Those burnt-sugar eyes wander down my body. I shiver because the attention feels like hot, caressing fingertips. I also prickle outwardly, angry with myself that he still has this effect.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I snap, folding my arms across my chest. I unfold them again just as quick as I remember that the action just serves to make my boobs look bigger. *According to a so-called friend’s mean-girl comment an age ago.* I’m not only angry with myself—I’m also angry with him for not seeing through the bullshit. But, hey, what’s one more injustice

in a life that already feels far from fair? “Just because we kissed last night doesn’t give you the right—”

“You mean, when you kissed me.” His tone, it’s so even. So reasonable. So annoying.

Humiliation flares inside, though I fight it with a fake laugh. “Boy! Tell me you have a low opinion of me without actually saying so.” He always did have a way to strip me, to expose the girl I’ve long tried to hide. The girl who yearned to be seen but was afraid she’d be found lacking. “But when did you get such a high one of yourself?”

“Didn’t you hear? I’m the man these days.”

“I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but I find you wholly resistible.” I look him up, then down as though weighing him for worth and finding myself shortchanged.

“That’s good. I’d hate for you to think I’m here for a trip down memory lane.”

“Oh my God!” I swing left, then right, my fingers clenching and opening as I try to keep a lid on my emotions. I have strategies and meds—when I can afford to refill my script—these days to keep me from feeling so explosive as I swipe up a fork from the drainer. “I would rather set fire to my face and try to put it out with this than be anywhere near you again.”

He doesn’t flinch as I hold it between us like a weapon, trembling from anger and adrenaline. In fact, he leans back against the counter. Sort of *have at it*. Oh, what I wouldn’t give to jab him—just enough to make him squeal. But he’d just prod me right back, I know it.

Maybe I could up the ante and grab a knife.

I drop the fork at the shocking thought.

“Got that out of your system?” To my mortification, he’s staring at me like I’m a toddler who just got over kicking and screaming on the floor of aisle five.

“Fuck you.”

“Look, this is hard for me too. But I was trying to pay you a compliment. Trying to say you look like you’ve barely changed.”

“You must be very out of practice.” But as the heat of the situation dies, it leaves behind that scratchy sense of discomfort. Shame based, naturally.

He rakes a hand through his hair, then grabs the edge of the countertop behind him. “I get it, you’re not interested. The kiss was a mistake.”

“Exactly,” I retort. “There’s nothing between us but history.” My eyes flit from the way his biceps strain under the cotton of his T-shirt. I also don’t notice the veins popping in his forearms. Much. *Nothing but history and chemistry.*

“I’d say that’s for the best, given what I’m about to suggest.”

“Finally, you’re getting to it.”

“Yeah, my proposition. One I hope you’ll find more appealing than waiting tables.”

My expression: *I doubt it.*

“I want you to come work for me.”

“What?” And why do I feel oddly disappointed?

“I showed you the posts.” Another flex as his gaze dips briefly to his Ferragamo kicks. “The lift in Table’s stock is because the market is under the impression we’re together.”

“But we’re not.”

“I know that. And you know that. But right now, that narrative is worth two-point-six billion dollars.”

“That’s insane.”

“You’re telling me.”

“No, what’s insane is that this has nothing to do with me. It’s some perceived link to my dad.”

“True. Traders have assumed your father’s endorsement. The signal is that he’s backing us, that he’s about to invest.”

Rothschild, Rockefeller, Morgan, Forbes. Titans, one and all.

“But there’s no truth to it. It’s just a . . .” I wave my hand in the air as though I might pluck the right term from it. “A bubble.” Pretty sure that’s what it’s called when a stock shoots up in price for no apparent reason. “And a bubble inevitably pops.”

“Bursts.” His lips twitch, though I’ll credit him as trying not to show his amusement. “But this isn’t about the share price. Or the money.”

“That’s the kind of thing only a rich person would say.” The look he slides me is chastening. A reminder that I’m not the only one of us who knows this. “If it’s not money, then what?”

“Our regulatory risk has dropped. You’ve gotta know that’s huge.”

I don’t know a lot about the stock market, but I do know that the fintech industry is often labeled as the tech Wild West. It’s for that reason it’s often subject to more scrutiny than other ventures.

“But that’s also only temporary.” When the bubble bursts, it all bursts.

“What if it’s not—what if it holds? We draw a different kind of interest, is what. The Forbes family office sees us as a good play, and suddenly, we have the big players and legacy banks sniffing around, wanting a piece of the pie.”

“So it is about the money,” I say flatly.

“It’s not only about the money.”

“But my father isn’t going to invest. I don’t think he knows who you are.”

“He’ll know.” His expression isn’t quite a grimace yet not quite a smile. “And I bet he still doesn’t like me.”

“All the more reason to leave it.”

“Come work for me,” he says again, and I remember what this conversation is supposed to be about. “Let me find you a spot in marketing or PR.” I’m surprised by how hurt I feel by his offer. I think it must show on my face. “Whatever you want. Whatever you think might suit your skill set best.”

“Crumbs from the table? I think I’d rather spend my days wiping them down.”

“You can’t be serious, Clara.”

Maybe. Or maybe I’m just petty. “I can’t work out if you want to give me a job to help me, help you, or hurt my dad.”

“First two. Wrong order. If the third is a by-product, I won’t be mad.”

“And what happens when he says he’s not investing?”

“He’s unlikely to announce that to the world. But it doesn’t matter if he does. It’s not what anyone says they are or aren’t doing. What’s important is how things look to the market.”

“Giving me a job isn’t going to mean anything to the market.”

“It’ll mean something when we’re seen together.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Seen together romantically. I want to give the impression that we’re dating.”

“You want to date me?” My eyes almost fall out of my head as a quiver of something I don’t dare identify shimmers though my insides. “And pay me for it?”

“I want to date you for the optics. The money you’ll earn from a legitimate job within Table.”

But I’m already shaking my head even as my mind swims with the benefits. A salary and health care. I wouldn’t need to live like this anymore. No more waiting tables and scraping to get by.

“It’s a win-win, Clara.”

“Crazy, more like.” But tempting.

“No, it’s business.”

“No, no, it’s not.” My denial is stronger this time, maybe because my fingers are tingling so badly with the desire to grab this lifeline.

“We’re talking a few dinners and some strategically posed exits.”

I can already see it. His arm around me. His palm pressed to my lower back. His lips at my temple. Words whispered in my ear. The images are scary. Seductive. And wildly tempting. Which is why, “You can’t hire me to be your girlfriend.”

“Not girlfriend. Narrative.”

“You think that sounds any better?” I bluster, suddenly stung. I mean, why the hell would he want to date me again? He can’t even stand to be around me.

But if he can, how about . . .

I inhale a tiny breath, almost scared by the thought.

“Just think, no more living like this.”

I nearly laugh, because this place might seem like the height of luxury in a few weeks, given how rents have skyrocketed.

“No more shitty jobs,” he continues. “No more just getting by. You could start again. Make contacts. Even build a career, if you like.”

“I don’t need your charity.” And I can’t stare at his face across a dinner table or let myself get used to his arm around my waist.

But the alternative calls for more pretense and closer confines, my mind whispers. But the terms would be mine, and the outcome would be infinitely safer.

“It’s not charity,” he insists. I snap out of my own head as he gives his a decisive shake. “I’m talking about a mutually beneficial transaction.”

Why does that sound like kinky orgasm speak? I pivot and make for the sink, not because I’m thirsty but because I need a moment to process the scenarios running through my head.

“I’ll throw in some equity,” he says, hot on my heels.

I flick on the faucet and fill up a glass, sipping slowly as I gather my thoughts. He’s desperate, but my counteroffer is what Chelsea would call

delulu. Except, she was the one who said Troy looked like a retirement plan.

There's no way he'll say yes.

Is there?

"Stop worrying about your dad."

I almost smile. "It's very hard not to when he's hell-bent on ruining my life."

"Stop letting him. He's not gonna announce to the world that he's cut you off, that he's forced you to live like this." He gives an angry sweep of his arm. "Come work for me. Claim your life back."

A job would be good, especially as I've likely been canned by the catering crew. It would solve my housing problems. And help Troy and his company. But then what? It's only a matter of time before my father throws something else in my path. *Something much worse, I fear.*

My life.

My freedom.

My father's rule.

My idea could fix it all in one fell swoop.

I put the glass down and angle my attention Troy's way. "You want this pretty badly, don't you?"

His expression takes on a cunning edge. "What do you think?"

"I think you're desperate."

"I wouldn't say that. What I would say is, name your price. Pretty sure I can afford it."

"Ha!" My response sounds mildly hysterical. To think I'd considered this very thing, just for a nanosecond, while staring at Cal this morning.

"You owe me." Troy's tone drops as he changes tack, and my heart does a painful little jitterbug.

"I do." But I also owe it to myself to stay safe, and no one else is going to do that for me. The sink makes a tinny sound as I place the glass in it and turn to face him. "And I am going to claim my life back."

"Good. Great." He smiles one of the many smiles from his vast arsenal, not that it holds.

"But I'm not going to come work for you. I'm also not going to pretend to date you, because I have a better idea."

"Fuck. Let's hear it, then."

I take a centering breath before wiping that cocky smirk off his face. “I’m going to marry you instead.”

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Chapter 10
TROY

“Before you say anything,” Clara begins, “I know I sound like a crazy lady.”

“Pretty on brand for you.”

Her brow pinches as though hurt, and for some reason, it makes me feel like an antagonistic prick. There’s no one else in the world who does this to me, who brings out the worst in me. *Christ, maybe she just brings out the real me.*

She rolls her full lips together, and I don’t think about kissing her. *Much*.

“Give me five minutes to explain,” she says, already on the move. She pauses as I bark out an incredulous laugh, half annoyed, half amused. Yep, she’s still crazy. Which must make me crazy too.

“You think you’re going to convince me this is a good idea in five minutes? Did you somehow forget how things ended between us?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” she says so quietly that my amusement fades.

Temperature check: Clara is still outrageous and outrageously out of touch. And I am still not over what she did.

“Troy.” She reaches out, her fingers warm on my already heated skin. I angle my gaze sharply her way, her blue eyes wide and earnest. *Yeah, right.* “There isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t regret what happened.”

“It didn’t just happen. It wasn’t an accident. It was a choice you made.” A choice that almost destroyed me.

“I’m so sorry. I feel that in more ways than I can adequately say.”

“You feel it, but I lived it.” Her hand falls away as I jerk my thumb to my chest, the place where the hurt still seems stored. “I thought you were different. You said you loved me.” I feel myself sneer. “But you were no better than any of the other entitled assholes in that town. You built me up just to tear me the fuck down.”

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“You didn’t mean what?” I fold my arms across my chest. “You didn’t mean to majorly fuck up, then let me take the fall for it?”

Stricken, she presses her hand to her mouth.

“But the worst of it was what you did to my mom.”

She makes a plea of my name.

“You didn’t just cost her a job, Clara. You made her fucking homeless.”

The worst of seeing her again is the resurgence of all those memories. The way my mother looked at me as her sense of security was ripped away. How wretched I felt, staring at the result of my own selfishness. I risked everything for Clara, yet she looked at me like I meant nothing.

Even after that night, and after scrabbling to find somewhere for my mom to stay, after the jobs I took on to earn money for food and rent at a time I should’ve been neck deep in my studies, I still ached for Clara like she was a phantom fucking limb.

“If there was any way to make it up to you—”

“There is. I just spelled it out for you. You owe me. Owe me fuckin’ big.”

Her throat works with a swallow. “Just . . . give me those five minutes,” she says, half turning. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch her ass in those pants as she cuts across the small space before disappearing right around a corner. I all but collapse against the countertop and contemplate banging my head against it. Marry her? I thought my idea was crazy even *after* I’d talked myself into it. A fixed timeline. A job in the form of compensation she doesn’t fucking deserve. A few dinners followed by some slow exits. Smiles and strategically placed hands. A business deal with boundaries and without rogue thoughts.

Like the touch of her lips or that ass in my hands. I close my eyes and fight the memory of last night, and speaking of asses, I pull my head from mine.

Photographs. That’s what I need. A visual representation of a storyline to drive those business optics to safeguard the continued success of my company at a precarious time in its lifespan.

But a wedding is not a storyline. It’s fucking real.

I mean, I expected, *no*—I came prepared for—her to say no. I fully anticipated the need to up the ante, to offer her a ridiculous salary package. Housing. Share options. Whatever it took. I was ready to argue my case, to

use charm and also threats to get what I want. What I was not prepared for was this whole other level of crazy. *I mean, what was with the fork?* I think, turning it in my hand.

"I'm back." I watch her eyes drop to the piece of flatware. Her mouth gives a pull as though regretting her choice of murder weapon. "Shall we?" She gestures to a small table by the window, and I notice the folded sheet of paper in her hand.

I give a shrug and follow. We each take a seat—there are only two—and Clara takes the kind of breath that might precede jumping off a cliff.

"What's the difference between dating and marriage?"

"As of today, two-point-six billion dollars."

"Risking your share," she says with a contemplative nod. "Well, I'll sign a prenup, obviously. I'll have my trust fund."

"In ten months."

"There's a clause. If I'm married before the age of thirty, I can access my trust earlier."

"That's fucking Gothic."

"If my grandmother had known . . ." I watch as she physically shakes off that train of thought. "This was her way of protecting an impetuous beloved child."

"Spoiled," I correct.

"Yes. Okay. But the danger came from a direction she couldn't have anticipated."

"Danger. Seems a little strong."

"This isn't just about money," she says sharply. "I'm sorry." She begins to bite the inside of her lip. "I didn't mean to snap. It's just, I've been under a lot of stress." I say nothing because this isn't a competition. "My grandmother obviously thought that if I was ready to marry before I turned thirty, I'd be mature enough to handle the money. And if not, then thirty, in her mind, would make me a grown-up. She was trying to look out for me. She loved me."

"I'm sure your dad loves you too."

She gives a tense smile. "You're confusing love with possession. Now, I obviously won't be as rich as you," she says, moving on, "but a prenup will protect you." Her hand taps the paper nervously. "I don't need your money. Just your help."

"Still, marriage seems . . . extreme." More like unhinged.

“Says the man who wants to date me for money.”

“First off, I don’t want to date you. The relationship wouldn’t be real. And I didn’t offer you money. I offered you a job.”

“And if I never turned up for one single hour, would you have made sure I still received my salary?”

“That’s not the point.”

“I think it is. The job is nothing but a smoke screen. You’d still be paying to take me to dinner, parties, whatever. It’s a little . . . tasteless, don’t you think? A little transactional.”

“Really?” It’s weird how icy my reply sounds when, inside, I feel like a volcano about to erupt. “Look.” I point a finger her way but move it again as I press my elbow to the table, only to find it as rickety as hell. “That is not my intention. How it plays out is down to you. If you want to make a go of the job, build a career out of it, whatever, you’d have the full weight of Table’s resources behind you. But I forgot,” I say, sitting back again. “You’re not the kind of girl who works, are you?”

“These nails and these god-awful pants say otherwise, so how about you stop pretending you know me?”

“Fine.” But this is so far from fine.

“If you thought dating me would help your company, imagine how much better those market signals would be if you were marrying me? This is your plan, Troy. Just on steroids.”

“And we all know what steroids do to a man.” Confusion flits across her face. “It shrinks his dick.” I slump back and fold my arms across my chest.

She seems lost for words, all fluttery blinking. But then, like a terrier, she’s back again. “Dating is unpredictable by nature. Marriage is solid. It speaks to a future and longevity, to the forging of strong links.”

“Forged to you?” My tone is less than kind. The more she fights for this, the bigger asshole I seem to become.

“Forged to legacy.”

“To your father.”

“To authenticity, deep roots, history, and stability.”

With a snort, I slide her a look of derision.

“Yes, you’re right. It’s all utter bullshit. But it’s your narrative. Marrying me is marrying the gold mine.”

I fucking hate that she could be right. “How about you get to the point and show me what the hell that paper is about.”

“*Fine*.” Her eyes flare, as blue as a storm over the ocean. “My dad cut me off because, in his words, I defied him. In my words, it was because I was done being controlled.”

“In what way?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she says, visibly prickling. “Not for the purpose of this.” She moves a finger between us. *For the purposes of whatever this thing is. This thing that can’t be marriage.* “You need a good story. A romantic link to someone with my kind of background and perceived connections. Given that gossip has already started, you need me. What I need is my trust fund. I also need to know I’m safe.”

That’s twice she’s said that now. “Safe from what, exactly?”

She presses her fingertips to the paper, sliding it across the table. I pick it up and unfold it.

It’s an eviction notice. Looks like the building has been sold.

“You’ve got to move out.” My gaze lifts, and I seize my chance. “I’ll help you find somewhere better. Along with that job.”

Her mouth twists, but it’s not quite a smile. “If only it was that easy.”

“It can be.”

“Look at the date,” she insists.

The notice is dated two weeks ago. “Have you found anywhere yet?”

“Considering I only got the notice this morning, no. According to the landlord, we were all mailed individual notices two weeks ago. Strange how none of us in this apartment received them.”

“It’s a ball ache, sure.” I feel myself frown. I mean, I get how this might make her feel unsafe, kind of.

“Did you notice the name of the company?” Her tone is curiously flat. “Forbes Property Group LLC. That’s one of my father’s companies.”

“Okay.” I guess that is a little strange.

“He’s bought the building. A building that has no internet footprint—no listing showing it for sale.”

“Private sales happen,” I say, not sure which of us I’m trying to convince.

“He bought it to make me homeless.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can, because he’s thrown every obstacle he can in my way. You think I’m exaggerating,” she says like she knows what’s going on in my head.

But her dad loved her. *Didn’t he?*

“I have a degree, Troy. An Ivy League education. I have corporate work experience. I’m smart and personable. And every interview I’ve had ends the same way. They’re impressed, and I’m excited. They talk contracts and start dates. Then suddenly, the position isn’t available anymore.”

“It happens.”

“Yes, it happens the same way buildings that aren’t for sale get sold. But for it to have happened six times?”

I open my hands in answer. Just because it hasn’t happened to me, doesn’t mean it’s totally implausible.

“And a building in Inwood? It would be the ugly boil of his portfolio.”

“Gentrification,” I reason. “Or maybe he doesn’t know about the specifics.” I glance at the notice again. “I’m sure the man has a lot of fingers in a lot of pies.”

“I could go on.”

I make a gesture that’s not exactly an invitation.

“Let me see. My job, the roof over my head,” she says bitterly. “The way he turned people against me. How invitations dried up. How recruiters can’t or won’t place me. And, oh! He canceled my medical insurance.”

“What?” I lean forward like I misheard.

“It was a corporate plan, and technically, I haven’t worked for him in months. But it was only canceled last month. I know what you’re going to say,” she adds as I open my mouth. “An oversight at the office. Except, I also had access to the family concierge medical service. But huh.” She presses a pondering finger to her lips. “That stopped at the same time. And last I checked, I am still part of the family.”

Fuck.

“Then there was the fun time I had with the IRS when *someone* informed them I’d failed to report income from freelance consulting to the tune of forty-two thousand dollars. I mean, sure, let me pay those taxes on money I never earned. And the last one is almost laughable—a letter from his lawyer reminding me of my confidentiality obligations to the family office. At best, an empty threat. It said he’d pursue damages, but from

what? You can’t get blood out of a stone.” Her arms rise and fall in a motion of futility.

“And you think all this leads to what?” My tone might be even, but I almost dread her answer.

“Forcing me back into the fold.”

Her certainty gives me pause, but this isn’t how I remember things being between her and her dad. “So you think marrying me will offer you protection?” My stomach tightens as though preparing for a blow.

“I think marrying you will give me access to my trust fund before he turns his attention to that. It really is only a matter of time. My father’s reach is long, his pockets deep, and his influence frightening. He’s not above lying to get what he wants.”

“Seems like a lot of effort to go to.” I mentally kick myself for how that sounds.

“I’m not flattered by his attention. Truthfully, I’m a little frightened.”

“Of your dad?”

“He doesn’t like being bested.”

“It sounds like you’re asking me to step into a war.”

“I’m asking you to marry me. To help me help you in a way that also removes my trust from his reach.”

“By putting me in the firing line.”

I watch her ponder that, the force of her teeth making her bottom lip pale. “No,” she says after a beat. “My father prefers to fight downward, not across. He won’t touch someone with your profile.”

“And you wouldn’t be telling me that just to get what you want?”

Her head rears back. “No, I wouldn’t. But the Troy I knew wouldn’t allow a bully to frighten him.”

I send her an unimpressed look.

“Seriously, I wouldn’t wish my father’s attentions on my worst enemy.”

“So you wouldn’t wish them on me. This is fucking nuts,” I add in a mutter.

“You should try living it. Imagine having the comfortable rug ripped out from under your feet.”

“Yeah, I wonder what that must feel like,” I retort flatly. It might not be exactly the same, but I know how injustice feels.

“He needs me to struggle. It’s his idea of punishment, and I can see what it’s all leading up to.” She wraps her arms around herself quite suddenly. “He’ll say I’m in need of supervision, that I can’t keep a roof over my own head. That I can’t hold down a decent job or manage my taxes. That I’m in debt. That I can’t look after my own health.” Every line of her body seems to tremble. “And then he’ll say that I’m too messed up to manage my trust. That’s what’s coming next.”

“Okay, so *that* sounds like a gothic novel.”

“It sometimes feels like I’m living in one. Especially when I need a man to solve my problems.” Now, that had teeth.

“You could’ve asked a woman to marry you.”

“I don’t know a woman desperate enough.”

I give a gravelly laugh.

“Marry me, and legally, I become your problem.”

“That’s not a great sales pitch. Unless that means *I* get to shove you in an asylum.” I glance around, wondering if I’m already there. “Or maybe an attic with a minder named Bertha.”

Her mouth gives an amused twitch. “I can’t see you as a Byronic hero somehow.”

“I know, my disposition is far too sunshiny for Mr. Rochester.”

At this, she gives a cackling laugh. “I don’t know what mirror you have hanging on your wall.” But then she straightens, and the air between us immediately cools. “We’re getting off track. I just meant any way he might try to keep my trust from me dissolves if I have a husband. That I’m no longer his problem.”

“You’ll be mine,” I retort.

“I’m not a problem, I’m the solution. My plan is much more solid than yours.”

“And the till-death-do-us-part bit?”

“Now who’s being Gothic?”

“Okay, but if I did consider this, and I’m not saying I am, but it’s not without some fucking deep pitfalls.”

“Which is why we’ll both sign a prenup.”

“This isn’t just about money, Clara.”

“Look, you wanted a few dinners, some carefully placed exits. Some PDAs, I’m assuming.” Color tinges her cheeks. “Well, the only way any of that is happening is if you help get my dad off my back.”

No bargaining and no pleading. Just a resolute kind of calmness that makes it impossible to guess if she's scared shitless of the prospect of being married to me or entirely certain of her plan.

I lean back in my chair as I study her. Fuck if I can make it out.

Being hitched to Clara would undoubtedly be a superior narrative to the outside world. Marriage speaks of permanence and the market would eat that shit up. Which, in turn, would help the share price and, ultimately, our stability.

A newly public company is a little like a boat just outside the harbor—we're past the dock but not yet beyond the breakwater. The place where every swell hits harder than it should and every gust threatens to knock the boat sideways. It takes time before the water smooths and the real journey begins. Marriage, and a wife called Clara Forbes, could negate a lot of those knocks and buy us that much-needed time.

There would be costs, sure. Costs to me. But I've endured a lot in the name of success. I've sat through meetings with people I despise, taken shit from men who I wanted to crush. I've sacrificed sleep and forfeited relationships, gone without time and money and peace for the longest time.

This should be no different, this sacrifice.

Yet it feels different. More dangerous.

Because it's her.

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Chapter 11
TROY

“Two years.” Cue a needle-scratch moment. Or maybe not as Clara looks on, confused.

“Two years for what?”

“For this marriage of convenience.” I can’t believe I’m even saying this. “We need a timeline. And an exit plan.”

“You want to stay married for two years?” she demands incredulously. “To me?”

“*Want* is a strong word, Clara.”

“Two years isn’t a marriage of convenience. It’s . . . it’s a prison sentence.”

I almost ask which of us gets to be the jailer, except quips are no part of a hardball negotiation.

“You weren’t expecting to date me for two years. Were you?”

“Fake date you,” I amend.

“But for two years?”

“I thought the situation could be open ended.”

“Still sounds like a prison sentence. What happened to parole?”

“So tell me, what does an exit plan look like for you? When do you want this to end, in other words.”

“Quickly.” Her shoulders jump. “I just need my trust fund, which will only take a matter of weeks to be released. A month tops?”

“That’s not long enough to suit my purposes. It’s not like I *want* to live with you for two years.”

“Rewind that, would you? Who said we were living together?”

“We’re gonna need to live together, Clara.”

“You and me?” Her voice quivers. “Under the same roof?”

“Married couples usually inhabit the same space.”

“Not all married couples,” she says a little desperately.

“Remember the narrative.” I mean, fuck living together for two years, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t enjoying her horror. “You need it to be convincing too. One hint of the truth, and according to you, dear old Dad

will have you certified and me crucified.” In the court of public perception, at least.

“I don’t see how anyone would find out.”

“You want to take that risk?” I let that sink in for a minute. “Give your dad that kind of ammunition? I sure as hell don’t.”

“So I guess we’re living together.” She looks like she’s about to throw up.

“Maybe I should just crucify myself,” I mutter.

“Be a doll and do it while I’m not home,” she snipes. “This is so effed up. I didn’t consider . . . I just thought I’d get the certificate, that the legalities would be covered. I didn’t stop to consider what you’d need.”

“Let me find my surprised face,” I deadpan.

“I know that sounds bad, but things have been so desperate. I thought we could just stay married for a short while. A couple of weeks, maybe? A month before we part amicably?”

“You think we’ll be amicable in a month?”

“I think there’s more chance at least one of us will consider murder before the two-year mark.”

“A year.” And so goes my counteroffer.

She pulls a *yikes* face.

“I’ll permit revisiting the situation at the six-month mark.” Though my gut says a year is what I’ll need.

“You’ll *permit* it?”

“I’m just covering all my bases.”

“Three months. We revisit at three months.”

“Any newly floated company trades on confidence, Clara. And confidence requires stability. Thanks to Fifth Ave . . . whatever, Table is publicly aligned with a powerful family, *your* family. But we need more than that. More time. This isn’t just about the share price.”

“That narrative,” she mutters unhappily. “Okay, so we’ll do the married thing for a year.” She holds up a forestalling hand. “But we’re not living together that long. Three months of publicity is all I’m willing to gamble on.”

I run that over in my head. Three months of being seen together. Attention will have moved on to someone else by then. The company will be in safer waters. “Fine.”

Relief rushes out of her in a gust of breath.

“Contingent on the narrative having served its purpose during that time, we’ll consider moving into separate spaces before beginning divorce proceedings at the twelve-month mark. No fault, of course.”

“Deal.”

“I’m not done.”

Her tentative smile falls.

“A minimum of three months of cohabiting and divorce after a year, all plans going well. But ultimately, this marriage isn’t over until I say so.”

“What?” Her eyes fly wide. “That’s ridiculous—I’m not staying married to you!”

“What’s ridiculous is how you seem to think that I won’t yeet myself out of this marriage at the first opportunity.” I let her digest that for a minute. Fuck, I let myself digest what an asshole I’m being.

“It’s too open ended,” she retorts with a scowl.

“That’s my deal-breaker, Clara. I have too much to lose. It’s my contingency.”

“A stupid one. What’s to say I won’t agree now, only to renege later?”

“The world of shit I’ll rain down on you if you do.”

“I’m feeling less and less charmed by the minute,” she mutters.

“You’re not marrying me for my charm. Think of it like this. You’re running the hundred meters, and my event is the marathon. We’ll both achieve our aims, just at different finish lines.”

“This is insane.”

“Agreed.” I hold out my hand, and she begrudgingly takes it. “But maybe also kind of genius.”

Hands retract across the tabletop, and we both take a moment to let that thought percolate. Until the noisy rattle of the refrigerator interrupts the sudden silence, and Clara’s spine goes suddenly bolt straight.

“Separate bedrooms,” she announces.

“I assumed that was a given.” I mean, she’s still hot, but I’m no longer stupid.

“Where do you live, by the way?”

“Battery Park. The apartment is pretty big, and I work a lot. We won’t have to spend a whole lot of time there together.” Which is just as well, because the thought of watching her fold panties in my space does something to my concentration.

“Right. Good.”

Fuck, I can’t imagine lying in my bed while she does the same on the other side of the apartment. “We’ll need to find a way to be comfortable around each other.”

“The damn narrative.” She rolls her eyes.

Yeah, for that too.

“And those public displays of affection,” she adds with the same level of comfort as I’d imagine her admitting she’s into BDSM. “What are you smiling about?”

“On Wednesdays we wear bondage.”

“I don’t remember your sense of humor being weird.” She gives her head a quick shake. “Just how affectionate are we talking?”

“Newlyweds are usually hot for each other.”

“How hot?”

“Hand holding, loving gazes. Touching, at a minimum.”

“And at a maximum?” If her voice gets any higher, we’ll be surrounded by dogs.

“Well, we have fucked in some very public places.”

“We have not!”

“A park. The lake. The beach. A truck stop.” I remember the days I wanted her so badly that it seemed to physically hurt. Privacy wasn’t something easily come by, and the horny struggle was very real. Not that reminiscing is helpful right now.

“It was secluded, and we were in a car!”

“Remember when that cop knocked on the window and asked us what we were doing?”

She tips forward with a groan, pressing her face to her hands.

“And I told him we were making out.” *Necking*, I’d added for the old guy’s benefit. His reply? It was time for me to put my neck away.

“Stop.” The word is muffled, and I’m pretty sure even her fingernails are pink.

“Obviously, this will be a fuck-free marriage. Kissing, though . . .”

Those sapphire blues appear over her fingertips. “Kissing?”

“In public.”

“Because it sounds so much better when you mention that.”

“Convincing kissing,” I amend. *Just like at the car,* I don’t add. “We might need to practice.”

“You’re enjoying this,” she accuses.

“Can’t have you flinching when I touch you. Or when I pull you in for a little lip-lock.”

“*Never* say that again.”

“Can’t be kissing my wife if she’s pulling that face.”

“I am literally desiccating—all the moisture has left my body.”

“I didn’t seem to have that effect on you Friday.” She fuckin’ melted.

“Friday was—” Her spine goes ramrod straight, and she gives a tiny, denying shake of her head. “It was your phrasing I object to, not your meaning.”

We just stare at each other for a beat as I try not to let my eyes linger on her pretty lips.

“Kissing.” The word is barely audible as she rubs her finger over the scarred tabletop. “To recap, we agree that kissing will fall within the parameters of touch.” Her gaze slices up. “It will be occasional, in public, and PG rated.”

“You forgot convincing. Like Friday.”

“I assume you’ll also want me to laugh at your jokes in company.”

“As I recall, you were the amusing one.” What did I say that for?

“I think we should take a moment to discuss other boundaries.”

“Such as?”

“I think our private lives should remain just that.”

“Agreed.”

“There should be no emotional expectations,” she adds, chin held high.

“Also a given.” Not to mention highly fucking unlikely.

“And if one of us meets someone else—”

“We don’t bring them home.” As I say the words, I get a flash of myself in my bed again. Only this time, I’m listening to Clara being railed. *No way that is happening under my fucking roof.*

“That’s not what I was going to say.” Could it be that Clara is having the same thought in reverse? “A cheating husband won’t fit the narrative.”

“Neither will a cheating wife,” I mutter gruffly.

She pulls a face. “Only one of us is regularly referred to as a playboy on the internet.”

“No one says I’m a playboy.”

“Really?” She’s suddenly all wide-eyed countenance. “I must have it wrong. But what was it I read? Fintech’s most eligible billionaire treats dating like day trading?”

“Been checking up on me?”

“You’re not the only one taking a risk.”

“It’s not quite the same.”

“I agree. You’re not in danger of losing your autonomy. Your freedom. Your dignity.”

“Your father was always very protective of you.”

“No.” She slices her hair behind her ears, the motion tense and jerky. “That was control. You’re not my last hope, you know.” She begins to drum her fingertips against the tabletop. Until she notices me watching.

“You have a plan B? Who’s the lucky fuck?”

“I have a roommate. He’d say yes. For a price.”

“So why me?”

“You’re . . . you.” Her eyes move over me in a way that doesn’t feel complimentary. “Highly regarded, in certain circles. You’re solvent and, on the surface, an upstanding citizen.”

Her begrudging tone makes me grin. “Thanks, I think.”

“You’re just a better bet.”

“I’m a sure bet,” I correct. Not sure why that sounded sexual.

“You’re my preferred course of action.”

“I think you mean *husband*.” That word seems to shock us both.

“Just google your name and then see how many women you’ve been linked with,” she says, returning to her point.

“Some of those are just women I’ve stood next to at parties.” Not that I’ve googled myself, but Hannah has. And, okay, some of them I’ve fucked. *A lot of them I’ve fucked.* But Clara was a good lesson to learn.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says primly. “It’s how things look. So unless you have a regular . . .”

“What?” My brows flicker as though I don’t know what she means.

“Situationship?” She doesn’t sound sure.

The corner of my mouth lifts. “You’re saying I should keep it on the down-low?”

“Yes, be discreet. I know rich men are so often excused of their dalliances, especially those shackled to tedious, old money, Upper East Side wives. But I imagine in the early stages of our marriage, that wouldn’t be a good look for you.”

I lean forward with a dark chuckle and thread my fingers together as I give a disbelieving shake of my head. “No one would ever call you boring,

Clara," I say. "You're more like an aneurysm in the making."

Or the woman staging a hostile takeover of my life.

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Chapter 12
TROY

Past

The climb is harder than I expected. Not because the trellis is unstable—it is—but because halfway up I realize how insane this idea is. Two stories of roses and wood between me and the gravel. One misstep, and I'm explaining to an emergency room doctor why I thought this was a reasonable plan.

Then explaining it to my mom. Clara's father. Then the police.

Still, I keep climbing. Because the alternative is going home and pretending I didn't spend the entire evening thinking about kissing Clara earlier. A stolen moment in the boathouse, her skin luminescent in the setting sun. She would've let me fuck her, I know it. Right there on the old rickety table, splinters and all. But the first time we do this, I want to do it right.

"Jesus." I should've brought gloves. My palms are gonna be ripped to shreds. Adjusting my hold, I look up. Her window is open. It feels like a good sign. I mean, it's not like I promised I'd be climbing in through her window tonight, though I might've suggested it. I might've also cracked the bulb on the security light for that exact purpose.

Above me, Clara's face appears, her dark hair hanging vertical, her beautiful eyes wide with disbelief. "You're insane," she whisper-hisses, unable to rein in her smile.

Insane is about the strength of it, because insane is the way she makes me feel. I'm consumed by the thought of her. I lie in bed at night almost suffocated by the weight of my need.

"What light through yonder window breaks," I grunt out, propelling myself past a gap in the trellis.

"What?" Man, the sheer delight in her tone. She's so fucking special, and out of all the guys drooling after her, she picked me.

“It is my lady.” I hook my hand over the sill and pull myself up, biceps screaming, boots scraping against brick as I swing inside. I brush the dust from my jeans and straighten. The room is mostly pink and softly lit, but that’s not what I’m paying attention to.

How the fuck did I get to be so lucky?

I take a step toward her, feeding my hand under the silky curtain of her dark hair. “It is my love,” I whisper, borrowing another of the Bard’s lines.

My chest feels tight, the feeling something I can’t place. *Can’t place and don’t know what to do with.* We’re almost in kissing distance, sharing the same air, and for a second, I forget what to do with my hands. Hell, what even are hands?

“Hey.” A soft word. A coy smile.

Then I’m experiencing the beauty of her lips by feel as I press my mouth to hers. Soft and coaxing. Teasing and sweet. Her honeyed sigh. Her breath speeding up as she stands on her toes to deepen the contact. She feels so soft where I feel hard, and Jesus, I want her so much. You only get one first time with a girl, and I’m not gonna rush it. She deserves better than that. This girl. This woman, the kind that guys like me are supposed to admire at a distance. I’m gonna take my time, just like I promised her. And I’ll need every minute, because she makes me feel so fuckin’ greedy.

“Hey.” I brush my nose against hers, slowing the moment.

“Hello there, Romeo.” Her eyes are deep blue and lust drunk, and her words so husky, I find myself biting back my smile.

“Sorry I’m a little late.” I thread the dark locks behind her ears. Press a kiss to her forehead.

“I wasn’t sure you would really come.”

“Someone’s a liar,” I say, setting her back and letting my eyes roam over her. “And someone will be coming.”

“Troy!” She says my name as though scandalized, but all I can do is shake my head. And try to make sure I’m not drooling as I stare. “What?” She pushes her shoulders back a touch. She knows she looks good wrapped in that short silky robe. She’s like a pretty package I can’t wait to rip at.

“You always go to bed dressed like that?”

“No.” She gives a tiny shimmy. “I’m usually naked.”

I grin. I mean, I don’t believe it for a minute, but that doesn’t mean I don’t think about it for a beat. *Or eternity.*

“Are you just going to stand there and stare at me?”

“Baby, I’m just deciding what I want to taste first.” My eyes flick to the door. “That thing have a lock on it?”

She nods. “Their room is on the other side of the house. Besides, we won’t be disturbed, thanks to red wine and Ambien. Self-administered, before you ask.”

I give a rough laugh. She looks as desperate for tonight as I am. “Good,” I grunt as I tug on the belt of her robe. And, good Lord, the sight of her takes my breath away.

What she’s wearing under the robe hardly constitutes a nightdress. Not quite white and not quite pink, sheer lace cups her breasts before turning to something silky that skims her thighs. I’ve never seen anything so fine. And I’ve never wanted to strip a girl out of her things so quick.

“Pretty.” My hand trembles as I skim a finger under the lace at her shoulder. *Her skin is so damn soft.* She inhales a tiny breath as my knuckle skims over the curve of her breast.

“I’m shaking,” she whispers.

“It’s the wanting.” I tug at the ribbon between her breasts.

“My insides feel so hollow.”

“If you keep looking at me like that, they won’t be for long.” Satin, silk, whatever, shimmers with her tiny laugh. “I meant what I said, Clara. I’m gonna take my time with you, but I’m not sure the wanting will ever go away.” I slide the lace from her shoulders, and her nightdress whispers to the floor.

“Fuck.” I am a dumb fuck. I want to wax lyrical, to sing her praises. She deserves sonnets written about the silk of her skin, the blue of her eyes, and the lush fullness of her tits. Yet *fuck* is all I can come up with.

“Cat got your tongue?”

I shake my head. Not in answer, but to drag myself from this trance as she stands before me in nothing but a pair of matching tiny panties.

Jesus, this dream is about to turn real.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” Pulling her to me, I lower my mouth to hers. Kissing. So much kissing. Touching. Brushing. My hands on her breast, her ass, as hers work under my T-shirt.

“I want to see you,” she whispers feverishly. “I want to touch you.”

“We’ve got all night,” I whisper, backing her up against the nearest surface, my thoughts and actions not yet together enough to trust myself with a bed.

The surface is a chair, it turns out, pink and velvet and girly, just like her whole room. A room that smells of soap and lotion and perfume.

I drop to my haunches, ignoring her frustrated mewl. Folding my hands around her hips, I press my face to that satin scrap between her legs. Her soft moan is seriously satisfying as I inhale lungfuls of her. She smells so fucking good.

"I'm gonna taste you, Clara. You okay with that?" I swallow thickly, my mouth watering. I haven't tasted her from the source yet. Just from my fingers, and I'm so ready for this. But as my gaze crawls up her heavenly body, what I see is consternation. "You don't like it when guys go down on you?" My heart plummets. I've been dreaming about this for weeks. I'm near fucking delirious with the thoughts of it.

"I've never . . ." Her cheeks color, her expression uncomfortable. "Guys don't . . ."

"Fucking idiots," I growl, and without waiting for clarification, I put my mouth back to the center of her femininity, that heavenly triangle between her legs. I give a long lick up and over the silk. "You like that?"

Oh, yeah, she likes that. So I begin to make out with her pussy, slowly, thoroughly. Lots of appreciative groans and eye contact as I work my tongue between her lips over the fabric.

"*Oh, God.*" Her hand finds my head, and she looks like she doesn't know whether she wants to pull me deeper or push me away. "I feel like I'm burning."

I tighten my hands on her hips. The steadiness of her knees not looking so good as I breathe her in over the damp fabric. "You smell so good," I whisper, sliding my finger under the elastic. Her body begins to move with my fingers, one, then two, my tongue circling that tight bundle of nerves for all I'm worth.

"Oh, God. Oh, God. I don't know . . ."

"I'd better continue," I say, pressing my smile into her skin. "Just to be sure."

"Troy, I don't think I can come like this." She whimpers, her thighs beginning to tremble.

I look up, my gaze meeting hers: Challenge accepted.

She shakes her head, her hair flying about her face. "I mean standing up. I don't think . . . I don't . . . oh, God." She tightens her grip on my hair, and I guess she changes her mind.

Or maybe I change it for her as I threaten to bury my tongue deep inside her.

Her body arches against the chair, eyes screwing shut as she falls apart. Fucking amazing.

All that and with her panties still on.

Her body twists away, and I let her go. This time.

Scooping up her almost boneless form, I carry this rare treasure to her bed and set her down.

“Take off your panties.” My voice is low and rough from need, and her eyes flare at my tone. *Or maybe she likes being told what to do.* I slot the little insight away, and watch as she shimmies her wet panties down her legs.

“I want to see you too,” she whispers.

“I’m getting there.” I pop the button on my jeans.

Reaching back between my shoulder blades, I pull off my T-shirt, her touch immediate against my skin. My pecs, my ribs, down over the planes of my stomach, her fingers are five hot points of contact that drives me wild. She bites her full bottom lip as she reaches the trail of downy hair.

Her hand slips into my jeans, and I make a low groan as her fingers close around my cock. Hiss a curse as she pulls it free.

“I want you in my mouth,” she whispers, her tongue flicking over my crown.

“Jesus, Clara.” I make a pained groan as she puts her lips to the head before swallowing me down, down, down.

Where I want to thrust, I don’t. When I want to take control, instead, I thread my fingers together at the back of my head. I watch as she explores me, fucking revel in her mouth and tongue as she works every part of me she can reach. Her hair tickles my taut abs as her mouth disintegrates every one of my brain cells. She’s so fucking good at this, soft lips, tight mouth, and sloppy tongue.

“You look so good, baby.” Despite removing my hands from the equation, my body, my words, urge her on. “Yeah, like that, just like that. Oh, God. You’re gonna make me come.”

She hums, and looks up. Fuck, I think my heart might be about to burst. Or maybe my balls. And that wouldn’t do at all.

“Come here,” I grate out before I get too carried away. I drag her mouth to mine. Suck on her tongue. Lay her back on the bed as I slide my

hands along the sensitive insides of her thighs. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” The compliment is low and rough as I shuck out of my clothes and suit up, enjoying the way she watches.

“I can’t believe we’re finally here,” she whispers as I kiss my way up her body, shaking, aching, not quite able to believe my luck. “It’s like a dream, right?”

“You’re the dream, and I’m the luckiest guy in the world.” I part her with my thumb, watch the digit grow wet as I push it inside. She arches and gives a soft sigh. “This is such a pretty pussy.”

“Troy, please.” The way she pulses for me.

I swap my hand for the real thing, my body over hers. Poised over her, our chests expand with something like a synchronized breath as I push my way inside her for the very first time.

The feel of her . . . I have no words as I still, holding us there. This is everything, the exquisite way we fit, how her heart beats against mine, and the trusting way she looks up at me.

With my body and my heart I promise that I’ll be careful, careful in a way I’ve never been with anyone or anything. Because if Clara Forbes can choose me, the least I can do is be the man who proves her instincts are right.

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Chapter 13
TROY

"You got a minute?" It's gone six when I stick my head around Max's office door. The sky has darkened as his fingers hammer on the keyboard, the slump of his shoulders reflecting in the window.

"Give me a few," he says without looking up.

I step into his office, closing the door behind me. This is not a conversation I want to have, let alone want others to overhear.

His fingers continue to rain down whatever legal hell that is as I wander around his office, hands slunk low into my pockets.

The space is about the same size as mine, the aspect from the windows likewise. Difference is, his office looks like it's used. A pile of legal pads has been stacked haphazardly on the conference table; a multitude of framed degrees and diplomas leans against one wall. In the place of art, he has bookcase after bookcase full of legal tomes standing straight as the man himself.

I scan a few of the dark leather-bound books. *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure*, employment statutes, labor laws, the list of books goes on and on. His desk is cluttered with more of the same, books and files, some of them open. Others have pens and shit keeping a place.

Even his Montegrappa fountain pen—a graduation gift—peeks from beneath a pocket-size copy of the United States Constitution. It might be a prized possession, but as his friend and an observer for some years, I know he prefers to take notes with a cheap-ass plastic Pilot.

I also know he has packets and packets of spares in one of his drawers.

I sometimes miss sharing an office with him, though I don't miss the first building we rented. Rattling windows and a concrete walk-up. Perma-stained coffee cups and space heaters that made the electrics trip. Those early days were manic and as scary as fuck, but we were all in it together. Now, though, we're separated by walls. We still hang out, but things have changed. The pressure, I guess.

"What's up?"

I pivot at the sound of his voice. He looks tired, and I should feel bad for adding to his load, but frankly, I don't have that luxury. Table is my baby. It's practically my name above the door, and there's not a lot I won't do to keep it that way.

"I have something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Every time you start a conversation with that opener, I age in dog years."

"Story checks out," I retort, narrowing my eyes as though to study him. "Have you thought of Botox? Maybe a peel?"

"Fuck you," he says in the tune of a happy *thank you!*

"Maybe you should book yourself a spa day."

"Yeah." His mouth quirks. "That's exactly what I need. A spa day."

"Spa day in Bali?"

"I can see that going down well with the board. Next item on the agenda, the recent share price volatility. You guys good to deal with that while I take the jet to the tropics for a little me time?"

"Think I might come with you," I say, dropping into one of the chairs facing his desk.

"You should. You're only the CEO. Nobody needs you."

"See, that's what I thought."

"Also, you could look after the kid while I have my massage."

"We'll hire a nanny. Or take yours."

"Quit stalling and spill."

"I need a favor," I say, leaning forward to straighten the pleat in my pant leg. Then I brush off a pelt of nonexistent dog hairs.

"You mean a command dressed up as a suggestion."

"You're saying I'm manipulative?" Reaching up, I run a finger over my eyebrow. "Then how come I still live?"

"Because I regularly remind Hannah that pretty people do, in fact, go to jail. Also, fuck you. You know exactly what you're doing. We've just known you too long to fall for your schtick. Charming, my asshole," he mutters not quite under his breath.

I sit suddenly forward to tap an invisible microphone. "Let it be noted for the record that I have *never* tried to charm the counsel's asshole." I sit back again.

"Thank fuck."

"Because you know I'd make you want it."

He puts up a hand as though to shield his eyes. “Stop talking about my asshole, and put away the goddamn smolder.”

“Fine.”

“What did you break, Troy?”

“Not your asshole.” Unfolding my legs, I cross them at the ankles and thread my fingers together, resting them across my middle.

His gaze narrows. “Ominous.”

“What is?”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you sit still for weeks. You’re giving me the heebie-jeebies. Spit it the fuck out, whatever it is.”

“I need you to draft me a prenup.”

“Quit fucking around. What do you really want?”

“For you. To draft. Me. A prenup.”

His mouth opens. Then closes. He turns his head and glances out of the window, then back again. “Troy? Blink once if you’re in danger.”

“How about once if I am and twice for *I’m really getting hitched*?” A double blink. I really am getting hitched. For at least six months.

“Have you impregnated one of your supermodels?” Do I detect a note of panic in Max’s voice? *Unusual.*

“Yeah.” I glance over my shoulder. “Her daddy is at the door with his shotgun.”

“Do me a favor? Smile for me.” I flash him my teeth instead. “Lift your arms.”

With a protracted sigh, I make chicken wings. “Can’t smell burning toast neither,” I add heavily. “Are you gonna help me, or do I need to find outside counsel?”

“Yeah, you need a family attorney. Preferably someone who specializes in matrimony and prenups. But, fuck, you are commitment averse—the least marriage-minded person I know. Well, excluding me. And maybe Hannah.”

“Not Hugh?”

“Nah, he’s just dying for the whole white picket fence. He just has to date a woman long enough for her to propose.” He gives a pause as he studies me. “Really?”

“Really. Tomorrow. No invitations, no party. It’s a courthouse thing.”

“Nah.” He presses both palms to his desk. “You’re fucking with me.”

“I am not.” Even if I wish I were.

“Wait.” He suddenly straightens, and my gut tenses in reflex. “This is about her, isn’t it? The girl.”

“It is about *a* girl. How long have we known each other? It can’t be that much of a surprise to you that I’m into vaginas.”

“It’s the one Hannah was talking about.”

“Hannah was talking about a vagina?”

“The woman from the party, from the past.”

“Hannah doesn’t know shit,” I mutter.

“Oh, she knows. And she remembers. *Everything.*”

“Whatever the fuck that means.”

“So *Page Six* got it right.” Like a dog with a scent, he goes down the wrong hole. “Unless *Page Six* also got it wrong.” The dog backtracks. Self-corrects.

“I hope you don’t have dreams of joining New York’s finest because that is some terrible detective work.” My phone buzzes. It’s a text from Clara, and I try to ignore what a head fuck it is, seeing her name flash up on the screen. I type out a quick answer. “Whatever *Page Six* got right or wrong isn’t worth shit,” I add. “And I’d prefer to keep the prenup in house. No outside counsel.”

“Sorry, I was wrong. *That* was the statement that’s ominous. What was her name again?”

“So maybe Hannah doesn’t know everything.”

“Her dad is a big-name player, right? Banking. Third, no, fourth-generational wealth.”

I’m saved by the buzzer again as the intercom on his desk interrupts us.

“Wendy, unless it’s the nanny, I don’t want to know.”

“Sorry, there’s a Miss Forbes—” Wendy, the C-suite receptionist, begins before Max cuts her off.

“Don’t know her. And I’m busy.”

“She’s not here to see you,” Wendy answers flatly. “She’s here for Mr. Templeton.”

“It’s Troy, Wendy,” I say, leaning closer to the speaker. How many times have I got to tell her that? “Send her in, please.”

“What in the name of fuck,” Max begins as I stand. Fastening the button on my jacket, I turn to the door. “This better not be what I think it is.”

“Clara.” A strange sensation runs through me as I say her name. It’s so fucked up that she’s the one. The one I lost my heart to. The one who set my life on fire. The one I’m about to marry . . . as a business transaction. “Thanks for coming.”

She’s curled her hair is my first thought, though *curl* probably isn’t the right word. There’s something timeless about the look. Something a little Ziegfeld Follies Girl. *Thanks, Mom and classic movies, for that insight.*

My second thought plays into that, thanks to her red lipstick, its boldness drawing attention to the sweet bow of her mouth. The iconic Max Mara coat and heeled boots complete a killer look. No one, and I mean no one, would ever believe this woman made a living serving beers to working-class joes.

Fuck. *Polyester pants. Remember the polyester pants.*

“It’s no problem at all.” She quirks a brow as I meet her in the middle of the room, not sure what to do. Kiss her cheek? Take her hand? Put her in a headlock? “Hello.” This she directs Max’s way, peeking around the shield of my body.

I move to the side and settle for placing my hand to the small of her back. She barely stiffens and doesn’t jump away. Good.

“This is Max, my legal counsel.” He sends me a look back that seems to say, *The fuck I am*. “Max, this is Clara.”

“Pleasure.” His expression is anything but pleasured as he shoots me an angry glare. “This had better not be what I think it is.”

“You already said that.”

“And what is that, if you don’t mind me asking?” Clara’s all even tone and pretty manners. And stellar fucking rack as she loosens the belt of her coat.

“An ambush,” he retorts flatly. “Excuse me.” His attention swings my way. “Does she know?”

I like this for me. Max has assumed—I assume—that I’ve decided to propose to Clara on the strength of the share price performance. *It’s like he knows me.*

“Do I know what?” Clara’s attention flicks between us.

“That I want to marry you.”

Now, we’d talked a little about this, me and Clara, about how to play this meeting. And the signal I just gave is certainly open to interpretation, but that doesn’t mean I expect her reaction.

“Oh, Troy!” She claps her hands to her cheeks. “Do you really mean it? Because yes, darling! Yes!”

Ho, boy. As the minutes pass, she’s looking more and more like a Ziegfeld Follies Girl. Particularly one from the film industry’s pretalkies era. In other words, she’s a terrible actress. A fuckin’ ham.

“Wait.” She presses her hand to her chest, eyes bouncing between us. “You told your lawyer before you asked me?”

I grate out her name as a warning.

“I’m also his friend,” Max puts at my defense. “Unfortunately,” he adds under his breath.

“Oh, well, that’s a little different. I suppose you were getting advice on the ring?”

Somebody just shoot me. Shoot me now.

“The general convention is three months’ salary. So I’m told.” She gives a demure flutter of her lashes.

“You’ll need to get her a full-time security guard,” Max mutters.

“Perfect. Just perfect.” I tip my head to the ceiling, not sure whether I’m looking for divine intervention or a good old smiting.

“Troy, darling, I’d wear a curtain ring for you.”

“Sit down.” I point at the chair I recently vacated.

She makes tiny paws with her hands and practically trots over to the thing. I guess I should be happy she doesn’t add *woof*.

“For the record, I had no part in this,” Max begins, his brow jutting over his eyes like a shelf. “And I know nothing about any ring.”

“There isn’t a fucking ring.”

“What?” Clara looks like someone just told her Santa Claus isn’t real.

“Knock that off. He knows this is an arrangement between us.” He guessed, at least.

“I know it’s a clusterfuck that I want no part in,” Max retorts.

“Too late,” I say. “Because we need that prenup. And now you know why this needs to be in house.”

“What the man says,” Clara chimes in, out of character now.

“No.” Max stands so abruptly, his chair shoots back. “Absolutely not. So close to the IPO, Troy? No way we’re compounding the situation with a . . . a personal detonation.”

“Marriage is the opposite.” Clara’s tone is even. “It’s a stabilizing agent. It’s cement.”

“What?” He looks confused.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I was nervous,” she says, pushing out a quiet breath. Should I find it weird that she doesn’t send daggers my way? “But we know what we’re doing.”

“I highly doubt that,” Max retorts, his gaze finding mine. “You have no idea how this will look.”

“I do. And that’s the whole point. How this looks.”

“The optics,” Clara clarifies. Optics and narratives. Those words will be chiseled on my fucking tombstone.

“What optics?” he demands.

“Fintech CEO marries Manhattan royalty.”

“That’s crazy.”

“But it’s a calculated kind of crazy,” I reason. “We go way back.” Clara glances my way. It feels like we’re coconspirators. “And we fully intend on making use of that history.”

“Just how are you gonna do that?” Max folds his arms.

“Sound bites to the press. Maybe some old photos for the feels.”

“I don’t have—” Clara looks suddenly flustered.

“I have one or two.” My shoulder lifts and falls as though I don’t mind admitting it.

“Why do this?” Max pulls at the knot of his necktie. “Why go to these lengths?”

“Because I can.” And because I’d do much worse for Table’s continued success.

“Why are you going along with this?” he demands of Clara.

“I have my reasons,” she says softly, placing her hands demurely in her lap. “But the bottom line? We’re going to need that prenup.”

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Chapter 14
CLARA

If the devil had a diary, it would surely be filled with my Tuesday. He'd probably use highlighters, sparkly gel pens, and stickers as a treat to himself for hitting payday.

I tighten the belt on my coat, glad once more that I hadn't managed to sell it. Not that I hadn't tried. And not that I hadn't cried a couple of times when I so desperately needed the money. While I'm not quite at the point of feeling that everything happens for a reason, I am glad to be able to bring a little class to the day.

The day being my wedding day.

I get to the building first, the Office of the City Clerk, and for probably the first time in my life, I stare up at the imposing facade. I've probably passed by the building a million times, but it never would've entered my head that I'd get married there one day.

Whenever the thought of marriage crossed my mind in that past, in that nebulous, distant, some-time-far-away way, I assumed I'd be dressed in white, complete with train and cathedral veil. Maybe I'd be on the shores of Lake Como. Or in a vineyard in Tuscany. Or maybe at a Disney-esque château on the outskirts of Paris. And obviously, I'd be wearing Valentino. Or maybe a bespoke Vera Wang masterpiece.

Huh. Maybe I gave marriage more thought than I realize.

But I never imagined I'd marry for anything other than love. Yet here I stand, outside of a municipal building, ready to plight my troth. Get spliced. Hitched. Tie the knot to a man I no longer know. *Does it count that I loved him once?*

"Clara."

At the sound of my name, I come back to myself with a jolt. My bottom lip stings, probably because I was chewing on it again. "Hi. Hello. How are you?" I say all at once, then clamp my mouth shut. I run my tongue over my teeth; red on white isn't a good look. Unless we're talking strawberry and cream. Or candy canes.

"I'm good. You?" he answers, mildly amused.

“Mm-hmm.” I nod and glance down, embarrassed. But then notice his shiny shoes. “Corthay?” Shoes at $3,000 a pair.

“How’d you tell?”

I’m grateful he glances down at the same time as my gaze rises, because holy suit porn, Batman. Troy is dressed in another three-piece suit—when you look that good, why stop at two? The midnight blue, the wool-silk blend is tailored to his body like it was cut by a lover’s hand. His shirt is snowy, and his natty sky blue silk tie matches his pocket square.

Blue seems to be the color of the day because, under this coat, I’m wearing a blue Mikado silk dress. *Another garment I tried in vain to sell.* I’m not sure how I feel about the whole unintentional matchy-matchy.

“Don’t you look dapper.” I sound like an old maid as I curl my fingers into my palms. Strategic touching might be fine, but as there’s no one here to witness this, I’m not supposed to feel him up.

“Thanks. These are for you.” He thrusts a small bouquet my way. Pale-colored peonies with sprigs of eucalyptus.

“Oh, how lovely.” *Don’t cry, you idiot,* I tell myself as I stroke a silken petal. But it’s such a surprise. A kindness I did *not* expect.

“You got the ring, so I thought I’d get flowers.”

“They’re beautiful,” I whisper, ignoring the fact that my wedding ring is a cheap piece of costume jewelry. Score one for Troy.

“I thought, for the photo. You know.” His words come out jerky as he reaches up to rub the back of his neck.

I stick my nose in the blooms as my ridiculous heart sinks. The photo. The much-needed proof of today. The optics. The narrative. Ah, well. At least the flowers aren’t pretend.

“Let me get you the ring.” I hoist the bag higher from where it’s pinching the crook of my arm. My overnight bag of consequences but not action, because this will be a sexless marriage. Even if he does look good enough to climb. “Hold these?” I offer him the bouquet, unable to open the zipper and hold the flowers.

But he reaches for the bag instead. “You should’ve let me send a car.”

“The A is quicker,” I say, swinging it out of his way. This is a business deal. A marriage of practicalities. There’s no need for chivalry, no place for a reemergence of feelings, and there will be *no* reminiscing. Ever!

“We could’ve picked up your things later.”

My things. The reference makes me feel kind of swimmy in the stomach. It's not quite anxiety and not quite giddiness. Apparently, I'm supposed to prepare to be unimpressed by his fancy Tribeca apartment as it's currently under renovation. Maybe he's forgotten where I was living. Maybe I'll forget soon too.

I breathe in deeply, then breathe out. I'm all in my feelings. I'm looking forward to escaping the crappy house share—and potential homelessness—but the prospect of my new housemate is . . .

Just breathhhe.

At least his apartment has five bedrooms. There will be no sleeping-arrangement dramas, especially as the principal suite is at the opposite end of the apartment from the other bedrooms. I'm not sure if he mentioned this to put me at ease or whether it was his way of saying he didn't expect to see me in or near his room.

"Give me the bag," Troy commands, ignoring the flowers.

"It's fine, really. Strong, independent woman here."

"Strong, independent woman who's marrying a dick, by the look of things." He quirks a brow and just . . . urgh.

"Fine." Everything is *not* fine. And I don't feel giddy, not at all. What I am is terrified.

I hand over the bag, unzip the side pocket, then unravel the ring from the tissue I wrapped it in.

"Thanks." If he thinks I cheaped out, he doesn't say so as he slides it into his inside jacket pocket.

I know as part of my grandmother's legacy, I have a safe-deposit box full of jewelry waiting for me. While I guess I could wear her wedding set once I get access, I think I'll buy something new. Nothing fancy. Just something more convincing than what I just handed him. Probably zirconia or maybe moissanite. Something manufactured. Just like this marriage.

"Shall we?" He gestures to the entrance at the top of a short flight of stone steps.

It might as well be at the summit of Mount Everest.

"Give me a minute?" My voice sounds as weak as my knees suddenly feel. On the journey in, I had other things to concentrate on. Like forcibly ignoring the advertising cards on the walls of the subway car: **BUY NOW, TABLE IT FOR LATER!**

Staring at them only led my mind back to Troy, so instead, I wondered if I made a mistake buying that bagel for breakfast. Did I remember to pack my toothbrush? I pondered how ice cream was probably invented during the winter and how that hadn't affected its popularity. And how, when we jump up and down, we don't actually jump *down*. And why is it that sleep is something that doesn't get better with practice—the less you do it, the easier it seems to happen. My mind spun and jumped from topic to topic, *and* I'd taken the last of my meds.

"Clara?"

"Hmm?"

"We don't want to miss our slot."

"Oh, right."

Troy takes a moment to study my face. "Are you having second thoughts?"

I give a weird laugh. "Try fifth, twelfth, and probably fiftieth since I stepped out of the apartment this morning."

He dips a little, bringing his warm gaze to mine. He looks benignly amused. I can't really blame him. "This was your idea."

"I'm aware," I retort tersely.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Can you make space for my freak-out?"

"Like, physically?" He gives a quick glance as though examining our surroundings.

"Hold, please." I lift my hand like a stop sign, hating how crazy I sound. "I just need a moment to put the hamster back on the wheel."

His brows dip as though he's thinking. "If it's any consolation, I've had to tear down some internal walls myself this morning."

"For the renovation?"

He gives a tiny shake of his head and straightens. "I just hope they weren't load bearing," he mutters as he turns away.

Wow. Was that an insight into the inner workings of Troy? Of course he'd be having second thoughts too. Second thoughts worse than mine, because he didn't try to ruin my life.

I square my shoulders. "Ready."

Troy offers me his hand. Whether as a concession or a comfort, it feels nice as I take it. It's not like running away will achieve anything. Plus, he has my bag. So we make for the steps.

At security, our appointment time is checked and our IDs scrutinized before we pass through the metal detector that leads to a beige hallway. We follow the sign for the reception, weaving in and out of the crowds. As I read on the internet, the place is pretty busy—a revolving door of matrimony. We pass women in formal wedding dresses and men in suits. Some couples look like they've escaped the office for five minutes, and others more like they're rolling in after a night on the town.

Maybe the place is busy because it's spring. It is the season of new beginnings, hope, and renewal. Or in my case, desperation.

"I meant to ask you how you got a slot so quickly," I say, tugging a little on Troy's hand.

"I came in yesterday and just asked."

"You just asked?" I dodge left to avoid walking into a woman in a pink taffeta dress.

"There were no appointments online, so I thought I'd come in. I snagged a cancellation."

By now, we're at reception with just one couple up ahead dealing with a city employee. She looks to be unimpressed by all things spring wedding fever. In fact, by her expression, she might as well be working at the DMV.

"I can't tell if she's just bored or if she hates her job." I angle my head Troy's way. "You'd think this would be a happy career, right?"

"Maybe she's happy on the inside."

"Yeah." I feel my mouth turn down. "I can see she's just brimming with it."

"Be nice," he says with a curious-looking smile. But I'm not mean. Generally. People are just people, and I'm just making conversation. Creating a distraction for my brain as I curl and release my toes inside my Mary Jane shoes. I do a couple of belly breaths next, then give my hands by my sides a discreet shake.

"You good?"

"I'm getting there." I suck in a sharp breath as his arm comes around my back, pulling me into his side. PDA before marriage. We didn't discuss that.

"Good, because we're up."

The couple in front steps away, and the city employee just lights up. Literally—eyes wide, her weathered face is suddenly wreathed in a wide smile. "Well, hello there!"

Troy sets down my overnight bag. “Hey, Dolores.”

I am shook that Troy addresses the city employee by name, especially after what I just said. But it doesn’t take long for things to fall into place.

“And this must be your intended,” she trills.

“Hello.” I give a quick smile that feels over the top. *I wasn’t talking about you being a sourpuss just a moment ago, promise!*

“Yeah, this is my Clara,” he says, pulling me even closer and pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

His Clara? And the PDA is just *flowing* today.

“I adore a good love story,” she says, as her gaze jumps between us. “And second chance is just the best!”

“I won’t disagree,” he says, beaming down at me and making my heart give a traitorous flip. “Miles and years mean nothing when it was meant to be, right, Tater Tot?”

Tater—what on earth has he told her? Is this about the flying canapés? His fingers tighten a touch against my shoulder, and I gush, “Absolutely!”

“The story behind your pet name just broke my heart,” she says, pressing her hand to her chest. *No need to cry over spilled canapés, Dolores.* “Lucky for you, Troy is such a gentleman.”

“Oh, yes. Lucky.” Did he tell her he picked them up? “I count those stars every day.”

“Modern doctors can do such wonders.” This she says as though I don’t have ears. “And not one acne scar!” *Acne?* “Now, IDs, please?”

Another beige-and-brown hallway. This time long green couches line one wall. People mill around, some obviously couples, others guests. People smile and hold hands, laugh, and whisper sweet nothings. The atmosphere is . . .

I know joy is supposed to be infectious, but I’m not feeling it.

“Jumping the gun,” Troy mutters, indicating a seat.

“What? Oh.” A couple at the end of the seating is making out—really going for it. I feel that telltale sting in my cheeks.

“I wonder how many people there are before us.”

“Acne?” I demand, whipping the numbered ticket out from Troy’s hand.

He gives a chuckle and straightens the pleats in his pants as he sits. “You had acne *and* a face like a potato.” Lounging back in his seat, he

spreads his arm out behind me. “I told Dolores I took you to prom as a favor to the brother you don’t have.”

“Shameful,” I mutter, my own back as straight as a pole, both hands clasped around my flowers. I feel so aware of him, the shape of him, that it’s not even a little bit funny.

“I made up for it.” He pulls me suddenly back. I suppose it wouldn’t do for us to be the only couple not exhibiting togetherness. “I told her you were beautiful now,” he murmurs in my ear. The woman seated to Troy’s left smiles. Trust him to play it so perfectly for the audience.

“I love your dress,” I say as I catch her eye, unwilling to dwell on what isn’t real.

“Thank you, your . . . coat too.”

“She’s keeping me in suspense,” Troy says. “Not allowed a look at her dress until we’re in the room.” If only he knew.

“So cute,” she gushes.

“Not really. She’s got terrible dress sense. She’s probably wearing something made from chip packets under there.”

I playfully thump his arm. “You said you’d marry me in whatever—that I could wear what I like. And I like Kettle chips!”

The poor woman seems mildly horrified. Until a second later when her number is called. We both manage to hang on to our laughter until she’s gone. But our amusement dies almost immediately, and we’re left looking at each other.

He has the best eyes, burnt sugar with espresso at the rim. And in a few more minutes, I’m going to be married to him.

I, Clara Forbes, am going to be married to Troy Templeton.

It’s been a long while since I told myself that, and my stomach flips in a not-unpleasant way. Troy clears his throat and looks away, the first of us to come back to his senses. I sit straight in my seat again.

“I don’t hear any crinkles.” The ghost of his smile is visible in profile as he leans forward, pressing his elbows to his knees.

“That’s because I used Pringles cans.”

“Can’t wait.” His gaze drops to his shoes while mine remains resolutely ahead as we both fall quiet, lost to our internal worlds. Though I can’t speak for where his mind takes him, mine gets to spinning again. I thought I had butterflies earlier, but I think they might be albatross. With teeth like velociraptors that seem to be gnawing at my insides.

How will we navigate this marriage?

The lies we'll tell, who we'll tell.

Living together under one roof. I know we made rules and stuff, but how will we manage to remain civil?

Will he tell his mom? Will she be devastated and take out a hit on me?

What will I do with my time now that I won't be working?

Now, I totally get Troy's point of view here, because tending bar doesn't fit the narrative of trust fund baby. I'm not sure what or how, but I'll need to find something befitting my new station as a billionaire's wife. An odd feeling runs through me at that thought. One I choose not to identify.

Better get on that plan, because I cannot be the little woman at home. First off, I can't cook. *But would he expect me to cook?* I mean, I would cook. If I could. Just not as a wife, but as a roommate who appreciates the $100,000 loan he just made me. *Even if it was detailed as a gift in the prenup as a surprise.*

I hate that he did that, even if $100K is pocket change to him. It feels like a signing bonus, but I get I'll need to look the part for our stupid future dates. I'll pay him back as soon as I have my trust. At least we agreed on that, even if it isn't detailed in said prenup.

First on my agenda is a facial. See if I can't get my skin to glow like his friendly redhead, Hannah. She looked stunning that night—that night I was in an apron and ugly shoes. Not that she would've noticed me. Troy says they've only ever been friends, and I brushed that off like I didn't care. *I care more than I ought to.*

As a sudden prickle runs down my neck, I glance his way to find him watching me.

"Your head must be an interesting place to be."

"Only when I'm taking my meds." Otherwise, it's hell.

"Meds for?"

"ADHD. I probably should've mentioned that." Though I guess now is as good a time as any to do so. Speak now or forever hold your peace, right? "I was late to the party."

"I don't take your meaning."

"Just that I was rawdogging the ADHD life up until after college." When the wheels came off the minute I didn't have to keep it together for the sake of my studies. Hyperfocus was my friend up until then. But I just couldn't mask anymore. "The diagnosis was a relief."

“I imagine.” He quirks his head, and I find myself disappointed that’s all he has to say. “I haven’t seen you with your hair up in an age.”

My hand goes there automatically. I’ve braided it into a crown, kind of, and it takes me a moment to work out that “an age” can only mean he’s reminiscing. I also see the moment he makes the same connection, hear it as he says, “Those are pretty earrings.”

Can you spell *diversion*?

“Thank you. They were my grandmother’s.” Seaman Schepps, cabochon-cut aquamarine, sapphire, and pearls. She gave them to me before she died, and somehow, they weren’t included on the list of her effects. They’re another way I’m playing in to our wedding color scheme, even if it wasn’t my intention. “I couldn’t bear to part with them, though I got close a couple of times.”

“How come you never sold the coat?”

“I’m sorry?”

“The coat you’re wearing. Max Mara whatever.”

“Well spotted, Mr. Fashion Forward.” I pluck a tiny piece of colored paper from my sleeve. *Confetti, maybe?* “Why would I sell it?”

He slides me a look. “I expect you would’ve gotten a couple of weeks’ rent out of the proceeds.” He gives a careless shrug. Nothing to see here. No past revealed and no need for pity. It doesn’t stop my flare of guilt. Poverty. Scarcity. Lack. Whatever you call the consuming fear that comes from not knowing if you’ll have enough left over for food after you’ve paid the rent. You might get through the experience, but do you ever get over it? I guess time will tell.

“I tried to sell it,” I admit softly. “A couple of times. I couldn’t find a buyer the same shape.”

He gives a soft laugh. A scoff, really.

“Seriously, I had it tailored to fit, and no one else in Manhattan is a five-feet-two boobzilla.”

Oh. Sweet Jesus. That sounded like a setup. *Look at my tits, Troy! Look at my tits!*

But the good Lord is on my side today as, at that very moment, our number is called.

Wait . . . maybe the devil was in charge of that.

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Chapter 15
TROY

"Please join hands."

Two minutes. It takes two minutes to change my whole life. *On paper, at least.*

We get married in an ugly-ass room with a man in a cheap suit standing behind a lectern, doing his best to make everything sound special. But how could it be special when we are the twentieth—fiftieth—couple of that day?

But that's not to say I don't feel something when Clara slips off her coat. *Something inconvenient.* Her dress is pale blue, a straight silhouette cut a little low at the front and the back. It's simple yet stylish, demure yet seductive. She looks beautiful. And the inconvenience? It's how my gut twists with anticipation as I imagine her dress on my bedroom floor.

"Do you, Troy, take Clara to be your lawful wedded spouse?"

"I do." Be . . . wondering what the hell I'm doing right now. Did I somehow forget how things ended for me the last time I held this woman's hand?

Clara, meanwhile, says *I do* like she is stating a fact she's already accepted.

So I promise to love, honor, cherish, and keep Clara as I find myself wondering if it makes me no better than my father. He made those promises to my mom, then beat her for the first ten years of their marriage. *Fuck.* I'm gonna have to think of something to tell her when she gets back from her cruise.

Hey, Mom, I just married the woman who ripped our lives apart. You cool wid dat?

Yeah, I'm gonna have to come up with something better.

"As a symbol of your promise, please place the ring on Clara's finger."

Some symbol this is, I think, as I slip the cheap-ass piece of whatever the fuck this metal is onto her slender finger.

"As you have both consented to be united within the bonds of matrimony, and having exchanged your promises, by the powers vested in

me by the state of New York . . .”

My heart begins to thump.

“. . . I now pronounce you married.”

Well, fuck.

“You may seal your vows with a kiss.”

A kiss of the strategic variety.

We negotiated every detail of this marriage like an actual contract we’d sign. We spoke of timelines and expectations, and drew boundaries so tight they might as well have been legal clauses. What we barely considered were the risks. And I didn’t account for this moment, standing in this oddly bureaucratic room, holding hands and staring into Clara’s deep-blue eyes.

In front of me, she gives a valiant attempt at a smile, but I see her anxiety. It helps a little. We’re in this for different reasons, but we are in this together. There’s some comfort in that.

I give her fingers a reassuring squeeze and lean the top half of my body toward hers, and our mouths meet. Briefly. Lips closed. Convincing enough, judging by Dolores’s loud whoop. I guess it was nice of her to offer to be a witness, though it feels like a pebble added to this rock cairn of pressure. I’m also aware her offer was just another opportunity to scan Clara’s face for acne scars.

Kiss over, we make our thanks and leave as fast as humanly possible. As we head for the exit, Clara’s fingers twitch in mine.

“What is it?” I angle my gaze her way.

“You’re doing it again. Your legs are way longer than mine.”

“Sorry.” I adjust my pace, and she mutters something under her breath. “What was that?”

“Nothing.”

But I swear she said something about supermodels.

We exit the courthouse, still hand in hand, where her friend is waiting to catch the happy event. She’ll take a few photographs, and something tasteful and candid appearing will quietly find its way to the press.

The story will write itself. Fintech CEO Marries Banking Heiress. Part human story, part business event.

The sunlight is bright as we push through the courthouse doors, not that I notice as one word rattles around in my head. Married. Married. Married.

I have a wife. That sounds so fucking weird.

Clara Forbes is my wife. My stomach swoops.

This is my wife, Clara Forbes. Clara Forbes Templeton? Shut the fuck up, you idiot. She's not gonna use your name.

Color rains down on us quite suddenly—confetti cut in the shape of hearts. Clara's smile freezes before morphing into concern as, in front of us, a little girl of maybe four or five, bursts into tears in her father's arms.

"It's not them!" she wails.

"It's okay, honey." Her father comforts his daughter by rubbing her back as he slides us an apologetic look.

"I frew too soon," she cries, waving an empty paper cone.

Clara's grip on my hand loosens as she makes her way to the kid. "It was perfect timing," she says gently.

The girl frowns, her words hiccuping. "But it's all gone."

"It was very kind of you. We didn't have anyone to throw confetti for us." She glances back my way, maybe for corroboration. But I don't know where she's taking this. "Thank you for making our day so, so special."

The girl hesitates as Clara lifts the small bouquet she's been holding since the ceremony. Pulling a bloom free, she holds it out. "This is for you."

The girl's eyes widen as she reaches for it.

"For your excellent confetti work."

She takes the flower slowly, suspiciously, though her tears disappear almost instantly.

"If you want, you can make very special confetti out of it to throw when your . . ." She glances the dad's way.

"Uncle." He smiles, relieved, touched, and a dozen other things I can only guess at.

"When your uncle comes out."

"How?" the little girl asks.

"Just pull the petals." And she shows her how.

"Thank you," a woman—the girl's mother?—says, stepping closer. "She was just so excited. And now you get to throw confetti twice." The little girl is suddenly all smiles. "Hey, why don't I take a couple of snaps of you both?" The woman reaches for her phone. She probably thinks she's doing us a favor, seeing us here alone.

"Oh, that's okay." Clara's gaze glides across the street to where her friend with the camera should be. But something in the moment has shifted. At least, for me.

“Here, use mine,” I say, pulling out my phone and handing it over as I ignore Clara’s questioning look. I don’t have an answer. Unlike her, I’m not trying to make anyone feel better. It just feels right somehow.

Maybe because none of this interaction is staged—not the stranger holding my phone or the little girl clutching a flower. Maybe it feels like this recording, this proof of our marriage, shouldn’t be staged either.

The woman steps back a few feet as Clara slides her hand back into mine. The contact is warm and natural, and the little girl beams up at us from the side of the steps.

“Perfect.” The woman lifts my phone. Snaps a couple of times. “How about a little smooch?”

“Kisses for love!” the little girl puts in.

Startled, Clara looks up at me, and something in my chest shifts. Something like a donkey kick, wild and inconvenient. A realization maybe that, one way or another, this woman is going to ruin my carefully managed life.

“Come on!” encourages the mom.

I put my hand to the small of Clara’s back. She startles a touch, but it only lasts half a second before she tilts her face. Our second kiss. Now *this* is a wedding-day kiss. Soft and slow and sweet. Real in a way it shouldn’t be.

Supporting her back, I lean into her. Her arm drops and her knee lifts, sliding along my leg. In my mind’s eye, I see how perfect this’ll look for the cameras.

Incidentally, it’s as perfect as it feels.

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Chapter 16
TROY

The town car pulls up in front of my building, and the driver gets out to handle Clara's bag.

Sitting forward, Clara looks up at the building the car has just pulled up in front of. "This looks . . ."

"Do not say like a glass dick."

Her head whips my way. "Oh my God, what?"

"It's just something Max said once." Though I believe his exact words were "*a giant, unhappy glass dick.*" I don't think it looks remotely phallic. *Or like a half-deflated chub.* Even if it's tall and long . . . before it folds over the roof of the next building.

We climb out—she doesn't wait for her door to be opened for her, thank fuck—and make our way in through the entrance doors.

"No doorman?"

"Is that a deal-breaker for you?" I ask as Aziz, the guy on duty today, rounds the desk, intent on taking Clara's bag. I wave him away.

We cross the lobby, and at the elevators, I press my access card to the panel. We get in, the doors slide closed, and we begin our swift ascent.

"No going down?"

I doubt she meant that as it sounded. "To the basement?" I ask. "Or are you asking if I live in hell along with Uncle Satan?"

She gives a tinkling laugh. "I guess I meant that the building gives off secret-bunker vibes. Glass and steel and a swanky lobby, but it's all a cover. In the basement, foreign spies are being interrogated."

"Your mind is a curious place."

"No, it's really not. It can be loud and chaotic and . . ." She gives her head a quick shake.

I don't remember this about her, the way she puts herself down. Before, she always seemed like the most confident person in the room. What's changed? Other than she's been pulled down a peg or two by circumstances.

As for what she said about an ADHD diagnosis, I guess I can see it in hindsight. There were signs, not that I would've realized back then. I was a kid, and Clara just blinded me. But she was impulsive, either full-on or kind of distracted. Forgetful sometimes. Blind to time, come to think of it. *Just like I was blind to the person she really was.*

The doors glide open to the sight of a hallway, the scent of paint and new wood, and the sound of power tools. Or progress, as the contractor calls it.

"Welcome to Crazy Town," I say, pushing on the door. I fucking love coming home.

"I take it back. There is no bunker." She stares at the sheet of thick plastic covering the hallway to the right. "This place is more serial killer vibes." Her attention tips to the protective matting underfoot.

"You got me. Now I got you." The latter I say in my most dastardly tone, then clear my throat. "Kitchen." I pitch my voice louder over the sudden burst of power tools. "Don't worry about that. It's just the team grinding up my last victim."

"Environmentally responsible."

I drop her bag to the floor and my keys to the island. Clara carefully lays down her bouquet, trailing her hand across the marble island. "This is beautiful. Calacatta, right?"

I make a vague gesture. "Living, dining." I point to the open-plan space straight ahead with views over the Hudson. "Still waiting on the delivery of furniture."

"Oh, so you weren't aiming for bachelor pad chic?"

"That was last season's look." The decor is a little sparse, though the furniture cost a fuck ton. "Down that hallway," I say, pointing left, "is the home office, my bedroom, and some other stuff. Guest suites are to the right. Which is where all the noise is coming from."

"And that's where I'll be staying?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. They just put up the sheeting this morning to contain the dust."

"I can handle a little dust."

I don't immediately answer, and I don't stare at her mouth for too long. "I'll make sure they leave a bedroom and a bathroom until last. And they don't work after four."

I roll my lips together as though I can still taste hers. *It was just a photo op. No need to get all twisted up about it.*

"Are there doors down there or only plastic?" Her eyes go to the sheeting again, her voice lifting above what sounds like a chainsaw.

"Last time I—" The noise suddenly drops out. "Last time I looked," I repeat at a normal volume. The doors aren't staying, but that's a worry for later. It's not like I'll be creeping around, trying to catch her naked. *Clara naked in my place. I'm not gonna think about it.* "Like I said, one side of the place is done. The other is still a work in progress."

The place was two apartments originally, two penthouses, when a developer picked them up a few years ago. While I loved the fact that Battery Park feels like its own little village on the edge of the hustle and bustle, I didn't love the interior. Hence the remodel and the refit, installing a gym, refurbishing the patios and stuff. "Seven should work, right?"

"I'm sorry?" As her head whips back, her hair catches on her lipstick. I shove my hands in my pockets.

"If the crew arrives after seven a.m. to start work."

"It's your place."

"But you'll be living here." My stomach tenses at that. "I know it's not ideal, but—"

"Honestly, it's fine. You saw where I was staying. This is practically the Ritz compared."

"Okay." But I still feel defensive. Like I need to explain the unexplainable. It's not like I can't afford to live somewhere else for convenience. I just don't want to.

"This is a beautiful sin," Clara says, changing the subject, like she knows what's going on in my head. Her dainty fingers glide along the marble, the thin band on her hand catching the light. *Piece-of-shit ring.* "Oh, I like these." Like a magpie, her attention is caught by the tile samples I'm supposed to give an opinion on. My opinion is *You're the interior designer, so design*.

I cough, and her attention pings back. "Despite the mats and the plastic, the crew don't come through this part of the house."

"They use a service entrance," she intuits.

"Yeah. Anyway, you can pretty much hang out here whenever. I'll be at work a lot. Evenings, weekends."

"I'll be sure to keep out of your hair otherwise."

“That’s not what I meant.”

“No, but we agreed that our private lives . . .” Her words trail off, but I hear the next part anyway. *No emotional expectations.*

“I’ve gotta get back to the office this afternoon.”

“Oh . . . kay.” Her expression must reflect her thoughts, but fuck if I can work them out. Her phone begins to ring. “Excuse me,” she murmurs, making for the window. I don’t think it’s me she’s hiding from but the noise. “Hi, Chel. All good. You?” A pause. “Well, that’s great. I’m super happy to hear it. No, I don’t need to see. Okay. Can you hold a minute?” She presses her phone to her shoulder and turns her attention my way. “They offered Chelsea five thousand dollars.”

Five thousand dollars for our wedding photograph. I ponder the number for a minute. “She should tell them seven. Maybe she’ll get six.”

She nods and tells Chelsea just that, then murmurs her goodbyes.

“Thanks for letting her do that,” she says, setting her phone next to my keys. “It means a lot.”

To her or to her friend? I don’t need to know. “Might as well let someone make a few bucks from breaking the news.”

“Should we share it to our own social media accounts?” Her nose scrunches. “I have Instagram, though I haven’t used it in a while.”

I give a shrug. “The algorithm on my account probably has a DNR.” The one person guaranteed to see any post is my mother. I guess posting to Instagram is one way to break the news. “Let’s wait awhile.”

“It’s not like we’re a couple of celebrities. Well, I’m not.”

“The press will be just as interested in you as me.”

“Please.” She gives a cute snort, then turns to slip off her coat, revealing an exquisite slice of pale back.

Boundaries, I repeat in my head. Because that dress and that body just scramble my brain.

As she turns back, she catches me staring. She says nothing as she slides away a stray hair.

“You’re the elusive one in this partnership.” I’m not happy with how throaty the words sound, but I’m saved from further embarrassment by the buzz of the intercom. I move to answer it.

“Mr. Templeton, there’s a Mr. Perez from—”

“Northern Lights,” I finish. “Thanks, Aziz. Send him up. The remodel crew’s foreman,” I explain as I turn.

“Should I leave?” She points over her shoulder, but I’m not sure I want to find her in my bedroom after this. I shake my head.

“Mr. Templeton,” Jimmy Perez begins a few minutes later, holding out his hand.

“It’s Troy, Jimmy,” I remind him as we shake. “How are you?”

“I’m okay.” Somehow, that sounds less than convincing as he pulls on the blue shoe covers over his boots. His eyes widen a touch as he straightens.

“Jimmy,” I say, half turning, “this is my . . . my Clara.” *Wife* is gonna take a little more practice.

“Hihowareya.” The words string together before his attention swings back. “I’m sorry to turn up like this, but I just got off the phone with one of the boys.” His tone isn’t what I’d call reassuring, especially as I realize the noise hasn’t started back up.

“The look on your face tells me this news is coming at a price.”

“You’re not wrong, I’m sorry to say.”

“Hit me with it.”

“You have a leak. A bad one. Caused by a fault in the roof membrane—it’s probably been like that for months.”

“Sounds bad.”

“Real bad. Your whole ceiling deck on that side of the property is saturated.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Like I said, this isn’t a new problem, just newly discovered,” he says in the contractor version of *It’s not my fault*. “Water’s been soaking into the insulation, dripping down into wall cavities. You’re looking at a major rot issue. You’re lucky you don’t have black mold.”

“Lucky.” The word jumps from my mouth like I’m amused. I’m anything but as I press my hand to my chin as I process what this means. But you can fix pretty much anything if you throw enough money at it.

“Two of the terraces need to come up.”

“And the shower?”

“And the shower,” he agrees, fighting a smile.

“Haters gotta hate,” I grumble. “I love that outdoor shower.”

“The good news is we found the leak before it compromised the whole ceiling structure. It doesn’t seem to have spread to this side of the place, but the door will need to be sealed properly. It’s gonna get messy.”

My eyes glide to the plastic covering.

“You can’t go through there,” he says immediately. “It’s off limits. Too dangerous.”

Clara murmurs, drawing closer to my side. “We can’t use the rooms at all?”

“Believe me, you won’t want to. Not when we start ripping everything out.”

“What does that mean?” Her eyes seem to plead as she looks up at me.

“Walls, the ceilings. Joists,” Jimmy says, but that’s not what she’s asking.

Fuck, this place just got a whole lot smaller for me and my new roommate. One bed. One couch. One bathroom.

“Should we get a hotel?” she says quietly.

“No.” My answer is sharp and a little ugly. But I’m going nowhere.

“I just got a text from Chelsea. The deal went through.”

What she means is there’s no altering the timeline now. Shit, I need to get back to the office and tell them before the news breaks. “We’re not moving out.”

“But . . .”

“I’ll, uh, let you two talk,” Jimmy says, stepping away as though he’s in a blast zone. “Gotta get some stuff from the truck.”

I give a nod. “Get Hayley to give me a call.” She’s their cost consultant.

“On it.”

The door isn’t closed before Clara starts again. “We can’t stay here, Troy.” She throws out her arm, her panic ratcheting. “You heard him say we’re not allowed in there. *I’m* not allowed in there.”

“The place is still big enough. We’ll make do.”

“Do you have another bedroom through there, or are you expecting me to sleep in the bathtub?”

“How do you know I have a bathtub?”

“I’m not sleeping in a bathtub.” She folds her arms across her chest, and I try not to look. But in that dress, it’s kind of hard not to. *Kind of hard not to get hard.* I push that realization away.

“I’m not moving out,” I repeat, rubbing my hand up the back of my head.

“You can’t be serious.”

“And you can’t be telling me what I am. Not five minutes ago, you said you didn’t care. Besides, half of this apartment is still better than that shithole you were living in.”

“But I had my own room. Privacy. A place to retreat.”

“I’ll barely be here.”

“But you will be here. What then?”

“I’m sure you’ll cope,” I say, digging in.

“What about you—can you stand to be around me? Because only a few days ago, I could’ve sworn you’d happily wrap your hands around my neck.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“And you’re being blind! How are we supposed to convince people we’re in love if we can barely stand to be around each other? We need space. And time—time away from each other and away from other people’s eyes. Otherwise this experience will be like living in a pressure chamber.”

“Still dramatic,” I say, moving to the fridge. I pull out a fancy-ass can of water and offer it to her. She shakes her head, so I crack the seal. “I’m not leaving.”

“Really? This is the hill you’re choosing to die on?”

“It’s just for a few weeks.” Though from the look on Jimmy’s face, it could be months. Maybe the whole three months. Maybe we’ll kill each other before then.

“A few weeks where I’ll sleep . . . where?” She glances around, her consternation clear. “I can’t go back to Inwood—I was evicted.”

“You can’t go back to Inwood because we agreed we’d live under the same roof.”

“It doesn’t have to be this roof!”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Why—why does it?”

“Because I said so.”

“And where will I sleep?” she demands.

“You can sleep on the couch.”

“*You* can sleep on the couch.” For a moment, I think she might stamp her feet.

“This is my apartment.”

“It’s also your stupid narrative,” she snaps.

“Well, I’m not sleeping on the couch. I’m too long for it.”

“Well, I’m not sleeping on the couch because there are no blinds!”

“What’s wrong? You worried someone might see you in my jimjams?”

“Why are you being so unreasonable?” she almost cries.

“Come with me.” I grab her hand and make for the good side of the apartment.

“I really hate it when you do this,” she grumbles from behind me. “Your legs are twice the length of mine.”

Suddenly, I want to test her hypothesis. I shut that shit down.

“In here,” I say, tugging her into my room. Another room that’s sparsely furnished but for my bed. A bed fit for a king. A modern-day king, none of that canopied shit. “This is the alternative.” I shove my hands into my pockets. It wouldn’t do to shake her.

“Your bed?” Her tone is one of utter disbelief. “You want me to sleep in your bed?”

“Let me twirl my dastardly mustache in celebration of getting you here.” Like an asshole, I do just that. “You got me. I set this whole thing up—got you to marry me, *then* hired in a crew of actors just to get you into this.” I point at my bed.

“But . . . You . . . I . . . We can’t.”

“It’s the couch or one-half of this huge fucking bed.” Probably should’ve kept the *fucking* out of it. “Until we can sort something else out.”

“Like moving out?”

“Like a camp bed in the office.”

“I just don’t understand. You could afford to book suites at every hotel in Manhattan—why would you make this so difficult?”

“Maybe because I’m difficult.”

“Is this some kind of punishment?”

“Not everything is about you,” I retort. Home is important. And home, if you’re not careful, can prove to be temporary. My home is my everything. But I can’t say any of that shit because it makes no sense—I own a goddamn property portfolio! I’m still not moving out.

“I know that.” Her small voice makes me feel like a prick.

“I’m staying. You do you.” Maybe I am a prick.

“That’s not an explanation.”

My jaw flexes. “I don’t owe you one.”

“Well, I’m not sleeping on the couch.” Something inside me unclenches as her eyes stray to the bed with genuine concern. “And I’m not

sleeping here.”

“Bathtub it is, then.”

“You’re not even funny,” she mutters, dropping to sit on the edge of the bed.

I lift my eyes to the window because I’d rather be looking down her dress. “Says the girl who promised me a dress made from Pringles tubes.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she grumbles, her fingers straightening a wrinkle in the shiny fabric of her dress.

“You’re the one with the Tater Tot face.” I won’t make her a princess or a sprite. Instead, I’ll label this desirable, complex woman as a pimple-faced pain. “You hungry?” I add, because my sugar levels are clearly making me hallucinate.

“I can’t cook,” she mutters petulantly, “if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Damn.” I try not to smile. “Should’ve said so before I married you.”

“You should’ve told me you’ve become perverse in your old age before I married *you*.”

“Nobody ever complained about my perversions before.” My words end in a playful curl, and I’m relieved to find I’m able to breathe now.

“If the whole roof caves in and I die, I will haunt you.”

“Seems fair.” Seems kind of nice. Better get some food inside me before I officially lose my mind. “Let’s go order something.” I hold out my hand, and she studies it.

“I like your apartment.” She offers me the concession as her dainty fingers meet mine. “This half, anyway.”

“Thanks.” I pull her up, let go, then turn for the door. That’s all I say. I didn’t buy the place to impress anyone, and I didn’t buy it to have to give it up.

No matter how temporary.

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Chapter 17
CLARA

I stare at my dress hanging on the back of the bedroom door. *His* bedroom door. I'm just a poor forgotten bride, spending her wedding night waiting for her workaholic husband to come home.

My sudden spurt of laughter sounds mildly hysterical. I shake it off before addressing the empty room. "You are an idiot, and this was a terrible idea. A reckless, ridiculous, rrr . . ." I give my head a tiny shake because I can't think of another *r* word except for *Rioja*. My shoulders slump as I stare into my glass, giving myself a double chin. I might be reckless and ridiculous, but I'm not Rioja. Not yet. I'm only on my first glass.

I found the wine in a kitchen cabinet filled with some other stuff. More wine, Japanese whiskey, three bottles of champagne, and a few boxes of fancy chocolates. My guess is they're gifts, and therefore I decided this had to be Troy's regifting cabinet. So I regifted the bottle of wine to me to help me through my hour(s) of need.

Today was always going to feel surreal. But then he kissed me, and I've been reeling since. I mean, he kissed me twice, but I'm not talking about the first mandated time. That kiss I expected. I mentally prepared for it. The other kiss, though . . .

Oh, the other kiss.

It made me feel like every other kiss I've had in my life, at least those kisses after Troy and before now, were wrong.

My head is a mess, so I'm drinking wine!

To keep myself busy, I unpacked my bag, which took me all of three minutes, and then appropriated a little space in his *huge* walk-in closet. I almost walked immediately out again, worried I wandered into a bougie but unmanned clothing store. The kind of place that uses verbiage like *traceability* and *materiality*, and is full of glass vitrines and tonal hanging displays.

I might've messed with those displays a little, mixing blues with beige and shoving a couple of red T-shirts in with green. *Too bad he's not colorblind.* I thought about messing up his underwear drawer, too, but I

didn’t want to reveal I’d had my hands on those most intimate of garments. For the record, his family jewels are mostly clothed in designer labels in hues of black and blues. Tight fitting in the buns. A comfy cradle for his . . .

I stare at my glass. *Wow, this stuff is strong.*

I feel pleasantly numb, I decide as I shuffle into the adjoining bathroom—Rosso Levanto marble, a stone bath, a mother-of-pearl chandelier, and a shower the size of an eight-person meeting pod—to put on a little hand cream. I’d made some real estate for my toiletries earlier. Space was not a problem.

His bedroom is also huge (a bit of a theme here, though I *know* he isn’t overcompensating for anything), but it reminds me of his office. Impersonal. In fact, it seems like the whole place has been designed for someone else.

I straighten the duvet from where I’ve been sitting, then putter out into the living space again. I feel antsy. Discomforted, I guess. Lonely, even. I didn’t feel alone this afternoon, thanks to the whir of power tools, and the odd muffled conversations coming from the other side of the plastic-wrapped door. But since night has fallen, I feel like I’m creeping around someone else’s house.

Which I suppose is exactly what I’ve been doing.

I’m standing at the window, feeling oddly detached (thanks, another glass) and staring out at the night sky when the front door opens. My heart begins to hammer against my chest. Turns out, I am *not* anesthetized enough. I take a breath and feel into it.

Recognize: My chest is tight because I’m worried. This is *not* excitement.

Restructure: We have a history, but I’m not the girl I was back then. So this is unfamiliar, but not unsafe.

Repeat: I can handle awkwardness. Conversation. Whatever the night brings.

Even if my heart insists on racing anyway.

Troy’s keys jingle as they’re deposited to the kitchen island, and as I turn, he’s already slipping out of his jacket. I don’t think I’ve willed into existence the way his shirt clings to the caps of his shoulders, but I appreciate the view all the same. *Come on, nervous system. Get with the program.*

“Nothing?” He takes a few steps closer, dropping the tailored jacket to one of a pair of Hans Wegner elbow chairs. Genuine. I’d checked the label.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I asked how you’re doing.”

“I’m drinking!” I say, lifting the oversize glass I have hugged to my chest.

“Right.”

“I didn’t think you’d mind, especially as I live here now.” Wild. Just wild. Unbelievable, actually.

“I don’t know where you got that from, but no, I don’t mind. And yes, you do live here.” Indulgent *and* amused. *Hmm.*

“It was in your regifting cupboard.” His brow flickers. “With a stash of chocolates.” At this, he pulls a face. I clap my hand to my mouth as I giggle. How did I forget this about him? He despises chocolate. I should remember that when I’m feeling like the weird one.

“From the Realtor and stuff. But, yeah, let’s make that the regifting cupboard.” He turns without appreciating what he’s said. *Let’s*, as though we’re in this together for realsies. “You hungry?”

“About that, I was meaning to ask,” I say, standing by the fridge, which took me an age to find earlier. Thanks, swanky cabinetry. “Were you bitten by a vampire recently?”

“Not so I noticed.”

“So you just don’t . . . eat? Fresh produce. Meats, cheese, and stuff. Or maybe your fridge is on a cleanse?”

“I haven’t been around much,” he says, pulling out a can of water. He cracks it open, and even from across the room I can see the strong muscles in his neck move with each swallow.

“You should get a filter,” I say, spinning away. I should get a flippin’ filter. Or a little duct tape. “It would be more environmentally friendly than a million cans. Nice view, by the way,” I say, changing the subject. Mainly because I have no idea if water filters or cans have the lesser environmental impact.

“It is when it’s daylight.” I pretend not to hear his amusement. “Shall I order something in?”

“You know I already did. You can smell it.”

“Ethiopian, right?”

I nod. Mainly because I had no idea what time he'd be home—because a marriage of convenience is sometimes inconvenient—and I knew it would heat up okay.

I pull the take-out containers from the warmer and watch Troy try to find the flatware. Then watch his entertainment as I pull on a drawer and lift out napery.

"I didn't know I had those."

"This place does look like someone Marie Kondo'd it." Other than the cereal cabinet. The man likes his cereal. Cheerios, Apple Jacks, Cap'n Crunch, Froot Loops, Lucky Charms. There was oddly no milk in the fridge, though. I guess Troy hasn't reached the private-chef kind of existence yet. I'm sure it will come. Hopefully before the diabetes does.

We each take a seat at the kitchen island and pretend it's normal that our elbows almost touch.

"You're saying . . . what? The house needs a little personality?"

"I'm saying nothing of the kind."

"Didn't sound like that to me." He splashes a little red into a glass before silently offering to top up mine.

"Two-glass limit." I put my hand over my glass. "I almost opened the champagne. Not to celebrate or anything," I add, quickly course correcting. "I've served plenty of the stuff to others, but it's been a while for me."

"Help yourself. I don't much like wine."

"You were more a beer kind of guy, as I recall."

His mouth curls, but his eyes seem watchful.

"Anyway," I bluster. "We can save the champagne for our real celebration."

He raises his glass to mine. "To your trust being released and Table making a fuck ton of money."

"To the narrative being a blinding success."

Our glasses *clink*, and we each reach for our forks. Troy digs in with gusto while I nibble a little injera bread. I was hungry earlier, but now I'm full of prebed jitters.

Forks scrape and glasses are sipped from, but we're awkwardly silent.

Small talk, small talk! My kingdom for a little small talk!

"This is good," Troy suddenly says as though tuning in to my inner monologue.

“I’m pleased you like it, because it’s the kind of food you can look forward to with me as your . . . with me living here. I know all the cuisines. Thai, Indian, Greek, Italian, Chinese. And by that, I mean I know all the restaurant numbers. Not that I expect you to be at home every night.”

“Feed me and who knows?”

My stomach does a little flip.

Troy reaches for his napkin, wiping the corner of his mouth. “I just realized, this is our first meal as a married couple.”

“Well . . .” I think I might be pulling a face like the drunk emoji, because he laughs.

“We are married, Clara.”

“Technically.”

“Legally. Got the ring and everything.” His eyes dip, and his brows pull down. “Just wild.”

“It is strange,” I agree. What’s even stranger is how he doesn’t seem mad about it. I mean, he isn’t ecstatic either. Maybe perplexed? Kind of *How did I find myself here?*

Same, friend. Same.

“What kind of a bartender were you, Gretch?”

“The kind that was in it for the tips.” I stick a little bread into my mouth.

“I’ll admit, I was impressed on Saturday. The way you handled the guys giving you shit was pretty cool to watch.”

“That was the best part of the job,” I answer. “Better than dealing with handsy, entitled suits. Bashing them over the head with your tray is frowned on by the supervisors.” I’m still feeling a little salty about that.

“About that asshole. He no longer works for Table.”

“Oh?” That feels . . . not horrible to hear. Even if he couldn’t have fired him just for me. “How did you find out who he was?”

“I asked questions. I’m pretty smart, you know.” He lifts his glass. “Fuck him.”

“And the Porsche he rode—drove—in on.” I touch the rim of my glass to his.

“I’d like to say he won’t work in this town again, but . . .”

“If his numbers are good, his personality gets overlooked.”

“We’ll see.” Which sounds a little like *Not if I get my way*. “What did you do today?”

“Unpacked. Looked around.” I slide him a pointed look: *Don’t you dare comment*. “Poured some wine,” I add, looping my fingers around the stem of the glass. “But mostly, I think I just got weirded out.”

“This doesn’t feel too weird, though, right? You and me, eating a meal. Drinking some wine.”

“Being civil?” I pull a face as I pinch my thumb and forefinger together.

He gives a quiet laugh, then turns back to his plate. I go back to rice chasing. And overthinking. Which I then make the mistake of swapping out for watching him. Secretly.

There’s something about the sandy rasp of stubble on his cheek that contrasts so well with his white shirt / dark pants combo. Something about it that creates a little flicker in my belly. I can’t work out if it’s evolutionary—the sight of the caveman, back from his hard day of woolly mammoth murder—or if I just have a thing for men who exude a certain kind of rakishness.

Or maybe I just have a thing for him.

I sit straight in my seat, the fork falling from between my fingers.

I cannot be into Troy Templeton. The stakes are too high.

I just won’t allow it!

“You good?” He angles his curiosity my way.

“Yes, fine.” No problem at all. I’m just literally losing my mind. “Back spasm,” I add, feigning a twinge. “I think we need to go to bed. And you’ll have to pull out.”

“Say again?”

Oh no. “I mean, I need to order a bed that I can pull out.” He’s already laughing, but I bluster on as though I haven’t noticed. “I was thinking I could put it in your home office. The bed. The pullout couch, I mean.”

Troy puts both elbows to the countertop, and his head in his hands, as his broad shoulders begin to shake.

“Would that work for you?” Why do I sound like Minnie Mouse?

His hand lifts like *I need a minute*. But that minute lasts a hundred years, and I die many, many painful deaths before he gathers himself. “Oof.” He sits up, gives a hiccuping laugh, then blows out a still-unsteady breath.

“Or even your closet,” I waffle. Like there’s any digging myself out of this. *The closet, really? Who do I think I am—Harry Potter?*

“The closet?” He looks at me as though I’ve grown another head. If he says “Harry Potter,” I will slap myself.

“It’s big enough. You have a lot of space in there. A lot of . . . things. Watches and stuff.”

“You have been snooping?”

“I was merely hanging up my clothes. I live here now, remember?”

“That’s not something I’ll easily forget.”

“Yes, well, the closer physicality is more than I’d bargained for myself.” Closer emotionally is absolutely *not* pending.

“Let’s not get into that again.”

“I wasn’t about to. Even if I don’t understand why we couldn’t just move into a hotel suite or something.”

“I don’t have to explain myself, Clara.” His barb is well aimed, and I fall quiet. Troy reaches for his napkin, wiping his fingertips as though he’d rather not look at me. “But maybe you can imagine,” he begins, his tone softer now, “after living with strangers and never quite feeling at home. After struggling to survive and worrying you might not make it, but then finding a home. And maybe then you can imagine how it’ll be for you after we’re done here. When you’ll move into your own place, and the door will close, and your shoulders will relax, and everything will feel right for the first time in a long while.” He puts the napkin down, his caramel-coffee eyes on mine. “Then maybe you’ll understand. There’s nothing more important than home.”

“Okay,” I whisper, avoiding his gaze. “I get that.”

He nods and turns, rising from his seat. And that’s the end of our first meal together as husband and wife. *Good Lord.*

We clean up in silence, but it’s a silence that feels very loud. Or maybe that’s just my brain. Then Troy says he has a little work to do in the office. I’m not sure if that’s true or if he doesn’t want to be around me, though I tell myself that’s none of my business.

At least I now understand his reasons for insisting on staying here. There is no denying his sentiments, but maybe I’m just more practically minded. Or it could be my previous privilege showing. Or maybe, just maybe, he’s right. That I can’t know how he feels because I’m still in survival mode.

After Troy leaves the room, I rub down his fancy sink and countertops, then resume my position on my stool and doomscroll through my phone for

a little while. When it's clear he's not coming back, I switch off the lights and tiptoe past the closed office door. Might as well call dibs on the bathroom first.

The mirror confirms that my pajamas look like they belong to a ninety-year-old man, both in style and by the number of times they appear to have been washed. The red tartan flannel, well, they're almost pink now, is aggressively unsexy and the most comfortable thing I own.

In the bedroom, I stare at the bed that looks like it could accommodate a small family. But just in case, I whip off a couple of the pillows and make a no-man's-land of the middle. I climb in, switch off the light above the nightstand, and pull the quilt up to my neck.

I blow out a breath.

Flop left, then right.

Move onto my back again and stare at the ceiling.

Get it together, Clara. I drum my heels against the mattress in an effort to rid myself of this pent-up energy. *Troy cannot walk in and see me having a mental crisis over the sleeping arrangements.*

Even if I am.

I drag myself upright with a huff and plump my remaining pillow. Then reach for my phone because my brain is still on blast mode. I pull up a meditation app, but after a few minutes, it becomes clear that my mind is too loud this evening.

The thoughts, they do rotate. Noisily.

It must be so strange having me here. Not to mention difficult, given our past. But dinner went better than I expected. The wine certainly helped.

I wonder if he thinks I deserve being cut off. If he derives satisfaction from knowing I've suffered, that I got my comeuppance. That I know the anxiety of an unexpected bill, that I'm well versed in the many jeopardies that can threaten a roof over a head. Not that my experiences absolve me of my actions.

I was young, yes, and there were extenuating factors. Ones I'd rather not think about. But the choices I made, I live with them every day. And maybe that's what he needs to hear over any kind of apology. Hear me say that when I think of the person I was, when I think of that day, I feel such shame. Maybe I should tell him that. Try to find the words. Maybe— "Why are you naked?"

From the other side of the bed, Troy looks down. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I squeak. I didn’t even hear him come in!

The light goes on, and I blink, my eyes flicking from his bare torso to a pair of pale-blue cotton shorts, the fabric so soft, they leave little to the imagination. I’ve looked down, so now I’ve got to look up, over hard ridges and peaks, over those fun lines of his obliques, over abs, biceps, deltoids, and other muscles I can’t name.

Wowza. He was always a treat to look at, but boy, has he grown.

“Not naked, as you can see.” He gives a little flourish that seems almost like an invitation to check. Tempting, but I manage to restrain myself.

“You’re hardly wearing pajamas either,” I retort.

“I don’t own any.”

“What?” My attention snaps to his face. So I was a little sidelined by the trail of downy hair I don’t recall being so dark.

“Pajamas.” The corner of his mouth lifts as if by a hook. “I don’t own any.”

“Everyone owns sleepwear, Troy. What do you wear when you stay in hotels?”

“Just my birthday suit. These,” he says, snapping the waist that already seems to be valiantly hanging on to that V, “are a concession.” And his expression? *You’re welcome.*

“They’re a liability,” I splutter. “What happens if you’re rushed into hospital?”

“Then I guess I have bigger things to worry about. And just so you know, if I meet a sudden demise, I’ve asked Max to make sure the coroner does a full toxicology report.”

“I’ll only poison you if I cook.”

“What’s with the pillows?” He absently rubs his fingers against his chest. Who knew men had cleavage?

“It’s a boundary line,” I say as though it’s obvious. “That half of the bed is yours. This is mine.”

“Half? That hardly seems fair when you’re just a little Tater Tot.”

“Call me that again and you will be sorry.”

“Look at the size of me to you.” But I’m not falling for that again. “Besides, I normally sleep in the middle. Like a starfish.”

“Fine,” I snap. “I’ll move the pillows.”

“Well, I appreciate that,” he says as he swaggers in the direction of the bathroom like he’s won something. A few minutes later and he’s back, staring unhappily at the repositioned pillows, which now offers him two-thirds of the bed.

“I said I’d move them. Not remove them.”

“Fine.” The bed dips under his weight, and then the room is plunged into absolute darkness.

He gives a soft sigh, and my stomach flips. It shouldn’t sound sexual but . . .

I haven’t had sex in months and months. The realization isn’t helpful, but neither was the sight of him in those shorts. I begin to count my breaths as a way to calm myself, while also listening for a change in his breathing. I get to thirty-five and give up.

I’ve never been more aware of sheets whispering.

“This is so weird,” I murmur.

“Yep.”

“On a scale of one to ten, this level of weird is about—”

“An eleven.”

“I’m glad it’s not just me.”

“Oh, you’re definitely weird.”

I lift my arm to land him a playful punch but then remember we aren’t friends.

“But then, they do say that all the best people are.”

I’m glad it’s dark, so he can’t see my ridiculous smile. “Well, *they* are an authority.”

He doesn’t answer, and the room falls quiet. Like we’re both pretending to sleep. I go back to counting. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty—

“You’re very stiff.” The words burst from my mouth.

“No. No, I am not.” His tone as flat as the palm I want to slap to my own head. “Maybe that’s why I’m finding this weird.”

“Respectfully, the ick! This is a no-oversharing zone.” My arms lift, and I slap them to the mattress. “I just meant you’re lying like so still, it’s like you’re in a coffin. Am I being haunted?”

“I’m being respectful.” He exhales a soft sound that’s almost a laugh. I find myself smiling at the sound.

The room falls quiet again. But my brain is loud. I agreed to this. Some form of this. I consented to living in proximity to this man. My husband. *Husband number one.* Maybe I’ll be like Elizabeth Taylor and have a string of them before I’m done. The thought makes me smile. Until my stomach flips because, as well as living under the same roof, I also agreed to kiss Troy in public.

It could be worse. My fate could be in the hands of my ex-roommate Cal. And it could be his bed I’m sharing. *Eurgh.*

Yep, it could *always* be worse.

I force my shoulders to relax and blow out a gust of breath into the darkness. “Do you think if we both pretend this is normal, our brains will eventually give up and let us rest?”

“It might be easier if you stop talking.”

“For you maybe,” I whisper, a little stung.

“Like you said, this is weird.”

“The weirdest. I also had wine, and my filter is gone.”

“I had a shot of bourbon before I left the office.”

My chest does something inconvenient as it warms. “Have you brought a lot of women home? Sorry,” I add quickly. “That’s none of my business.”

His sigh sounds protracted. “You’re the first.”

“Really?” That shouldn’t make me gleeful.

“The first here.”

“Of course.” It’s not like he’s been pining for me all these years. “It’s just good to know that I don’t need to worry about other girl cooties. And stains.” Good Lord.

“Good night, Clara.”

“Good night, Troy.” I hope he can’t hear my smile as I roll onto my side to face the windows.

A moment later, the sheets rustle as he does the same. *Rolls the opposite way.*

It feels comfortable. Almost. Even if the space between us feels kind of smaller.

I tuck my hands under my chin and close my eyes again. And despite the very weirdest of all weird, I finally drift off.

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Chapter 18
CLARA

Past

“You feel so fucking good.”

The party is in less than two hours. My stepmother’s stylist, hairstylist, and makeup artist will already be here. I know I’m supposed to leave, that they’ll be looking for me. Vanessa isn’t leaving my appearance to chance for their big party. But their anniversary is nothing I want to celebrate—the day my cheating father brought his side ho permanently home. I wonder if my mom knew before she died. Did she die of a broken heart?

“God, your lips, Clara,” Troy whispers in the space between his kisses.

“You like my mouth, huh?”

“Yeah, I like your mouth.” His hand disappears under my tennis dress, his fingers like a brand to my thigh. He smells of cut grass and soap. Of man and honest, hard work. I can’t get enough of him. “I like it a whole lot.”

“You like my mouth when it’s wrapped around your cock.”

“That is a dirty mouth you have on you, Miss Clara,” he rasps, hitching his knee higher between my thighs. He captures my soft moan with his mouth. “And I fuckin’ love it.”

“Maybe you should use it.”

I hook my thumbs into the waistband of his jeans. I left the house to avoid getting ready. To find Troy and make him distract me. And boy, has he. He went down on me for so long and so well that my knees still feel a little weak. But it’s not enough. I need for him to make me forget how fucked up this all is.

“Someone is going to notice the abandoned mower,” he says, putting his hands over mine.

“Let them,” I whisper, sliding my hands around his neck instead. I press my breasts against his chest because I know what he likes. “I want you.” My husky words find his ear. “*In my mouth.*”

“Fuck.” His curse is all groan, and my joy surges. For a moment, I think I have him. Until his hands come around my hips. He sets me back.

Dust swirls golden in the air, the late-afternoon light slipping in through the dirty window. But I suddenly feel cold.

“What is going on, Clara?”

“Let’s leave—let’s take the car and drive. Somewhere.”

“What?”

“Anywhere. I don’t want to go tonight.”

“I’m kind of looking forward to seeing you in your pretty dress.” He toys with the button on my tennis dress.

Vanessa chose my dress for tonight. She says it’s tasteful, but what it is, is a boring sack. She doesn’t seem to get that wearing it won’t make me look more like her. *Slim and elegant.*

“Wouldn’t you prefer me to take this one off instead? Maybe in a hotel. A whole night, Troy. Just you and me.”

Tonight is going to be so bad, I just know it. I’ve been dreading it since I impulsively invited Troy. But I couldn’t take it back—not after seeing what it meant to him. I just don’t know how to explain what a clusterfuck it will be. How could I ever prepare Troy for meeting my dad?

When I think of it, my stomach swirls with anxiety. I can almost see the events bouncing ahead like a skimmed stone. Troy will be charming and sweet, like he always is, and my father will be subtle but mean. It’ll be death by a thousand cuts as he tries to make Troy feel small. And when I can’t take it anymore, I’ll step in at Troy’s defense, and . . . they’ll both hate me for it.

I should’ve been honest from the start. I should’ve told Troy that my dad isn’t overprotective of his little girl. That he’s controlling. Domineering. Careless with his words. *Sometimes his hands.* I should’ve said that there’s no point trying to impress him, that any chance of an internship with him is contingent on having studied at Harvard or Yale. Or for his daddy to be a member of his stupid club.

“Let’s do it—let’s spend the night together.” And deal with the consequences tomorrow. He’s tempted; I can see it. Even if it’s just for a split second.

“And what happens when we get back?” His voice is calm in that maddeningly patient way of his.

“I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. And I have shit to finish here. The lawn is half mowed, and I have a million fuckin’ fairy lights to string up.”

My spirits sink. I can tempt him and tease, wheedle and cajole. But I can’t ask him to leave money on the table. I’m not thinking straight—I can’t put him at risk of being fired. I do have some morals.

“I can’t believe you’re playing hard to get.” I hide my thoughts behind my pout.

“Or maybe I’m holding out because I have a surprise for you.”

I beckon him closer. “Take off your pants. Put your surprise in my mouth.” *Where Troy is concerned, I have no impulse control.*

A breath of his laugh slips between us, his mouth capturing mine in a kiss that’s soft and sweet. But then I give a sharp gasp as he grabs me by the waist, lifting me with ease. He deposits me on the old wooden table, where the spare life jackets are stacked.

“Look at me.” His voice is deep and so tempting as he presses himself between my legs. I dampen my lips and hook my heels around him. “Baby, I just want to do the right thing.”

“And the right thing is the internship.” My face held in his big, calloused hands. My smile is bright and, I hope, convincing.

“Fuck, Clara. I don’t care about that. I just want the opportunity to look your dad in the eye so he knows that you and me? We’re the real deal.”

I don’t know what I did to deserve him.

“Are you gonna go and get dressed now? Let a man do his job.”

“What about your job here with me?” My words are just degrees from a purr as I move my hands above my head. *Hold me. Tie me down. Spread me wide. Make me forget.*

I’m not trying to seduce him. I’m trying to keep him. To collect these moments and memories. I would keep them in a jar like sea glass.

“You are trouble.”

“And you love it.”

“No.” His eyes turn soft and his smile sweet. “I don’t love it. I love you.”

Star drops in my veins. My heart in my eyes. I close them before he sees me cry. *Please, please let me keep him after tonight.* “I love you, Troy.”

He glances around the shed. “Some place for first-time confessions.”

“I don’t care.” I grab his cheeks and kiss my love into him.

His laughter comes out a little rough, the rasp in it making me want his hands, his teeth, all over me. He presses his lips to mine, but I'm in no mood for sweet as need consumes me. I tell him so without words as I palm his cock. A split second later, we're a wash of hot breath and questing fingers. Sweet is exchanged for deep demand as my insides melt into a puddle of hot, needy yes. My fingers pluck at buttons as Troy's mouth finds my neck. A delectable scrape of teeth, and I'm writhing against him.

"Baby, you'll get splinters."

"I don't care," I rasp, angling my pelvis, soft to his hard. His hands slip underneath me, grabbing handfuls of my ass.

I am *so* here for this. I'd die and be happy right now. *Well, maybe in ten minutes.*

"You're so . . . fuck." His harsh curse echoes right through me—through flesh and blood and bone. And as he bites over my nipple, everything inside me draws tight like a knot . . .

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Chapter 19
CLARA

"Oh my God, yes. *There.*" The heavy press of his cock, and I'm a wire wound so tight, I'm already on my way to that ricochet snap. "Please, I need . . ."

This. Him. The moment. This detonation. *It's been so long.*

He says my name in a low rumble that is so, *so* sexy. His teeth scrape my tender earlobe and . . . "*Oh, God.*"

"Jesus." His body surges over mine, his skin hot to the touch. The sensation of him notched between my legs exquisite, and his tortured groan is everything.

"Yes, there." I dig my teeth into the strip of muscle straining between his shoulder and neck.

You feel . . . Yeah, just like that.

I'm not sure who says what as hands grasp and tongues slide. Troy gives a solid thrust of his hips, and every inch of my skin begins to tingle like I might just burst. I buck, and he rocks. I cry out, and Troy curses again. And then my eyes spring open to a room of white.

I hear his breath. Inhale the sleepy musk of his skin and taste the salt of his sweat. The moment is heaven, and it is hell. It's everything I need and nothing I deserve when Troy jolts away as though he's just been cattle prodded.

"Ohmygod!" My head pounds, but that's not the only place I'm throbbing as my breath comes in sharp, sharp bursts. I rub my chest, really rub, then look down as I realize my pajama top is open and my left boob is hanging out. I die. "Oh my God—stop looking!"

"Clara—"

"Still looking!" I squeak, trying to shove it back inside, which is hard, given my fingers seem to have turned into sausages.

"That was—" he begins.

"An accident," we finish in unison.

"Are you crying?" He looks stricken, but I shake my head.

“Of course not,” I retort, swiping at my cheeks while pretending not to be intimidated by his glare.

“Did I hurt you?”

Did I will this moment into existence? “Don’t be ridiculous.” I clutch the flannel in my fist. “You would never . . .” I know. I’m the one who causes hurt.

He nods, his hair falling over his forehead. I curl my fingers against the hem of my pajama shirt and watch as he swallows thickly. I get it because my heart is in my throat too. Passion and shock make for a terrible cocktail. The comedown is unpleasant, and the anxiety very real.

I accidentally kissed him at our first meeting, and now I’ve somehow teleported myself into his arms during an R-rated sex dream of the past. What the heck must he think of me—and after I made such a big deal about sharing a bed?

“I’m sorry.” The words spurt from my mouth, but then my eye catches the tenting of his shorts, and something inside me gives a resonant throb. I close my eyes, but the image seems to be tattooed on the walls of my brain. *That’s not a little tenting*, a tiny voice whispers. *More like a great big yurt.*

I wonder if he’s gotten bigger there too. No—no, I don’t!

Ohmygod, am I on my way to becoming a sex pest?

“I was having a dream.” The words fall fast as I brush the bird’s nest from my face. “I was asleep, and . . . I don’t know what happened. It has been a while.”

His eyes flash with something like fury, and my stomach sinks.

“This isn’t a blaming situation. It’s just . . . fuck, I don’t know.” He drives a hand through his hair, and I clench again. *All that muscle working—that bicep flex.* “I guess proximity, our past, and sleep messed up the signals,” he says gruffly.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” I reply quickly. “It doesn’t change anything.” I cannot afford to lose my head, or anything else, to him.

His expression suddenly softens. “I don’t know about that. Seems to me we might be a couple of hornbag sleep goblins.”

A giggle bursts from me. Probably relief. I duck my head and try not to notice how the waistband of his shorts has flipped. His skin is visibly paler there and—

“Is that . . . is that a tattoo?” I squint, but he quickly flips the waistband back. “Was it a lobster?” My gaze lifts. It looked like one. A

simple black line tattoo.

"It's dumb," he says gruffly.

"It looked cute."

"The follies of youth," he mutters. Is he . . . *blushing?*

"You could have it lasered?" I don't know why I suggest this. He's old enough to fix his own mistakes.

"Didn't want to go through the inconvenience. Besides, it's a reminder of something."

"Something happy or sad?" He pins me with his gaze, and I feel myself reddening as I grip my pajamas tighter. "Happy, I hope," I babble. "I hope it's a happy memory."

He rubs a jerky hand across his golden raspy stubble but doesn't say anything else.

"Can we . . ." My teeth graze my lip. "Can we make a pact never to mention what just happened? Please?"

"It's not like it changes anything."

"No, agreed. It changes nothing at all."

Except the bed feels way smaller than it did last night.

It also feels way more dangerous.

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Chapter 20
TROY

"What are we calling this?" Hugo Lassiter, also known as Hugh, and sometimes Huge, for obvious reasons, one of the cofounders of Table, equal friend and pain in the ass, has his feet on the conference room table as I walk in the following morning.

"Stateside?" I loosen the button on my jacket and make for the coffeepot. "We usually call it Wednesday morning." The day after I married Clara Forbes. The day I awoke almost on top of her, almost got her off, and almost embarrassed myself.

Way to go, asshole. A near third-base blowup with Clara Forbes.

If I count the tattoo, then I already embarrassed myself.

Jesus, the experience was like being throat punched back to being twenty-two years old again when dry humping Clara was the second-best thing in the world. *Someone ought to bring the move back into vogue.*

"Aren't we rich now?" Hugo directs the whiny question Hannah's way. Seated to his right, she's currently picking apart a croissant. Hannah gives a shrug, and Hugo links his fingers behind his head, leaning back in his chair. "Surely, rich people have the choice of whether or not they want to face this hour."

"Not if they want to stay rich," I say. My back still to him, I'm smiling as I reminisce. *Man, dry humping takes me back.* I feel myself frown. What the fuck is my problem? Going back is the definition of insanity.

Oblivious to my consternation, my friends continue to bicker.

"Hugh's confusing his life with a rich English dude's in a piece of classic literature," Hannah says. "Honey, you're not a member of *the Ton*."

I turn and watch her scoop out the green pistachio goo. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like," she mutters, tapping the spoon to her plate. "Who the hell likes pistachio croissants?"

"The Italians," Hugo says through a yawn as he stretches his hands out behind his head. "And it's *croissant*," he says in what sounds like a perfect

French accent. “It’s not *kruh-sont*. Unless you’re ordering it with a slice of American cheese and extra bacon.”

“And that’s why you look like a pretentious asshole,” Max says, walking into the room, his phone in one hand and a manila folder in the other. He shoots me a quick but unhappy glance. I guess he’s still pissed about Monday.

After Clara left the building, he tried to rip me a new one. Reminded me I wasn’t a kid anymore and to stop fucking about. But he doesn’t get how serious I am. It’s not about the share price or the money. My risk is about success. There really isn’t a lot I won’t do for this company.

So I shut him down. Told him I was marrying her with or without his help. And when I told him about Clara’s trust fund clause, he seemed to settle some. He agreed to help, as I knew he would, though he insisted on bringing in separate counsel for Clara to keep the prenup aboveboard.

Protection for me as much as her, he said. The man is nothing if not thorough.

“No, I look like a pretentious arsehole because I am a pretentious arsehole,” Hugh happily declares.

“Get your feet off the table, man.”

“Fine.” He sits up with a protracted sigh.

“Right, let’s get this over with.” Max takes a seat at the end of the conference table and shoots me another glare.

“I wonder what’s got Max’s knickers in a twist,” Hugo whispers as he scoops his finger though the green smudge on Hannah’s plate.

“Ew, gross.” She scrunches her nose. “Looks like boogers.”

“Yum, yum!”

Max coughs pointedly, and the two settle down. “So good news. Stock is up.”

“Is it?” Hugo sits straight at the information.

“Don’t you keep an eye on the stock movement?” Hannah demands.

“I guess the novelty of being rich has worn off for him,” I put in.

“Rich on paper,” he corrects. “It doesn’t feel real. More like when your parents take your birthday money off you with a promise to bank it.”

Hannah scoffs. “Like you’re not already living the life of a lord.”

“*So*,” Max says heavily.

“A lord wouldn’t see the daylight until the afternoon,” Hugh complains.

“Can we get the fuck on with this?” Max demands.

“Shush.” Hugh nudges Hannah. “Dad’s talking.”

Max glances at each of us in turn. Satisfied with our attention, he begins again. “We’re seeing a steady daily increase since Saturday.”

“Whatcha got there?” Hugo asks, noticing Max toying with the corner of the file. In answer, he spins it my way across the table. I fold the same corner back. It’s my copy of the prenup.

“Share with the class.”

The prenup for my marriage of convenience? I don’t think so.

Convenience. That’s a joke. As pleasant as this morning’s interlude was, our living arrangements are clearly a problem. And there is nothing convenient about the semi that threatens every time I think of her hard nipple against my palm. I wanted to put it in my mouth, roll my tongue around it until it was shiny and pink. Tease it between my teeth to hear her breathy moan.

“Must be a love note,” Hannah puts in.

“It is in the air,” Hugo quips.

The pair stare expectantly at me. Meanwhile, Max is staring at the ceiling.

“What?” I reach for my coffee cup.

“I didn’t even know you knew any heiresses.” This from Hugo.

“That’s what I said,” Hannah adds. They’re talking about Friday, which is old news now. Better watch this space.

Hugh leans forward, cupping his chin. “But what I want to know is, does the lovely lady in question have any sisters?”

“Nope.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Is it?”

“Well, maybe if I marry an heiress, I won’t need to drag my arse out of bed to get into the office before eight a.m.”

I spray coffee all over the Swedish imported conference table. How does he . . . But then I remember Hannah said they’d been talking about me after the Fifth Ave piece on Saturday. It might’ve been easier if the news of our marriage had hit the internet already. Easier for me, at least. *Fuck. I’d better call my mom and break the news before someone else does.*

“Say it, don’t spray it.” Hannah balls a napkin, then pitches it my way.

“Thanks.”

“Can we get through this now? Some of us have work to do.” Max is not in a good mood. Maybe because I felt the need to point out during his “Marriage is a sacrament” lecture that he’s neither my priest nor my dad. I expected pushback, not a fucking sermon.

I wipe at the shower of coffee, studiously ignoring how the room has fallen quiet. “Okay,” I say eventually, looking up. “Let’s talk about it.”

“Talk about what?” Hugo blinks innocently. “Oh, you mean the mysterious heiress who dressed as a waitress to get your attention?” He glances Hannah’s way. “A woman once turned up on my doorstep in a French maid’s outfit. It was great.”

“Jesus.” Max reaches for the SMART Board remote.

“So we used to date,” I begin. “A long time ago. We lost touch and have recently reunited.”

“First love, second time around.” Hugo’s brow lifts. “And I hear her daddy owns half of Wall Street.”

I give a shrug as though that’s unimportant.

“So you two seeing each other?” Hannah’s voice is sharp.

“You could say that.” You could also say we’ve seen a little more of each other than we planned.

“And how’s it going?”

I bite back my smile. “It’s going good. Great, actually.”

“Well, that’s excellent.” Hugh leans back in his chair, his smile wide and genuine. “I’m very happy for you, mate. I’m mean, I’m also stoked for us. Obviously.”

I shoot Max a look. *That’s your cue.* Max gives a click of the remote, and blinds begin to drop over the windows, the whiteboard on the opposite wall lighting up.

“Home movie time.” Hugo leans closer to Hannah. “Should we snuggle?”

Her answer is to put her palm on his forehead, but then all eyes move to the screen as Max moves to the first slide, a graph from our in-house software. “Stock is up fourteen-point-two percent since Friday.”

“Fuck me! That is excellent news.” Hugo glances around as though looking for someone to high-five him.

“It’s not news.” I reach for my rapidly cooling coffee. Calm on the outside, but inside, my stomach feels tight.

“I beg to differ,” Hugo says. “It’s the kind of news I like to hear. All hail the magnificent Troy Boy. What?” he adds when no one chimes in. “It’s all down to the bird he’s seeing.”

Hannah shakes her head.

“Last week Troy was full of ‘We’ve got to keep our noses clean.’ Compliance. Data governance.” Hugh makes a yapping motion of his hand. “Regulatory quicksand, AI bullshit, blah fucking blah. But now he’s getting his end away with an heiress, and the future looks bright! Not only is the share price amazing, but it’s now far less likely we’ll be asked to bend over and grab our ankles. I dunno about you, but I don’t fancy a prostate exam conducted by a sausage-fingered SEC lawyer.”

Hannah turns to him, her mouth an unimpressed twist. “The longer I know you, the less I understand the things you say.”

“Allow me to elucidate. He is screwing someone.” He points my way, then circles his finger in the air. “While we were—potentially, according to Misery Guts over there—about to *be* screwed.”

“I’m not sure that’s exactly accurate,” I contend. “Especially on my end.”

Hannah turns over Hugh’s phone, then puts it to his face, which he stretches into some ridiculous expression.

“And I’m not the only one happy about the situation,” he says as he takes back his phone. “Because NiamLiSun says, *We love a power couple #hardlaunch.*”

“Liam who?” I demand. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Fifth Ave Files,” Hannah answers with a sigh.

“Oh, I am a sucker for those tense-jawed glares.” Hugo puts his fingers under his chin like the girliest of girls.

Max mutters something uncomplimentary under his breath.

“OMG,” Hugh continues in a comically camp voice. “*I would sign his NDA without even reading it,* says ImSoLinley. *Not me suddenly believing in trickledown economics.*” He glances my way. “Seems you have a bit of a fan club. I *definitely* need to find me an heiress to bone.”

“I’m not boning an heiress. Well, not outside of the bonds of matrimony. And I’ll thank you not to speak of my and my wife’s conjugal relations.”

“What?” Hugh does a comical double take.

“It means sex life, H.”

As planned, Max gives a groan. We agreed it was best not to draw him into this. For him to pretend this is his first time hearing the news.

“I know what it fucking means. I just dunno what *you* fucking mean,” Hugo demands, poking the air.

“I got married.”

He cants his head, then glances Hannah’s way. “Did he just say what I thought he said?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I married Clara,” I clarify. “The heiress in question.”

“When?” he splutters. “Fucking . . . why?”

“It’s like you said, first love second time around.”

The conference room falls quiet. But not for long.

“Yes!” Hugo jumps from his seat, punching the air like his sports team just scored.

“He means congratulations.” Hannah’s tone is . . . neutral.

“Yes, congratulations.” Hugh takes his seat again. “Fucking hell, mate, talk about dedication. Ow! What was that for?” he demands of Hannah, reaching under the table to rub his thigh.

“Idiot,” she mutters.

“Obviously, I love that journey for you. In fact, I think you should get out there and spread the news.”

“Around the office?”

“Why stop there? You should tell the world! Sell this touching and highly lucrative love story.”

Hannah shoots him the death glare.

“I’m just saying what we’re all thinking.” Hugo gives an emphatic shrug. “Troy gets seen with Clara the heiress, and the stock peaks. But Troy marries Clara the heiress? That’s amazing news. For us.” He glances around the table. “Don’t get all judgy. We all know this is a very precarious time, business wise. Go sell this company-adjacent love bomb, I say.”

“I’m not using my personal life to secure Table’s stability.” Said Troy never. Max gives another groan and slides lower in his seat. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, nothing,” he says with a scowl. “It’s not like I have any work to do today.”

“Like he didn’t already tell you,” Hannah accuses before turning her attention my way. “I spoke to you Saturday, and you never said a thing.”

“On Saturday I didn’t know I was about to propose. It was a bit of a whirlwind, Hans. But it’s not like we just met.”

“We should be happy for the bloke—and happy for us!”

“He has a point,” Max says begrudgingly. “Just look at the numbers.”

“Because that’s not suspicious at all,” she mutters, not even trying for convincing.

“It’s not like anyone asked him to do this,” Max replies. “Like he’d listen anyway.”

Come on, Max. Stick with the program.

“Look.” Max puts his hand to the table. “It’s sudden, but it’s not without benefits. Love, obviously.” He glances my way. “The share price, sure. But out there,” he says, pointing to the window, “it looks like Table’s CEO just got the seal of approval from Edwin Forbes himself. The company may be new, but it just got a whole lot less unpredictable to the market.”

Which is funny, considering I just blew up my life.

“Exactly my point,” Hugh agrees. “Troy Boy here is about to enter the hallowed halls of the untouchables. It’s fucking perfect. By the time he gets caught screwing the nanny in a few years, we’ll have sold our stock! I mean, he’ll lose half of his in alimony, but that won’t be *our* problem.”

“Thanks, H.”

My future in a nutshell? I don’t fucking think so.

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Chapter 21
CLARA

The sun is shining, and that always makes me feel better. But not today.

That's not to say I'm sad. More like I'm overwhelmed. Maybe overstimulated? I feel like I'm jacked up to the eyeballs on caffeine and like I'd very much prefer to run away from my current reality. *My current morning.* Instead, I'm Midtown bound with plans to meet Chelsea for coffee. *Probably should've made it lunch, carbs over the black stuff.*

Chelsea spots me the moment I walk into the café, her face lit with delight. Must be refreshing to not give a thought for appearances.

"Oh my God!" she says, leaping up and hugging me. "Girl, marriage suits you!"

"Thanks." Which is preferable to *You think so?*

I fix on a smile as I pull back. It's been a day, and it's not two o'clock yet. I place my purse on the table, my wedding certificate folded neatly inside, all officiously smug, having already detonated several areas of my life. There was the way I woke this morning, which, fine, wasn't the certificate's fault. Or maybe it was because married couples are supposed to f—

Stop that thought.

Then at my late grandmother's lawyer's offices earlier, I'd produced the certificate only to be promptly stripped of my identity. The decrepit senior partner insisted on referring to me as Mrs. Templeton.

I could've argued, told him I was keeping my own name. But I already felt like a fraud. The appointment went by in a whir. I signed things I barely understood and nodded through sentences that began with "Now that you're married . . ." and ended in numbers that made me feel quite dizzy. Not that I have my trust yet. Sounds like it's a whole process.

Despite my discomfort with how the day began, I found myself wondering why I hadn't done this eighteen months ago. Maybe because I couldn't bring myself to let a man save me. Until Troy because, in a way, I'm saving him too.

That's possibly an overstatement, but I am helping his company. *Which is the least I can or should do.*

"Let me see the ring," Chel demands.

The muscles in my shoulder bunch, and I almost pull my hand away. "I just went for a plain wedding band." That looks like it came from a cereal box. "Troy wants to upgrade it—"

"I *love* that for you!"

"—but I like the traditional."

"Let the man buy you a ring, Clara. Your marriage is, like, a fairy tale come true!"

Well, there is a villain. A reversal of fortunes. And the bargain we've struck sometimes feels like a curse. A curse of awkwardness, mostly. "It has been a bit of a whirlwind," I say, realizing Chelsea is waiting for a response.

"Bet. One minute you're wearing an apron, and the next, you're married to the man of your dreams."

"I wouldn't have put it quite that way." Her smile falters, and I feel like I've just told her Santa Claus isn't real. "I just mean, he isn't the man I broke up with all those years ago."

"Because he's an upgrade."

"Absolutely." The first that springs to mind is the upgrade in his body. The one that was on top of me a few short hours ago. The delicious weight of him, skin so hot to the touch.

"I texted you this morning."

"Sorry I didn't get back. I was kind of . . . busy." The last word hits the air as a squeak.

Chelsea gives a hoot and actually claps her hands.

Busy freaking out, not busy getting busy. But let her think I was lying in a bed that cost more than my last six months' rent, being pleasured by my bronzed Adonis husband until my brain short-circuited.

I guess there is a ring of truth to that, provided you ignore the way my boob was hanging out of my pajamas like a sad-faced puppy. And the way Troy recoiled when he realized who was under him.

"Spill the tea, sis." Chelsea practically vibrates in her seat. "I want it all—the romance, the backstory. Where you went after the ceremony. Your dress ate, by the way. And your hair." She puts her finger to her lips with a kiss.

"Thanks, Chel."

“My student debt thanks *you*!” She pushes a coffee in front of me, and I smile. Chelsea is the kind of friend who remembers how you take your coffee when you can’t even remember how you take your life. “May your pillows be ever cool and fluffed,” she says, lifting her cup in a toast. “And may you never again know the disappointment of a man. Which, of course, you won’t.”

I pick up the coffee my regulatory system doesn’t need and clink the cup to hers in toast. Troy won’t disappoint me. Not if I expect the worst.

“Did you see the reel on the ’gram this morning?”

My stomach gives a roller-coaster-worthy swoop so I wrap my hands around my cup as though it might ground me. “There was a—a video? I was expecting a photo.” Like last time.

“I waited until there was something on *Page Six*, thank you, six thousand dollars.”

“It’s there already?”

She gives an eager nod. “It hit their page an hour ago.” While I was still in Grandma’s lawyer’s office. *My lawyer’s office.* “After I saw the post, I sent the reel to the Fifth Ave Files.”

“Oh.” So she saw that first post. Troy. Me. The kiss.

“Don’t worry.” She gives an impish grin. “I don’t think the catering crew will put the two together.” She means Clara, the heiress, becomes waitress, then becomes tycoon’s wife.

“It’s fine,” I reply. I’ll probably just be labeled as eccentric.

“Look, I’m just going to put this out there.” Chelsea shifts in her seat. “You don’t have to say anything, but I had to go no contact with my own family last year. I’m guessing you understand all about that.”

An ache builds at the back of my throat as I reach out, take her hand, and give it a squeeze. We get so caught up in our own dramas and traumas, we sometimes forget to look around us, where others are battling the same. “I do understand,” I answer quietly.

“Thought so.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t know, but you’re not on your own. If you need *anything*, you come to me.”

“Thanks, sis.” But she’s a tough cookie, and this is just lip service.

“I mean it. You were there for me when no one else was.” She took me under her wing when I started with the catering crew. She covered my early mistakes. Clued me in on the tricks of the hospitality trade, from the

benefits of a double-sided apron to the advantages of wearing braids over a high ponytail. *Better tips and less headaches.* At least before I got my hair cut.

I'm going to help her, I decide in that moment. I'm not sure how, not yet, but something will come to me.

"So listen," she says, shaking off the moment. "I know you said photos, but it would've been a waste not to use the recording. The timing was just so perfect. See, I was messing with my phone when you and the new hubs burst through the door and the kid threw confetti. Here, it'll be easier for me to show you."

She whips out her phone, and I see that very sequence, starting with our genuine surprise and delight as we stepped through that painted metal door, hand in hand. *I was terrified and squeezing his hand so tight.* My heart gives a jump at the appearance of the little girl's tears, then I'm handing her a peony from my bouquet. I see her tentative smile and my pleasure and the way Troy watches as he stands behind me. *I want to wind it back to see his expression again, but I'll do that later.* And then the money shot. Our kiss. It looks so good. Like we're really in love.

"Maybe I should've gone to film school, because the aesthetic is a whole vibe."

"It's really good." I know we were acting, and we were aware of Chelsea's presence, that we needed it to look convincing, but there seems to be so much more to it as I watch it again. The way he gazes down at me and how I look back at him. His hand at the small of my back and the way I move with him. It's 100 percent romance movie material.

"So . . ."

I look up. "What's that?"

"Dish, girl, dish! Like how—when. Give me the whole love story!"

"Well," I begin carefully, "I'm not sure what to say except it all happened very suddenly."

"Bet! You were wearing an apron in his fancy-ass office. An apron, Clara! If you're going to run into an ex, a girl makes sure she's wearing her full armor."

My chuckle is genuine because that's so true. "It was kind of mortifying."

"You were shook," she says on a laugh. "I thought you'd seen a ghost, that you were gonna pass out."

Oh, Chelsea, I almost did. And not because Troy is rich, or handsome, or powerful, but because, once upon a time, he used to hold my face in his hands. But when he saw me Friday night, he looked like he wanted to wrap them a smidge farther south.

And now look at us, married. *Gulp.*

Chelsea leans in, her eyes wide. "When he did that hot boss-hole routine and marched you out of the place, I knew he was just trying to get you alone."

I glance coyly down. "That is what he wanted." He wanted me alone. And in another borough.

"Called it! I love this *so hard* for you. Park Avenue princess turned waitress bumps into an old flame while serving canapés. Marries in a courthouse four days later. I mean, Cinderella could never!"

When she puts it like that, it sounds amazing. But I feel worse than I did with my boob hanging out this morning. This isn't a rags-to-riches love story, and Troy might be handsome, but he's no prince come to rescue me. I'm rescuing myself.

This marriage is nothing but a strategic legal maneuver cultivated on lies and covered by a prenup sharp enough to draw blood. What it shouldn't have been was waking the morning after our marriage, tangled in sheets and dreams and a husband who recoiled when he realized who he was kissing. I don't remember that passage in *Cinderella*.

Yet I can't stop thinking about the weight and heat of him. The sounds he made in my ear and how my body seemed to remember his before my brain slammed on the brakes.

And the way he looked at me when I told him it had been a while. Like there was something wrong with me.

"Did he go down?"

Coffee sloshes over my fingers. *I wish.* "W-what was that?"

"I said, did he go down on one knee?"

I'm saved by the buzzing of my phone, yet all I can think of is how amazing Troy was at giving head. He was so enthusiastic—a total pussy devotee. I pick up my phone, and my stomach flips as his name flashes up on the screen. "Excuse me," I murmur. *I just know I've gone beet red.*

"That him?"

I nod as I open the text.

Troy: So. Small Problem.

My heart gives a worried little leap, and before I know it, I'm texting out a reply.

Me: If this is about the strange noise the coffee machine was making this morning, I didn't do it.

Deflect, deflect!

Troy: What strange noise?

Me: Exactly.

Troy: How did the lawyer's office go, by the way?

Me: Well, thank you. Tell you about it when I see you next.

Troy: I'll be late in the office tonight.

Me: It can wait!

So can I. It's not like I'm going to pine away or anything.

Troy: So, there's a charity thing next Saturday. Table has a table and I thought we could do the married thing?

Didn't we almost do that this morning? I mentally kick myself.

Me: Sounds like a plan.

Got to hold up my part of the bargain.

Troy: We should get our heads together before and shore up our backstory.

Me: Of course.

More tall tales to tell.

"Everything okay?"

I look up and nod, then shoot Chelsea a quick, reassuring smile. "He's just, you know . . ."

"Obsessed!"

Her comment doesn't exactly cool the heat in my cheeks. I glance at the screen again.

Troy: How about dinner tomorrow night?

Is this neutral ground or a desire to avoid being alone in the apartment with me? More likely an outing to support his narrative. It doesn't matter. It shouldn't matter. But I'm not looking forward to this weekend. Will he be around? Will he expect me not to be?

Me: That would be good.

Troy: I assume you've seen Page Six.

Me: I've heard about it.

Troy: You look amazing, by the way.

A tiny drop of pleasure bursts inside. Before my overthinking mechanism kicks in. Does he mean that as a compliment, that I look pretty? Or does he mean amazing for the purposes of this narrative? Not sure how to respond, I just don't, when another text comes through.

Troy: Too much? Maybe if my previous text was an email, I'd sign off with something like *live, laugh, toaster bath*.

I roll in my lips to prevent my smile. *No way he's embarrassed . . . is he?*

Maybe I'm not the only one on the overthinking bus.

“He just said something cute, didn’t he?” Chelsea sounds so eager.
“Kind of.”
“Knew it,” she singsongs. “Your eyes have gone all soft.”
“I’m almost done,” I say, glancing down at my phone again.
“Take your time. My envious ass is gonna get a brownie.” She pushes back her chair. “Want anything?”
I shake my head and quickly type out an answer before I can overthink it. Again.

Thank you for the compliment. I accept it with grace so no need to add a toaster to your bathwater. If it helps, you might remember that I was the one with the boob hanging out this morning.

I press “Send,” then decide he’s not the only one capable of a cute sign-off:

See you later.

Insert pleasantry here

Clara.

His response is immediate.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say that sounded like an invitation.

I bark out a laugh. Someone’s getting a little sassy. A little bold.
My boobs + insert ≠ an invitation to his pleasant penis.
But he’s joking. Obviously joking. So I reply with:

Rolling away like a tumbleweed in the wind.

“You guys sexting?” Chelsea asks, taking her seat again.
“Not even,” I say with a laugh.
“Well, something has you blushing. Deadass jealous over here.”

“Sorry. He’s just being . . .”

“Thirsty?”

I’m feeling a little parched myself. And a little fluttery. Unnecessarily. I reach for my cooling coffee as his next text lands.

Troy: Now who needs that toaster bath?

With all due respect . . . and a little jest. ;)

“More like . . . it doesn’t matter,” I answer, ignoring how that flutter has turned a little achy. And not at the use of that winky face. The exchange is a reminder of how we used to be. How fun things were between us. “Troy sent me the link,” I say, scrolling through the messages to open the link to the *Page Six* article.

I hold my phone between us, the post tagged as a “Society Exclusive” on their website, with a heading that reads:

> Fintech Giant Troy Templeton Marries Reclusive Park Avenue Heiress in Surprise Courthouse Wedding.

The subheading reads:

> Sources say the founder tied the knot just days after his $20 billion IPO.

“Hello, next term’s tuition source,” Chelsea murmurs, starting at the piece. “Maybe I’ll just buy a camera and join the paparazzi.”

“I thought it was film school.”

“Might be one, might be both. Right now, the world is my oyster!”

From oyster to crustacean, something clings. It takes me a moment to process, but I begin to reason why Troy’s lobster tattoo might suddenly make sense to me.

No. *Really?*

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Chapter 22
TROY

Neutral, that's what I need to aim for. I can't avoid going home every night. So here we are, Friday night at a local restaurant. A little food. Some conversation and plan to come up with a plausible backstory for our marriage.

Insert pleasantry here.

Fuck. There is nothing neutral in how that phrase keeps rotating through my brain. How she mentioned her boobs in our text exchange, then added a sign-off that sounded like an invitation, and my mind just ran with it.

Yes, fucking please! Can I touch them again? Fuck them? Come all over them?

Truthfully, it's not just the phrase that keeps repeating. It's the image of her that morning, writhing under me. Tits pressed against me, so lewd and lush. God, how I wanted to suck the hard pearl of her nipple into my mouth and—

"You were saying?"

Come on, brain, focus! I clear my throat and adjust myself under the cover of the table, firmly pulling my head from Clara's OnlyFans channel. *With a subscriber of one.*

"Yeah. The Stanley Foundation. Black tie. Cameras. Donors. Board-adjacent folk."

"The vultures." She pulls a face. It should look terrible, not cute. Fuck my wife—I mean, life.

"Polite vultures." I take another swig of my beer.

"Maybe to your face."

"That's all that matters at this stage."

"Fine." She tears at a piece of focaccia, pressing a chunk of it into her mouth like she hasn't eaten for a week. As she chews, she's already tearing off another piece. And to think she was described in three separate bylines this week as mysterious, refined, and sophisticated. Yet here she sits, getting olive oil on her sweater sleeve.

I love it. The contrast, I mean.

“Did I spill something?” She swipes her napkin across her pretty mouth.

“Sorry. I zoned out.” *I like watching you eat. You look good. You’ll look even better with a little more meat on your bones* . . . uttered Troy never.

“You’re doing it again.”

“Sorry. It’s not you, it’s . . . me. Thinking.” The look she slides me seems doubtful. “We met in the Hamptons,” I say, redirecting the conversation. And my wayward brain. “My mom worked for your dad.”

“We don’t have to go with that story.”

“Why not? It’s the truth. I think it would serve us to stick to it, where possible.”

“Why do that to yourself?”

“I’m not ashamed of where I come from.”

Her brow dips. “Of course you’re not. Why would you be? Even without everything you’ve achieved, your mom was just amazing.”

“She still is.” I reach for my drink again, glad I’d ordered a beer. I was gonna stick with water after the wine episode, but then Clara walked into the restaurant wearing that thin gray sweaterdress. Curves. Cleavage. Shapely legs. I needed something to quench my sudden thirst.

But with Clara it’s more than how she looks. It’s how she carries herself. How she talks. Sure, there’s attraction in those rosy cheeks, deep-blue eyes, and the soft bow of her mouth. But it’s also in how she moves. The way laughter shoots from her like a spurt of honey, golden and sweet. It’s the sass she gives and how in the quiet moments she just . . . is.

I must be soft in the head—or maybe these are old memories. We’ve barely spent any time together. I can’t know who she is now. *I didn’t really know who she was then.*

“She must be so proud of you.” I give a casual shrug as Clara adds, “I hope she’s happy.”

“She should be. I just sent her on vacation. A cruise around the Bahamas.” A timely coincidence.

“Nice.” Her smile . . . does nothing for me. Especially when I force myself to think how a cactus to the balls might feel. “Will you tell her about us?” She dips the bread in the oil, avoiding my eyes.

“Yeah. The truth, though.”

“Good,” she whispers, not seeming to notice olive oil dripping on the snowy tablecloth. “It’s nice here.” She glances around the restaurant that’s a mixture of exposed brick and old wood. The food is great, the wines are amazing (so I’ve heard), and there’s not a checkered tablecloth in sight. “The building has a good feel.”

“It does.” I’m not looking at the wine flush on her cheek or the way her dark hair shines in the ambient light. “The gnocchi comes highly recommended.” By Max. He’ll forgive me for this. Eventually. “Now, how about that all-important narrative?”

“We’re married.” She taps the cheap ring on her fourth finger. “Isn’t that the whole narrative?”

“That’s the headline.” A little like the *Bloomberg* one. Table Founder Troy Templeton’s Sudden Marriage Adds New Optics to Newly Public Fintech. “We need the paragraph under the headline. The meat of the story.”

“So we reconnected recently?” she suggests as my mind plays a quick montage of all the ways I’d like to reconnect with Clara. It’s official. I have reentered my teenage stage.

“How? How did we reconnect?”

“We just ran into each other by chance. At your place of employment.”

“And no one is gonna question why or how?”

Her brow furrows. “I’m not ashamed of waitressing, but you’re right. If anyone finds out that’s what I was doing there, it’s going to blow up your narrative.”

“For what it’s worth, I think it was brave of you to strike out on your own.”

“Strike out. Yes, let’s go with that.” Before I can say anything else, she moves the conversation on. “We can keep it vague, say we just bumped into each other and discovered there was still a spark.”

“It was an incendiary first meeting.”

She tilts her chin high, like she does when she’s uncomfortable.

“Not my finest moment,” I add.

“Your reaction was understandable,” Clara murmurs. Maybe but I’m not proud of it.

“So we, what? Met, sparked, and decided not to waste any more time?”

“You fell in love!” she says as though I’m missing the point. “Madly, hopelessly, and irrevocably. You couldn’t stand to live another minute

without me by your side, so you proposed."

She makes spirit fingers with her left hand. Gonna have to buy her another ring. That one is fooling no one.

"So I proposed and you agreed. Because you're crazy for me."

"I said yes. Impulsive. Romantic. Questionable." Her blue eyes sparkle. "Almost on brand for me."

"Less so now, I think." I swipe up my menu and stare at it.

"That will be the meds. They slow my brain down to almost acceptable levels."

The waiter arrives at the table in that moment. Clara hasn't looked at the menu yet, but that doesn't stop her getting into a discussion with the guy, pretty much extracting his life story.

"That is so impressive, Maxim. Full-time study *and* a full-time job—your family must be so proud of you."

"It is not easy," the guy answers haltingly, his accent pretty heavy. "But I am very glad to be here, to be able to provide for my family in America."

Clara reaches out, briefly touching the man's arm. "Well, we're glad you're here too," she says with a soft sincerity. The guy looks back at her as though she's the queen. Then she picks up her menu and orders the first thing that she sees.

Something the meds haven't changed. The Clara I knew before rarely deliberated. She jumped—leaped with both feet, trusting the ground to rise up and meet her.

Or so it often seemed.

"You expecting extra shrimp?" I ask as the waiter leaves.

"Extra?"

I nod at his retreating form. "You, making friends with the waiter."

"I was not making friends. I was making Maxim feel seen. Honestly, if everyone in the world spent one day wearing an apron, we'd all be a whole lot nicer."

A curious sensation twists in my gut.

"I've missed this," she says quite suddenly. "Being on the opposite side of the table." She leans forward, her eyes wide and earnest. "I love restaurants, I've realized. And hotels. Just not so much working in them."

I let out a chuckle because her expression is priceless, like she's cluing me in on some huge secret.

“I imagine that is a largely thankless task.”

“The worst. But this,” she says, glancing around. “This I like.”

“I’m glad.” Even if her reaction makes me feel better than it should.

“When I was small, my grandmother would take me to the Plaza for afternoon tea. She’d wear a hat, and we’d both wear gloves, and lots of her fabulous jewelry. Like real ladies.” Her eyes turn soft with the reminiscence. “I think that’s why I love hotels. Because of her and those memories.”

Man, she is so fucking lovely when she smiles. “Where’s your favorite hotel?”

“Well.” Her fingers loop the stem of her glass. “There’s a place in Midtown where I used to go for a little peace.”

“Midtown?” I frown. “Not Paris or London?”

“Paris is très chic, and London is the best place for a G and T. But there’s nothing quite like a staycation in your own town.”

“Okay,” I say, like I doubt her.

“Truly—it’s just a stone’s throw from Bergdorf’s and the Park—and the MoMA. But it’s so quiet. And hardly anyone knows it’s there.”

“What’s the place called?”

“Secret,” she says, tapping her nose.

“What?” I half ask, half laugh.

“I can’t tell you the name of my secret hideaway.”

“You don’t wanna share it?”

She shakes her head. “You might steal the magic.”

I think the magic might be her.

“What about you?” she asks, lifting her glass. “What’s the one thing money changed for you?”

Control and a sense of safety. It took the duster from my mother’s hand. “I don’t look at the prices anymore,” I answer instead. “And I tip nice round numbers.”

“With abandon?” Her eyes sparkle. *Like Ceylon sapphires.*

“Of course.”

“I love that!” She gives a tinkling laugh as she raises her glass. I lift the neck of my beer to meet her toast. “Why don’t you tell me about your company? How it came about.”

“You mean my loan sharking business?”

“I think I already said sorry about that. In my defense, you were looking at me like you wanted to . . .” She puts her hands around her throat and sticks out her tongue as though she’s choking.

“Might’ve thought about it,” I say with a sly grin.

“So Table?”

“Well, me and Benny the Brick—” is as far as I get when a lump of focaccia hits me square between the eyes.

“And I don’t do that lightly,” she says primly. “Especially as someone else has to clean up.” Clara-speak for *Stop fucking about*.

I reach down for the lump of bread.

“Don’t—”

“Five-second rule,” I say, popping it into my mouth.

“My husband, the fancy billionaire.”

The way she said *husband* hits me in a way it shouldn’t.

Clara makes a rolling gesture with her hand. *Please continue.*

“The business. One day, me and Benny—”

“You’re horrible.”

I give a lopsided grin as I try to ignore the way messing with her makes me feel. “I got the idea my last year of college. My old roommate was up to the eyeballs in debt. He had a job to go to but needed to graduate first, but things had reached a breaking point. His credit card debt was snowballing faster than his tuition aid.”

“So he didn’t graduate?”

“Dropped out.”

“That’s awful.”

“It was for him. It was a moment of genius for me.” Built on years of watching my own mom struggle, I don’t add.

“So modest, Troy. I bet people say that to you all the time.”

“Huh. You know they don’t.”

“I’m astounded,” she deadpans.

“His experience did make me realize first how lucky I was to have been gifted a full ride.”

“Nothing to do with luck. You always were the smartest person in the room.”

“That’s because the room was usually full of your dumb-as-dog-shit friends.”

“They weren’t the best,” she agrees, moving her glass a little to the left.

“They were as mean as snakes. Anyway, all that guy needed was a little more time and it made me realize that people don’t always fail because they spend too much or too fast. They fail because they need more time. Table wasn’t built just to loan money. It was built to delay consequences long enough to change outcomes.”

I see that hit. See it in the slump of her shoulders and downward trajectory of her pretty mouth. But I don’t want her to feel bad. So I tell her about the four of us and the shitty office we rented and the weeks I camped out there because I couldn’t afford to pay two rents. Then I tell her about the investors who laughed in our faces, only to come hammering on the door a few months later. And she listens, really listens, though she still takes the time to make the waiter smile when he returns with our food.

“It’s so incredible, Troy. I always knew you would do great things. I’m so proud of you.”

The way her expression softens makes something stir in my chest. She sounds like she means every word. It feels like validation, maybe. I don’t know, it just feels fucking good.

Because I’m an idiot.

“Tell me what you did after Brown,” I say, reaching over and spearing a shrimp with my fork.

“Hey!” she complains, but not really.

“Couples share food.” So I’ve heard. “Want a little pig cheek?” She scrunches her nose as I offer her a fork of my *rigatoni all’ amatriciana*. “It’s a Roman staple.”

“That might be true,” she says, leaning in with a whisper, “but it also smells like feet.”

“That’s the Pecorino.”

“I’ll be wearing a peg on my nose for bed.”

Bed. The word is so small for such large consequences. Fuck, I want her. *And I’m still an idiot.* “So. After Brown?”

She gives a deep sigh, her words flat. “I went to work in the family office.”

“Why there? You could’ve gone anywhere.” I’m not buttering her up. When she set her mind to something, there was really no stopping her.

“Dad wanted me in the office, so to the office I went.”

The Clara I knew would've run in the opposite direction. I'm sensing a story behind those big blue eyes. "Was that the beginning of all this? Why you don't get along?"

"We hadn't seen eye to eye for a long while," she replies neutrally.

"What happened?"

"You mean, what did I do to make my father want to lock me in an attic?" She tries for flippant, but the attempt falls flat on its face.

"You're not crazy, Clara."

"I know that. I just decided I'd had enough. I suppose I realized that obedience to him is the same as love."

"Love works both ways."

"What?" She seems to come back to herself.

"If your love was obedience, what was his love to you?"

"Conditional," she says after a beat. "Invisible. At least, now it is."

"My mom used to say, *'I love you, but I don't have to like you.'*"

Her face brightens. "I can't imagine Mariam ever saying that."

"I was a little rough around the edges as a teenager. Or a pain in the ass." I pause. "This is just a suggestion, but maybe your dad just finds it hard to say how he feels."

"I'd like to think so, but my dad has always told me exactly what he thought of me." She gives a sad-looking smile. "I never used to let it worry me, but with age comes wisdom."

"Are you sure? He always seemed—"

"I know what he's capable of." She gnaws at the inside of her lip for a beat. "Let's change the subject," she says a little too brightly. "I'm done talking about him."

But that just makes me wonder all the more.

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Chapter 23
CLARA

Fourteen months ago

“How did the deposition go?”

I look up from my desk, stunned. My dad in my office—in the family office? The place rich people send their black sheep to keep them out of trouble. Along with their family members too stupid to get a job. I’m sure when I walked in through the door following an aimless year traveling after college, the staff here were happy to learn I didn’t belong to the latter group.

It’s a pretty easy gig. And as the person most likely to become the boss—if the dark lord is ever done with dear old Dad—I was afforded a corner office. I’m also paid a six-figure salary—a tax write-off for Dad’s bottom line. And, bonus, the job doesn’t interfere too much with my social life.

“It went fine.” I close my laptop and answer with a bright smile despite the warning drill my body has begun. The icy finger of dread pulling down my spine. The way the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand. The little voice that says I should get up from my seat and make for the door. *For safety’s sake.*

But he’s standing there, filling the space, and before I can make my excuses, he steps over the threshold and closes the door behind him with a quiet *snick.*

Shit.

We see less of each other since I moved out, which suits me just fine. The less we see each other, the better we get along. *Or the less he hurts me, maybe.*

I’m required only to turn up for dinner once a month and never for vacations. Safe to say it’s been some time since I’ve ignored my body’s warning bells.

“Fine? Really? That isn’t the way I’d phrase it.” He brings his hands to the front of his body, one hand atop the other. I’m suddenly very grateful

for the desk between us. Not that he'd lash out here, not where there are potential witnesses.

"I'm sorry, I don't follow." I hate the tiny warble in my answer.

"Try harder, Clara."

"I answered their questions." I move a pen an inch to the right, then straighten the document folder next to it. Behind me, the sun shines over Central Park, while on the other side of the wall, the office hums with mundanity. Only in this room have things changed. The air has thinned, making it harder to breathe, the space between us tension filled.

"It's how you answered them that is a problem." Edwin Forbes at fifty-eight is still a good-looking man, I'm told. Tall and formidable, he demands respect wherever he goes. And at twenty-seven, I'm still more than a little frightened of him.

"I answered them honestly. I repeated the events as I saw them."

He reaches up to rub his chin. "Honesty isn't your strong point."

I inhale a thin, sharp breath. We both know what he's talking about, what he's dangled over my head like a sword for almost eight years. He's never explicitly said the words, but he uses the event as a reminder. A stick to keep me in line that's more effective than just his hands.

"Let's not pretend you didn't know what you were doing. What is it now?" he asks wearily. "What do you want?"

"I don't want anything."

"Come now, Clara. We both know your loyalty is negotiable."

"I don't like to lie." I enunciate my words clearly. "And I don't like men who take advantage of the women around them."

My father huffs out a laugh. "Women who don't know their place, you mean."

"In the land of dinosaurs, sure." There I go, burning bridges again. But this one is intentional. That's not to say my stomach didn't ache in that bland meeting room downtown. That my hands didn't shake as I reached for the glass of water as Chloe Goode's attorney shot question after question my way. It also doesn't mean I'm not exceptionally anxious right now.

Chloe used to work in this office in accounts. She's twenty-five and inordinately sweet. I like her. We even met up for a drink after she left to go work for one of Dad's oldest friends, Drummond East. Or Uncle Drum, as I've always known him.

That day, I went to his office to deliver some paperwork. There had been a mix-up with an invoice from a private airfield, and I was meeting friends for sushi at Hatsuhana anyway. At least I was until I found Chloe alone in the office, red eyed and clearly distressed.

I asked her if she was okay. A stupid question, in hindsight, even if I so wanted her to say yes. For her to say she was suffering from hay fever or a cold or something. I'm not a perfect person by any stretch of the imagination, but I am human. And she was crying, so I took her hand.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice soft. Careful, I suppose.

She shook her head and brought the back of her hand to her nose. Her left wrist was red, and she was shaking so badly. "He said if I tell anyone, I'm finished." Her watery eyes lifted to mine. "That no one would believe me."

Maybe I should've insisted she call the police. Instead, I called a cab, and I took her home. Because I know what it's like to be frightened by a man.

But not anymore.

"It's a civil suit." Dad's voice makes me jump in my seat. "The woman is after money."

"She's after payback," I correct. It's her flag in the ground. Her attempt at taking back her power, her self-worth. She's sticking it to the man who made her feel all kinds of less than.

"You said it yourself, you didn't see anything." He gives a flourish of his hand. "Drum wasn't even in the building."

"I saw what I saw, Dad."

His eyes narrow, and his jaw works like it does when he's angry. "You should know better than anyone how dangerous it is to misinterpret attention-seeking behaviors as victimhood."

That sword above my head moves swiftly, piercing my chest. Tears sting, and my lip hurts under the press of my teeth. But I will not cry, and I will not bend, and I will not let him ruin another life with me as his instrument.

"You're going to fix this," he insists, his voice steely.

"No, I'm not."

"You're going to amend your statement." His answer rolls over mine as though I haven't spoken.

"I said no."

“You’re going to stress that you did not witness anything inappropriate. You will restate that you merely found the woman in distress —”

“Her name is Chloe.”

“—a woman you know to be emotional from your time working with her here.”

“That’s not true.”

“There are members of staff in this office that would say otherwise.”

“Then get them to lie.” Under the cover of my desk, I ball my hands tight, my fingernails piercing my palms. “But you won’t, because that would be a risk for you.”

“Drum is like family. You owe him your loyalty.”

“I don’t owe him my lies.”

Malice licks over my father’s face. “Oh, but you’ll lie to cover your own mistakes, won’t you?” His words land like the slap. “Everyone makes mistakes, Clara.”

“True. But we should also pay for them.”

“This is not up for discussion.” He steps away from the door, and my heart rate spikes, my eyes darting to my only way out.

Could I make it? Should I even try? I could take another slap, I decide in that moment. In some ways, it would be easier than suffering his contempt.

“You will revise your statement. You will say she never indicated distress, that there was no reason to believe Drum had been there, let alone that he might be responsible for any form of misconduct.”

Misconduct. I shake my head, literally lost for words. But then I find them again, with a hardness that surprises me. “He abused his position—he abused Chloe. You get that, don’t you? He touched her—sexually assaulted her.”

“Everything you have, Clara. The apartment you live in, the money you spend, this job, it’s all down to me.”

“I’m aware of my blessings.” I almost choke on the words.

“The opportunities you’ve squandered, the mistakes I’ve covered up on your behalf. You owe everything to me.”

“This isn’t the same,” I begin, my voice shaking with rage. “It isn’t nearly the same. I was there. I saw how frightened she was. I can’t ignore that.”

His lips give an arctic twist. “You’re not going to ruin your life for some woman you barely know.”

My own gaze pinches, his meaning unraveling in my head. All those monetary benefits. Comforts. My so-called blessings.

“Don’t misunderstand me, Clara. Go against my word, and I’ll cut you off.” He gives a click of his fingers. “Just like that.” His cruel smile says that he means every word.

But then, so do I.

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Chapter 24
CLARA

I almost told him at dinner. I almost said what happened in the family office that afternoon. But I couldn't, because then I'd have to confess what happened eight years ago. And those words are much harder to find.

Best to let the past lie.

Anyway, after Troy suggested that my dad might just find it hard to tell me he loves me, I'd redirected the conversation to him. He told me about his fellow founders. Max, the cutthroat lawyer whom I've already met, and Hugo, the brilliant engineer who sounds very British and slightly eccentric. And Hannah, of course, the kick-ass behavioral scientist, whom Troy described in such glowing terms that it was hard not to feel jealousy.

He spoke of them so fondly, with an affectionate side of shit-talking, of course, that it made me glad to know he had people in his corner. But when he asked what I was going to do with the rest of my life, I couldn't answer him. I've been too busy trying to survive. Or so I thought until I realized he'd been in a similar place. Poverty and injustice hadn't stopped him.

Troy was always brilliant. Driven and focused. And I called him a loan shark. I might've even suggested he was scum. But that was before we reached this place of . . . cordiality. That day, I was feeling stung, like a failure caught in an apron and ugly shoes.

At least I'm not wearing ugly shoes tonight.

As for the things I said, the insults, the Troy I knew, and the Troy I'm beginning to know again—he wouldn't take advantage. There's no way he would profit from people's circumstances. I see now his brilliant business idea is more about giving people a chance. Table charges the merchants more and the consumers less and doesn't load penalties and interest charges immediately for late payments. Which is probably part of the reason it's been such a meteoric success.

That's not to say Troy is a saint. He's not above using charm and flattery to get what he wants. Not that he used that charm with me when he did the whole "You owe me" thing. That was more like brute-force

manipulation. *And look how well that ended for him,* I think a little smugly. Walking hand in hand home with his legal wife, while pretending he's besotted.

He's so good at it, I could almost believe it myself.

◆ ◆ ◆

I needn't have worried about things being awkward in the apartment over the weekend, because Troy shot out of the door bright and early Saturday morning for the office. Or so he said. He also said his weekend was full, that he'd be at the gym that evening, and that Sunday morning was blocked out for investor meetings over brunch. Sunday evening, I'm not sure where he was. *Maybe he had a date. It's not like he needs to report in.* While I try to keep those kinds of thoughts light, it's not how they feel inside me.

But I kept myself occupied, and after spending Friday night sleeping on the couch, I was relieved when my new bed arrived. *Well, sleeper sofa. Sleeper chair?* I had the delivery guys place it in Troy's office, where I practiced. You know, pulling it out.

Pulling *it* out. Not having *him* pull out.

I give a sigh. I may well suffer eternal embarrassment over my earlier verbal slip. *Thanks so much, intrusive thoughts.*

But after a few uncomfortable nights, I can confirm my new sleeping arrangement is no improvement on Troy's couch as far as my poor back is concerned. I should've gone with a regular bed, but in a classic pattern of overthinking, I didn't want to risk anyone—Agné, Troy's housekeeper, potential visitors, the maintenance and cleaning crews—wondering why the newlyweds were sleeping in separate rooms. On the plus side, not sharing a bed with Troy has meant there's been no repeat of boob-gate.

"Morning." I hear his sleepy voice before I see him, but there's no mentally preparing myself for the sight of him.

"Good morning." Abs. I try not to count them, but there appear to be more than six. And the way the morning sun's rays turn his skin golden seems desperately unfair as he turns for the cereal cabinet. "I can tell you don't go to the gym," I mutter under my breath.

"What was that?" He turns suddenly and looks down as though checking for something.

"Nothing."

“Did you say I don’t look like I go to the gym?”

“No! Why would I—”

“Surely you mean I look like I go to *all* the gyms?”

“Modest to a fault.” I reach for my coffee cup and try not to allow my eyes to stray.

“Modesty is overrated,” he says, turning away again.

So is celibacy. I push away the ridiculous thought, unsure where it came from. *Maybe I need a vacation,* I think, as he tugs open the cabinet. The action creates such a visual effect, his shoulder blade shifting, muscle and sinew rippling under his tan skin. The body is a beautiful machine, some more beautiful than others, and while I never thought I had a favorite part of a man, it would seem I do.

Wowza. Good thing I’ve been able to fill my script, that I’m suitably medicated. Begone hyperfocus and issues with impulse control!

Troy pivots, a box of cereal in hand. I dust the toast crumbs from my fingers and try to move my thoughts back to that vacation. It might not be a plan for the rest of my life, but it could be the start. Something to look forward to when we’re done here. In three months.

A weight sinks into the pit of my stomach, but I push on. I could go somewhere tropical, play the happy divorcée getting her groove back. I might need the release after months of living here and staring at all *that*. I stifle a sigh as my eyes drop over him again. *I wonder if the tattoo I saw peeking from under the waistband of his shorts is what I think it is.*

As though reading my thoughts, Troy hooks his thumb into the elastic, flashing a little more of the V-shaped groove of his hip while simultaneously making his bicep flex.

Gulp.

Maybe I should bulk buy some gummy bears in the meantime. Or invest in a *really* quiet vibrator. And then I realize *he* realizes I’m staring.

“See something you like?” he asks with an exaggerated sleaziness.

“Your gears must be a little slow this morning.” The pique in my tone seems to ring across the marble.

“You do seem to appreciate the view.” He does that thing again where he trails his finger down his pec cleavage now, assuming pec cleavage is a thing.

“You’re so full of it.” I shrug the hair from my face, secretly checking for drool. “I zoned out, that’s all. Eyes unseeing, okay?” I swipe my hand

back and forth in front of my face as though to prove it.

"I'm just messing with you, Clara." He pushes off the fridge.

"My husband, the comedian." *That sounds so weird.*

Troy pulls out a bowl from a drawer in the island, dumping in a small mountain of Cheerios before reaching for the milk. He rounds the island, and I give a reflexive inhale as he takes the seat next to me.

It's annoying how good he smells. I have noticed that he wears the most exquisite cologne. It's probably something bespoke from a perfume house, though what I can smell now is toothpaste and the man himself, I think. *Maybe the cologne has seeped into the pores of his skin. No man smells this good on his own.*

"Do you have a dress for Saturday?"

He means for the Stanley Foundation ball. Or Saturday's baptism of fire, as I've begun to think of it in my head. Not only will it be our first official big outing, I'll also be meeting his friends.

Eep!

"No, I don't own anything suitable." Not anymore. "Why?" I glance his way and cant my head. "Are you offering to take me shopping?"

"I'll give you my credit card," he says as he shovels cereal into his mouth.

"Just what I always wanted. A *Pretty Woman* moment in Bloomingdale's."

"Do you *want* me to come with you?"

I chuckle at his expression. "I take it you're not a fan of shopping." I'm secretly tickled it looks like I could've persuaded him.

"Unlike you."

"Turns out, I'm not so much anymore." I thought I'd be excited—that my debit card would be burning a hole in my hand. But that was the old Clara. "Which is why I ordered something online. Several somethings." Because a girl likes to have a choice even if she doesn't want to do the legwork. "They should arrive this morning."

"Cool." Troy plows through his breakfast like he's not even tasting it. Might be a little method in that madness, come to think of it. "I thought you'd call an old stylist in or something," he says between mouthfuls.

"How'd you know I had one?"

"I've dated other rich girls."

Welp, that shuts me up. I might not have a pithy comeback, but I do want to know if he's hooking up with someone currently. I'd rather poke out my eyes than ask. "Anyone I know?"

"I doubt it. What color is it?"

"What color is what?"

"The dress, Clara."

"Why, are we going to be matchy-matchy?"

"If it's black or white, yeah."

Black tie, of course. "Well, it'll be black."

"They're all black?"

"I'm with Coco Chanel. When I find a color darker than black . . ." I give a shrug.

"You look good in blue."

Pleasure bursts inside me. Is he talking about my wedding dress?

Reframe: The dress I wore to our wedding of convenience.

"Thank you," I almost whisper.

"Just sayin' what's true," he replies gruffly. Maybe the sugar from the cereal is burning his esophagus.

I take a sip of my coffee. The machine was noisy again this morning, but that's not where my mind is. "I had a call from my grandmother's lawyers. My lawyers now, I suppose."

"Yeah?"

"There's been a snag with my trust," I say, my brows knitting together. "An administrative error is delaying things." At least, that's what they're saying.

He lowers his spoon and turns to face me. I make a conscious effort to keep my eyes up top. It's no easy feat, given the whole topless situation. And I won't be looking at the shorts that are more smoke screen than actual garment.

"Are you worried?"

"A little," I admit, trying not to gnaw at my lip. "After everything, maybe it's just hard to expect positive things."

He nods like he understands. "You're okay for money, though, right? Because I can—"

"It's not the money," I say quickly. Troy has already done too much on that front. "I can't help but wonder, or worry, if the so-called administrative error is really something to do with my dad."

“What makes you say that?”

“I didn’t say it sounded sane,” I murmur, turning the handle on my cup. “But it is born from experience.”

“Do you want me to go speak with him?”

My attention jerks up. “My dad? God, no.” My words hit the air all stuttery and harsh. If I were a religious woman, I’d probably cross myself.

“I would, no problem.”

“And I might let you if I thought it would help.”

But that would only make things worse.

Much worse.

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Chapter 25
TROY

“Excuse me.” Clara’s arm darts around me, grabbing a bottle of something from the bathroom vanity. Between the ghost of her touch and the reflection in the mirror, whatever I was thinking flies out of my head.

“You’re problem,” I answer like an idiot. *You’re welcome? No problem?* I think now might be a good time to lower the razor from my jawline.

“I’m sorry?” In the mirror, her blue eyes blink. Her eye makeup lends her the look of an exotic feline, her mouth painted the same color as the Rosso marble.

“No . . . problem. Do you need anything else?” I move right a little from where I’m blocking her cosmetics or whatever shit she pulled from the drawer.

She shakes her head, the short pink robe still clutched in her fist at her chest. But she doesn’t stop looking, and neither do I. “What?”

“You look—” Pretty, I was about to say. “Like you just stepped out of a time machine.” I tap my finger to my head, and her own hand lifts self-consciously to the pink foam rollers, making her robe part at her thighs. *Panties. Black and tiny.* They’re enough to make my pulse jump.

“If you’ve got one, maybe we can speed ahead and miss tonight.”

“No time machine, unfortunately.” *Huh. Maybe backs are her thing.*

Her eyes lift almost owlishly. Our eyes lock, something heated and electric snapping in the space between us. Until she turns quite suddenly.

“I’ll let you get back to your shave.”

I don’t, not for a minute, as I try to make sense of what that just was.

Eventually, two smooth cheeks later, I announce my reentry to the bedroom with a polite cough. I’m still in my towel, and though I’d like to see those panties again, I’m not that big of an asshole.

Clara sits on the bed, a mirror propped on the nightstand as she messes with her hair as I cross to the far side of the room, where my tux hangs on a wooden gentleman’s valet, a quaint piece of furniture a tailor in London

once talked me into. The best way to avoid the pesky pant creases from a hanger, so he'd said.

"Who was that who delivered your tux this afternoon?" At least, I think that's what she says around a mouthful of hairpins.

"Someone from the dry cleaners, I guess?"

"You—" She takes the pins from between her lips. "You don't have a million interns and assistants running around to do your bidding?"

"I'm kind of low maintenance."

She gives a disparaging huff.

"I am."

"I didn't say anything." She assumes a look of wide-eyed innocence. Until her gaze dips. "Are you planning on dressing tonight, or is this really a toga party?"

"You're just angling for a flash of my buns."

"Oh, I can't handle the buns," she says with a low chuckle.

"I don't know, you did a pretty good job with them the other morning." I'm not sure I meant to make my voice sound so low as Clara almost jackknifes from the bed.

"I'm just going to go . . . going to. In here." She points at the closet, then the bathroom. "Here, I mean." And she scurries off.

I go back to getting dressed, and I'm shirtless and fastening my pants when she comes back in. *Without coughing.* She moves back to the bed and reaches for her brush, though in the mirror, her attention keeps drifting to my back.

"It's not just the buns, huh?" I give a little flex of my shoulders.

Her head lifts slowly as though forcing her eyes to meet mine in the reflection. "It's just . . . You've filled out a lot."

"I grew up. So did you."

And maybe that's the problem. Physically, she looks the same in so many ways, and while I've dated a whole lot, and from a wide pool of looks, it turns out I do have a preferred type.

Short, dark, and curvy is my yum-o kryptonite.

Wonder if I'm hers.

The women I've dated have all been low maintenance and undemanding, maybe because I once fell in love with a girl who took up all my waking thoughts. Turns out that girl is now a woman whose inner workings appear to have changed a lot. She's resilient and kind and

thoughtful, though her life has been chaos. She's still kind of funny, even when she doesn't mean to be, and when she looks at me . . .

Problem number two: None of this matters, because we're impossible.

"Clara," I begin carefully, like I want to defuse this thing, when *want* and *should* are two very different states of mind.

"I need to get dressed." She scoops up her dress and, this time, points in the right direction. "In here."

The closet door clicks shut behind her, and I exhale a whoosh of breath so hard, it fogs the mirror. *It's fine,* I tell myself. I can handle this. I'm a fucking adult, not the kid I was with a raging hard-on for her. I glance down accusingly. Not quite a hard-on, at any rate.

It doesn't mean anything.

My reflection doesn't seem to believe me either.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Wow." My eyes feast on the sight of her. "Clara, just . . . wow."

"Do I look okay?"

"Knockout," I reply as I put down my glass. It's not Dutch courage and more like our earlier interaction has driven me to drink. "You're stunning."

Her dress is black, no surprise there, but it subtly shimmers. A one-shouldered Grecian thing, cut to follow those heavenly curves before falling to her feet.

She crosses the room with a relieved smile. Her hair is up off her neck, and she twirls a finger through one of the artfully arranged curls as though to make it behave. "You look pretty spiffy yourself."

Oh, man. Even better, the dress is split at the front. It doesn't flash a lot of leg, but the skin it does reveal makes me want to stare. To slip my fingers between the fabric, sliding it higher to experience the secret softness of her inner thighs. Maybe follow that touch with my tongue. "Spiffy?"

"It was a compliment."

"They look painful." I sound almost parched as I stare at her high, high heels.

Fuck my life. Fuck-me heels.

"I'm hoping I'll get the hang of walking in them soon," she says, glancing down at them. "It's been a while."

She said that in my bed the day after we got hitched. “It has been a while.” Her eyes were so dark and her mouth red and kiss plump. Pretty sure I went blind for the moment thinking of all the ways I could right that wrong for her. I give a little cough. “Looks like you’re doing okay.” *Looks like you’re doing it for me*, as I ignore the telltale tug at the front of my pants. And it’s not just my cock that’s confused.

I’m gonna do it. Why the fuck not? It doesn’t have to mean anything other than making this story look right.

Clara places her clutch on the dining table, opening her palm to her grandmother’s earrings. She slips them on, one, two.

“I have something for you.” As she looks up, I slide my hand into my pocket. “Don’t get all weird on me, but I got you a replacement ring.”

“Replace—why?”

“Because that piece of shit isn’t fooling anyone.” I pull out the box as Clara looks on, bemused.

“I was just going to leave it off.” She does a little Beyoncé hand move, her fingers bare. “Say I’d forgotten it or something.”

“Some husband I must be if I can’t inspire my woman to keep on her wedding ring. Here.” I open my hand to reveal a small black velvet box balanced in my palm.

She eyes it like a damn bomb. “It wouldn’t be right.”

“It’s only a ring. For the narrative.”

She rolls her eyes. For some dumb reason, I love that she does. “I’ll only accept if you accept this is only a loan.”

“Sure, whatever.” My turn to roll my eyes, though more in tone.

“Okay.” She fights a smile. “Well, let’s have a look at what’s in store for the next Mrs. Templeton.”

My brows pinch together because that sounded wrong. I’m gonna say she didn’t like it, either, as she crosses the room. She lifts the box from my hand, and with a soft catch of the hinge, opens it. Her eyes meet mine over the lid.

“Troy, it’s . . .”

“Antique. Cartier. From the 1930s.” When the jewelry house was seen to be exclusive, so the guy behind the counter said. The ring is kind of architectural; three bands of platinum and a literal fuck ton of diamonds. “The guy said it’s a bombé-fan form, whatever that means.”

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers, handing me the box back as she slips it on. “It looks like something my grandmother would’ve worn.” That was the idea, after seeing those earrings. “So glamorous,” she whispers, holding out her hand to study it. “How did you know what size?”

“You left your ring on the nightstand, so I took it with me.”

“You took my piece of . . .”

“Shit ring?”

“To a fancy jeweler?”

I shrug. It wasn’t so much a jeweler. The guy called the place the world’s premier dealer of museum-quality decorative arts, but whatever. “What does he care? I was spending money.” Quite a bit of it, as it happens.

“I was talking about you. Weren’t you embarrassed?”

It’s my turn to pull a face now. “It’s like you don’t even know me, wife.”

She bursts out laughing at that. I’m gonna say the sheen in her eyes is down to laughter and decide not to tell her I went to Tiffany first, but that nothing there seemed right for her.

“But I’ll definitely give it back when—”

“Now you’re trying to offend me.” My expression? Exasperated and mildly put out. I want her to have it. I can’t see it on anyone else’s finger.

“But you agreed.”

“Well, now I’m disagreeing. I’m not taking it back, because it’s a gift. From me to you, so take the damn thing, and stop making a song and dance about it.”

Her huff of breath sounds like exasperation, but then her arms come around my middle. “Thank you. I don’t remember the last time anyone . . . Just thank you.”

The sincerity, just the meaning of those words, makes my heart hurt for her. But it’s my heart I need to guard because, last time I let her close, she was nothing but careless with it.

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Chapter 26
TROY

Past

It isn't my first time in Clara's parents' house. But it is the first time I've entered through the front door. Not that the back door is much safer territory, depending on the time of day and where my mother is. The way I see it, there's no need to worry her any more than she already does.

"Just . . . take care, *ya hayati*." My life. It's what she'd said before I left to walk over this evening. I know she wanted to say more, but she wouldn't let herself.

She's had a lot of practice swallowing her words. First as a means not to provoke my asshole father's blows. And now she does it to keep a roof over our heads.

"It's fine. It's just a party." I pressed my hands to her shoulder, bent, and pressed a kiss to her graying head. Then left without a second glance.

I cross the graveled walkway and round the house, glancing up at the trellis under Clara's window. *Not in this suit*, I think with a tiny grin. And then I'm at the door, cheap suit and all. And then I'm standing out like a turd in a punch bowl in a foyer that could belong to a European manor. Double height, black and white marble tiles, and a staircase built for showcasing.

People mill around, moving in and out of adjoining rooms as harp music flows from someplace nearby. It's not piped Muzak but an actual fucking harp. When Clara said that, I found myself wondering who in this century thought to themselves, *You know what would make me more friends at school? If I could play a really cool instrument. Like the harp. Bitches love the harp.*

I couldn't stop laughing.

I guess what I'm trying to say is the Forbes vacation home is like a small palace. A coastal-inspired masterpiece with a mile-long fucking driveway and manicured grounds. The swimming pool is Olympic-size, the

tennis courts are multiples, and the pool house is an actual fucking house. There's a ten-car garage, a boathouse with direct access to the water, and, in the back, where the trash is kept, there's an apartment for the housekeeper. This is where my mom lives. And me out of term time.

I'm not jealous. I'll have a place like this someday. A home where the air is fresh and woodsy instead of stinking of stale oil and garbage.

Jesus, the place is full of the kinds of people I usually sweat for, affluent neighbors through to the megarich. I recognize a few faces, mostly the boat-shoes-and-chinos brigade. People who vacation, not live here. Men who can't change a light bulb, and their wives, who'd gladly volunteer to hold the ladder for me while I do. And that's not a code for something else despite the number of indecent proposals I've been on the receiving end of.

Money talks and bullshit walks, and I've never felt more out of place in my whole damn life. But that's okay 'cause I'd put myself through a whole lot more for my girl.

"Troy!" Clara appears at the top of the staircase like Scarlett O'Hara, the sight of her hitting me in the chest like a fist. *I sometimes watch old movies with my mom.*

Almost twenty-one to my twenty-two, Clara is drop-dead gorgeous, bright and vivacious, and when she slides a smile my way, I can actually feel IQ points sloughing off. I might well be an idiot by the time fall rolls around, but I don't care because I am having the best damn summer of my life.

Her dark hair tamed into some fancy updo, Clara glides down the stairs like she's been groomed for this moment, wearing an emerald green dress she appears to have been poured into. *I can't believe she's mine.*

"Well, hey there, gorgeous." I take her hand as she reaches the bottom step. The way I feel . . . it's hard to contain. I want to hug her and kiss her and show her off. Or pull her out of the door, down to the boathouse. After her strange mood this afternoon, something tells me my girl would be down for that.

But there are things at stake tonight, because tonight, I'm being introduced to her old man. And while I'm not looking forward to it or expecting any kind of effusive welcome, I want to do what's right. I'd probably wrestle with lions if it meant I could be in Clara's life.

"Don't you look handsome." She's all soft-eyed wonder as her fingers brush the knot of my tie. "If I'd known you looked this good, I would've

asked you to suit up earlier.” Her words brim with suggestion.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you don’t know that if you asked me to come along in my old jockstrap, I’d be standing here bare assed right now.”

“Interesting.” Her hand slides down my chest, though I catch it before it gets to my belt.

“Be good.” I press a kiss to her knuckles. And, man, the way she smiles, I don’t care if I get dumb.

I guess I should be glad her apparent suit kink has come late in the summer. I couldn’t have bought one before this weekend due to a lack of funds. Despite her playful compliments, I know she’s just being kind. The suit isn’t a great fit, but it was the best I could do.

I know what I am and what I’m not. And I know what her friends think about me. Likely her dad’s opinion will be the same. I can’t change any of that, but what I can do is do my best to try to deserve her. This prize of a woman who should be beyond my reach.

“Maybe I will be good . . . if you bring the jockstrap next time.”

“Next time what?”

“Next time I have my wicked way with you.” Voice low and hella sexy, she stares up at me through her lashes, those blue eyes rimmed with indigo.

“Now you’re just trying to make me embarrass myself.”

“Are you trying to turn me on right now?”

God, I want to kiss the life out of her. But that wouldn’t do thanks to the dozens of people around us watching. Fuck, it feels like there’s always someone watching. Always someone to be mindful of. I’m tired of sneaking around, pretending we aren’t together, springing apart when we hear footsteps. But it won’t always be the case, because September is just around the corner, and we’ll both be back at college. UConn to Brown is only ninety minutes, give or take, and I foresee a lot of driving between the two, because this is more than just sex. We both said the same this afternoon.

“Oh, champagne,” Clara says, plucking a couple of flutes from a tray as a waiter passes. She hands me one.

“Not a good idea,” I say, setting it down.

“Champagne is always a good idea.”

“Except when you’re under twenty-one. Or trying to create a good impression.”

“Well, I’m only one of those things,” she says with a shrug. She tips the glass back. “It’s just one glass.”

I realize I’m frowning. “This is important, Clara. I want him to like me.” Not that want has much to do with it.

“Impossible. He doesn’t like anyone.”

“I just want to make the right kind of impression.”

“I know.” Her tiny sigh sounds like resignation, clever fingers warm against my wrist. “Come on. Let’s go out to the garden and dance before Vanessa finds me doing something interesting.”

“Is that my new name now?”

The peal of laughter draws more than a few curious looks. But Clara doesn’t give a fuck. One of these days, I’ll get to live my life like her.

I offer her my arm, and she takes it, pressing close as we cross the foyer. “You did tell your dad you invited me, didn’t you?”

“He said I could invite friends.”

Dammit. She never wants to talk about her dad, but I hear what Mom says about his uptight personality. Clara is his only kid, and it sounds like he doesn’t want to loosen the reins.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “It’s better this way.”

Better for who, I find myself thinking, though not for long. With Clara on my arm, I feel ten feet tall. The way she looks at me makes me feel worthy, but in this house, I’m not fooling myself. My presence is unwanted. I’m not one of them, and together, we are an aberration.

We make our way to the back of the house. It’s open plan, vaulted ceilings, the color scheme a million shades of white. Walls, couches, rugs, soft furnishings, even the flowers are all pale. And there are people everywhere. Men in summer-weight suits and frozen-faced women decked out in pastel gowns. They’re all holding glasses—wine as red as blood, amber liquids, clear ones with lemon twists floating like decorations. And no one is giving a fuck about spills or stains or water rings. Not until my mother comes in tomorrow morning, I guess. Hair pinned, sleeves rolled, all quiet industry while the family fucks around.

It’s not fair, but that’s life. And it won’t always be this way for her. I didn’t get a full ride at UConn for being stupid. I chose my courses

carefully. Applied economics and finance will take me far. *I'll take me far, my determination.*

I'm headed for the world of banking, aiming for a hedge fund. One day in the not-too-distant future, I'll have money, and the only spills my mom will worry over will be the dollar bills that spill from her purse.

Clara turns, ahead of me now, her hand still in mine. Bright and restless, my summer spark is like a lightning bug, always chasing her next thought. Her next escapade. She's so beautiful, and the way she looks at me makes me long to belong. The sensation twists inside like a knife.

"So sorry!" A woman bumps into me, and my contact with Clara breaks. "And just who might you be?" Her eyes run over me like I'm a bull at a state fair.

Old enough to be your son. "Me? I'm no one." With a grin, I move away. *No one on the way to being someone. Just ask my girl.*

Clara throws me a smile over her shoulder. "Hurry, Troy. I just love this song."

The doors to the huge terrace have been thrown open, the sultry summer air and the honeyed tones of a bluesy voice drifting in. The terrace has been strung with a million lights. *At least, that's what it felt like earlier when I was up that fucking ladder.*

Clara leads me down the honey-colored steps to the dance floor, the sky an endless sea of blue-black rain clouds overhead. It feels like an omen or a portent, but no one else seems to notice as Clara skirts the dance floor.

"I thought you wanted to dance."

"I do." She offers me her profile along with her answer, and my cock pulses. I can't pretend I don't know what this is. But fuck, I'd follow her anywhere.

Down the stone steps, the party lights fading, her heels clicking, the music softening to a distant hum. The trees grow thicker, the gardens wilder. *Just like my pulse.*

"Here." Clara stops abruptly, her face half in shadow as she turns.

"Why are we hiding?"

"So I can do this." Two steps, and her fingers fold around my lapels, her breath sweet and light as her lips meet mine. I slip my hand under her hair as I take over, soft and teasing drawing out into something else. Something hotter. Wetter. Deeper. The air between us suddenly electric. I

want her. Here. Now. Her back pressed against the trunk of a tree. On her knees in the dewy grass. Any of it. All of it.

"We shouldn't," I growl the reminder to myself. "Not here." Yet my hand still slides down to cup her ass, pulling her closer. "Fuck, this ass." I knead her taut flesh as I grind against her.

"Not here. Not *that*." I hear her amusement and the suggestion in her tone.

"Didn't sound like an outright no."

"Troy Templeton," she purrs as her lips graze my ear. "Are you saying you'd like to stick it in my butt?"

I pull back a little. "Well, like you said, not here."

"God." She rolls in her bottom lip, then bites it a little. She looks conflicted. Turned on and not trying to show it. I'm not sure I've ever been so hard. "You're into that?"

"I'm into you, Clara." I slide my lips down her neck. "I love you so fucking much."

"Nothing says love like butt talk," she whispers.

"You love it," I rasp.

"No, I love you. Oh, Lord, you feel so hard, and your kisses make my legs feel like JELL-O." She brings my hand to her breast, arching into my hold.

This woman is so goddamn perfect. I'm not sure I'll ever be enough.

Desire burns in my veins as I hook my finger into her neckline, exposing her nipple to the night air. As I skate my thumb across the tight pebbling, her breath hitches.

"You're so delicious." I suck the bud into my mouth. A swirl of tongue, a tight pull, and she melts against me. "So fucking delicious."

"Less talk," she whimpers.

"You love my talk. Especially when I tell you how I'm gonna get you off."

"Oh, God."

"I'm gonna make a meal of you." I begin to gather her skirts. "Make you come so hard that the stars will think you're a supernova and be jealous of how you shine."

"Clara. Clara!" calls a woman's voice from a distance.

"Dammit." Her body stiffens. "It's Vanessa."

"Fuck her."

“Shush!” Clara snickers but wiggles away, leaving my tongue flicking the night air. She takes my hands and pulls me into the shadows of a tall hedge.

“Clara, I know you’re down here.” The prim voice sounds closer now. “And I know who you’re with.” *Fuck.* “I’m giving you two minutes to comport yourself and get back to the party before . . . before I tell your father.”

“Bitch,” Clara hisses as the clacking of high heels draws away.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” I say, pulling her into my arms to press my lips to her forehead. Her arms come around me, and I sigh. “But it was fun while it lasted.”

“God, I can’t wait until we’re back at school.”

Amen to that.

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Chapter 27
CLARA

The music flows, lights twinkle, and the party is already in full swing as we arrive.

The ballroom is like a mini Versailles, the walls gilded mirrors. White linens and chandeliers, waiters in black, one hand behind their backs. Glassware chimes over the quiet hum of conversations. If you care to listen closely enough, I'm sure you'll hear power being brokered by men in black suits as the women on their arms drip in pearls and diamonds.

Everyone here tonight is cut from the same cloth. Birds of a feather, flocking together to benefit whatever the cause du jour is. The sad reality is few are here to benefit their fellow man. This is just a chance to see and be seen. To say *I'm here. I'm one of the chosen few.*

Privilege. Wealth. Entitlement. And I feel out of step.

I've been to enough of these things while working for my dad that you'd think I'd feel at home. I do not. And I have a feeling this knot in my stomach won't settle until I'm done and gone. How strange that I'm more at ease in a bar with blue-collar workers these days. Dressed to the nines with Troy's hand resting at the small of my back, I feel . . . unsteady. Or maybe that's because when the pressure shifts and his thumb skims lightly across my skin, my equilibrium teeters.

I wonder if he knows what he's doing to me.

"Shall we get a drink?"

"A drink sounds so good!"

"Thirsty?" Troy quirks a brow, amused.

"I am in need of lube."

"What was that?" Laughter lightens his voice.

"Drink is like lube. For social interactions." I pull a face like he's the crazy one.

Good Lord. As though getting dressed wasn't torture enough. Watching him walk around in nothing but that low-slung towel just served to remind me how long it's been since I last had sex. And how much longer it's been since I had sex better than a bag of gummy bears.

On our way to the bar, Troy raises his hand in greeting, and my stomach gives a nasty lurch. I really hope I don't see anyone I know. At least my dad won't be here. He no longer pretends that charity is his thing.

At the bar, Troy loosens the single button of his slim-fitting tux. He looks like he could've stepped directly from the catwalk in Paris or Milan. Tall, handsome, and golden. All lean, elegant angles, and good enough to lick from head to toe.

"Champagne?"

"Yes, please." I'll stick to one. Maybe two. I don't want to tempt the quenching of other thirsts. Troy orders himself a beer, and we turn for our designated table. "So your friends will be here? Max and the other founders?"

"Yep."

"No pressure, then," I whisper tremulously.

I suppress a shiver as Troy turns his lips to my ear. "You're doing great."

Good optics, I think as I tilt my face up to his. "I haven't done anything yet."

His mouth curves and, oh my, the butterflies. "No one's expecting you to perform, Gretch. Just be yourself."

I'm not sure anyone has ever said that to me before.

On the way to our table, we pause to allow an aproned server to go by. He stops, of course, and insists with a flourish that we should proceed first.

"This isn't Gretchen's scene. I'm not even sure it's Sunny's." I never quite figured out formal silver service.

"This is Clara's true place."

"Is it?" I inhale a quick breath. "I'm not sure anymore."

At our table, we find Max, the lawyer, is already there, wearing a tux and his perma-scowl. My stomach gives a little flip. I was a bit over the top the day we met. Though in my defense, Troy kind of set me up by sort of proposing. I reacted instinctively. The wrong instinct, as it turned out. No wonder he's unimpressed.

"How's it going?" He stands to greet us, and the men shake hands.

"Oh, good, thank you. We just got here."

"I meant in general. This one driving you insane yet?"

A genuine question? I angle my head Troy's way. Then give it a tiny bemused shake. "No, not yet."

Troy pulls out my chair, the smile in his eyes now. “Where’s your date?”

“He couldn’t make it. On account of getting himself hitched this week.”

“Look at her, then look at you.” Troy shrugs. “There’s no competition.”

A genuine question and now a *compliment.*

I almost startle as Troy leans in for a sudden kiss. *We’re jumping in with both feet on the PDA front,* I think to myself. And while it’s just a peck, it does make those butterflies flutter. Doubly so when he leans in and kisses me again. Delicately at first, then a tiny bit less so, forcing my mouth, my mind, to yield.

“Get a room, you two.”

I spring back at the sound of a very British accent, and Troy turns his attention to the man with a messy mop of dark hair.

“Hello, Mrs. Templeton.” His smile is almost boyish and his amusement infectious.

“Wow, I sound so old. Clara,” I offer, relaxing my fingers in my lap before offering them to him. He takes my hand, though leans in to kiss my cheek instead.

“Hugo,” Troy says, not quite a greeting yet not quite a reprimand.

“This is Leonora.” Hugo turns and gives a game show wave. The tall blonde smiles. Almost. The men all stand now, and further introductions are made before the newcomers take their seats at the table. “You’re playing up a division, boss man.”

I must look bemused as Max explains, “I know it sounds like English, but we’re not really sure it is.”

“Oi! My people invented the language.”

“Then you made it indecipherable.” The stunning redhead I saw at the office party is next to arrive. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little flustered that this must be Hannah. Tall, slim, and gorgeous, she has the most amazing auburn hair. “Hi, Clara. I’m Hannah,” she confirms, also offering me her hand.

“Hello. So nice to meet you.”

“What Hughie here is trying to say, in his own peculiar way, is that you’re very beautiful. Too beautiful for the likes of him.” She playfully bats the back of her fingers to Troy’s shoulder.

“My mom thinks I’m handsome.”

Hannah makes a disparaging noise. “Mariam is nice about everyone.”

I fight to keep my expression neutral as something uncomfortable sluices through my insides. I’m not sure Mariam would have anything pleasant to say about me.

Playful squabbles break out around the table, everyone claiming to be Troy’s mom’s particular favorite.

Interloper. I’m probably not the only new face at this table, especially as Hannah introduces her date, Garrett. But I know Mariam. Her soft voice and her kind hands, and those eyes so like her son’s. She used to make me tea in the kitchen and feed me her homemade almond cookies after I’d butt heads with my dad.

She made me feel seen and I loved her. Yet, right now, I’m suffering with the most pervasive sense that I’m unworthy of this shared moment. That my presence here isn’t legitimate. That I don’t fit in. I don’t fit in anywhere now.

“You okay?” Troy’s voice is low and his gaze concerned. *Just like his mom’s.* I nod, because what else am I supposed to say? “You’re worried, but don’t be.” He gives a one-sided pull of his lips. “Just imagine them—”

“Please don’t say naked.”

“I was gonna say imagine them as customers sitting on the other side of the bar.”

“I’m not abusing them.”

He throws back his head with a laugh.

“Share with the class, Troy Boy,” Hannah demands.

“Hansy,” Hugo puts in, “they’re newlyweds. I imagine we don’t need to know what they’re giggling about.”

Hannah looks thwarted rather than chastened.

“Troy just suggested I imagine you all naked.” My smile feels impish.

“Deviant!” Hugo announces, delighted.

“I do not envy you living with him,” Max says. “When we roomed together one year—and a year was enough—he was a nightmare of epic proportions.”

“No stories,” Troy warns, pointing a finger Max’s way around the neck of his beer.

Stories of socks on door handles and naked college escapades? Do I want to hear them? *No, I don’t.*

“I’ll keep it to the clean ones.” Max lifts his glass as though in challenge.

“Boring!” sings Hugo. “I don’t remember any clean stories about him, do you?” He looks to Hannah, who doesn’t see. She’s too busy trying to decipher me, I think.

“Yeah, well, without me, Max would be anything but clean.” Troy slides his arm across the back of my chair and leans closer. “This asshole couldn’t even use a washing machine when I met him.”

“Oh, I see how this is gonna go.” Max’s mouth is suddenly a flat line.

And now is probably not the time to admit that, for part of my adult life, I couldn’t use one myself. I laugh a little for real, a little in solidarity, maybe. But real is dangerous because it’s easy to be sucked in. To forget these people aren’t destined to be my friends.

“I’m the youngest in my family,” Max protests. “I was highly indulged.”

“He put three scoops of washing soda in the machine.” Troy shakes his head. “The place looked like spring break in Cancun. Without the bikinis.”

“It’s not my fault I had to wash my jeans and my T-shirt!” Max laughingly puts in. His amusement is infectious. Maybe he was just having a bad day before.

“Then you shouldn’t have worn them to the laundromat, you asshole.”

I burst out laughing at the visual, and Troy presses a kiss to my head.

“You guys look really good together.”

“That’s reassuring, Maxi.” I can’t make out if there is a warning in Troy’s tone.

“Is it?” Max tilts his head consideringly.

“Newlyweds that look unconvincing.” I glance Troy’s way. “That would be odd, right?”

“That, in a nutshell,” offers Hugo, “would be my parents’ marriage. Forty years and counting, and they still don’t seem to like each other. We thought the only reason they didn’t divorce was because neither of them wanted custody of the kids.” He gives a boyish shrug.

“You two like each other, though.” I can’t make out Max’s tone.

“Something other than a bill from a lawyer?” Troy lounges back in his chair, all bonhomie and relaxed posture. “I’ll take it.”

Max complains loudly, and the rest of his friends chuckle. But I can’t think straight as Troy draws his thumb in soft, teasing circles against my

bare shoulder.

“Wanna leave these losers and dance?” he whispers.

I quirk a brow. “If you want to risk your toes, why not.”

We excuse ourselves and begin to weave our way through the tables and pulled-out chairs, pausing for the event’s photographer on the way. A camera flashes, and faces suddenly blur. The rhythms are familiar, but I feel out of step with them. And boy, am I thankful for Troy’s presence by my side.

“I thought you said the others didn’t know,” I say once we’re alone again. We had this discussion and I agreed with him; the fewer people who know, the better for all concerned.

“They don’t. Just Max.”

“Not Hannah? I felt like she was watching me so closely.”

“That’s just her way.”

I don’t like it, I don’t say.

At the edge of the dance floor, Troy wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me close. I drape my hands in the appropriate places, running the steps through like my heels aren’t perilous enough.

“Do it for the optics,” I whisper mostly to myself.

“Or maybe because we just want to dance.” A pause. “We never really danced, did we?”

It catches me off guard when he mentions our past without acrimony. “We never went to the kinds of places people dance, I guess.”

“There was music and dancing at beach bonfires and the house parties your friends used to throw.”

“Then why didn’t we dance?”

“Too busy kissing, I expect.”

Kissing. I remember the kissing. I bite the inside of my lip because I’m not sharing that.

We fall quiet as we move to the music, my hand on his shoulder, his on my hip. I feel tiny in his arms. I mean, I am comparatively, even in my heels. But there’s such a sense of solidness about him, and I’m not just talking about his physique. He feels grounding. Or maybe a good place to land. It’s hard to explain, except I feel safe in his arms.

I almost laugh, given the tension in our reacquaintance. *Was that really only a week ago?*

“What’s funny?”

“Just this. Us. What’s supposed to be happening between us.”

“It shouldn’t be hard, Clara. We were mad about each other for a reason.”

But that’s just it. If it’s so easy, shouldn’t it frighten us? Frighten *him*.

My body sways to the rhythm of Troy’s as he leads us around the dance floor like we’ve been doing this for years.

“What about that time we went to a club with your friends.” His mouth gives a tiny curl as he returns to the previous conversational thread. “We almost danced there.”

“We didn’t go to a club . . . oh my gosh! I forgot about that. I got carded.”

“Yeah, because your fake ID said you were nearly a foot taller than your actual height.”

My laughter draws the attention of an older couple dancing by, and they smile so sweetly at us. I find myself wondering how long they’ve been married. I mean, they look like they are. Like the older couple I once imagined Troy and I would be.

“Do you know them?”

Troy shakes his head.

“They smiled like they knew one of us.”

“Maybe they smiled because we look good together.”

I catch a glimpse of our reflections in the glittering mirrors. The way his hand rests on my hip. The straight blade of his nose and the graceful curve of his cheekbone as he looks down at me. Hands clasped, bodies pressed so close.

“We would never have danced like this. Danced to anything like this,” I comment as the song ends and the singer begins her own version of “Cry to Me.”

Is it a good omen or bad that I know this song from *Dirty Dancing*?

“Just as well we didn’t. I didn’t know how to dance like this back then.”

“Did you have lessons?” Because he moves remarkably well. I was just thinking that that old adage had some truth to it. Good on the dance floor, good in bed. Only, my knowledge is in reverse.

“Hannah taught me.”

“Oh.” That tiny response feels like a sinking stone.

“It’s not like that.” The way he looks at me, it’s like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. And at that moment, the song reaches a particular point, and something seems to flash in his eyes.

“No,” I whisper, and I’m just about to add *Don’t you dare* when he does, pulling me impossibly close.

“Just go with it,” he says huskily, his expression a mixture of devilry and delight as he slides his thigh between my legs. I inhale a little gasp as his hips begin to imitate the tempo. And, oh my Lord, I bet he’s learned some things between our then and our now.

I’m laughing on the outside, having fun, taking his advice, but underneath all that, Troy is kind of stoking my fire. There’s nothing especially salacious about the moves. We’re just dancing—dirty dancing PG style as Troy’s palms glide up my ribs, when he dips me backward as though pressing me to a bed.

“She didn’t teach me this,” he whispers, as he raises me and my arms rise sinuously to the back of his neck. His voice is like velvet in my ear, but it’s not like I’m going to get myself off on his leg. Until he adds, “You did.”

I pull back a touch, and our eyes meet. Caramel with the burnt-sugar ring, sliding over me like a lover’s hand.

“In your car. Breath-fogged windows and cramping legs. The way you moved over me . . . I’ve never seen anything so hot.”

His words feel like the stroke of a tongue between my legs. I should say nothing. I should look away. I absolutely should not press my lips to his.

Oops. Too late.

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Chapter 28
TROY

I see her intention—feel it in the tightening of her hands. And if I were thinking at all, I'd tell myself that it's nothing. That we're playing up for the cameras, the witnesses. The narrative. But my brain is empty of thought as I pull her up onto her tiptoes and close the distance between us.

She inhales a tiny breath as she presses her mouth to mine. Her lips are soft and tender, our kiss deepening by slow degrees. *Steady, the way a tide moves.* And I catalog everything, from the flutter of her lashes to the lush press of her breasts. The way her hair smells like flowers and how the tip of her tongue tastes like champagne.

She makes to pull away—the tiniest of movements—when my arms tighten and I take control. I pour every ounce of my need into this kiss. Every confused thought, every notion that makes me want to consume her, body and soul.

"Aw, sweet."

The murmured comment from a passing dancer shatters the moment. Clara gasps, and I drop my hands like we've just been caught naked. She blinks, those eyes of hers midnight now, fingers touching her lips as though she can still feel the sparks.

And then she turns, and I don't see her for dust as she hightails it from the dance floor.

Fuck. My heart drops to the pit of my guts like a dead fish. I shove my hands in my pockets, mainly to disguise what's going on down there, and saunter in the same direction like I'm the luckiest man in the world.

◆ ◆ ◆

I don't go after her, obviously. I need a drink, so I make for the bar.

It sucks that she pulled away when I wasn't done. When I want to kiss her properly—to start at her mouth and work my way down, to taste her from her lips to the tips of her toes. Fuck, I want to confess every dirty

thought she inspires in me. To tell her that I've thought of little else but fucking her since I woke between her legs the other morning.

I want her, even though I know she'll only hurt me again. Turns out, I'm not as bright as I thought I was.

"How's it going?" Max appears at the bar. I wonder how long he's been waiting to get me alone.

"Good. Shit. I hate these things."

"Yeah, they're not exactly fun. But they are necessary. Especially while you're at the helm." He holds up two fingers to get the bartender's attention. "Scotch on the rocks, chief."

"You got it."

"You make it sound like that's temporary," I grumble, keeping my volume low. These events are like a sponge for gossip and whispers.

"Nothing is forever." He pushes one hand into his pocket and gives a shrug.

"Profound, my guy. Just . . . profound."

He gives a sardonic twist to his lips as the barman puts his drink down on a paper coaster. Max murmurs a thanks and sticks a fifty in the tip jar. "What?"

"Nothing." It's just a pity Clara wasn't here to see that. Max's stock would've hit the roof. At the very least she might've put him on her list of people she thinks aren't totally shit.

It won't be a long list. *Wonder if I'm on it.* But fair-minded folks are few and far between when you're on the bones of your ass and always playing catch-up. I know what that feels like. I also know it's hard not to apportion blame rather than accept any of it is your fault. Can't say I've noticed Clara blaming others for her experiences. Me, though . . .

I pull my head out from the past. I have enough shit going on in the now. "I know I won't be CEO forever. As long as I get to go when I'm ready and not when the board tells me to go."

"Well, for what it's worth, I think this loopy plan of yours is working. I've had to field calls today from board members wanting the scoop, and I was stopped twice on the way over here for the same."

I take a swig of my beer. "Why haven't they stopped to ask me?" To congratulate me.

"Maybe because Mr. Newlywed's been busy with the kissing and dancing and . . ." He inhales. "Shit."

“Shit?” I quirk a brow as I loop my finger around the neck of my beer again.

“Romance. You’re selling a very solid picture, and people are responding to it.”

So is my cock, but that’s not a topic for conversation.

“Why haven’t you got a date tonight?” Because what he said earlier isn’t true. I usually bring someone better looking than him. Someone female.

In fact, I almost forgot to cancel on my date tonight. I was kind of hoping that she might’ve already heard. *No such luck. Fun times were not had during yesterday’s call.*

“Too busy,” Max mutters. While the truth, it’s not the whole truth.

“You know what I’m gonna say, and I know you don’t want to hear it.” I get grief isn’t linear. That I can’t truly comprehend because I’ve never been where he is. Losing his wife, raising a son alone. The hours he works, I wouldn’t blame him if he sold up and walked away after the lock-in period. Retired to some island in the sunshine.

“Between the demands of this job, dating, and seeing my kid, there’s no competition.”

“You’ve gotta get out there more, or little Archie will be big Archer and going off to college when you’ll look down and realize your dick has fallen off from lack of use.”

“Hilarious,” he retorts.

“Did I see Wendy got a new assistant? She’s pretty cute.”

“One, I don’t shit where I eat,” he says.

“Or eat where you shit.”

“And two, I doubt Maddie will still be here next month.”

“She’s a temp? Perfect.”

“What she is, is fucking useless.”

“The assistant to the assistant . . . it can’t be that hard a gig.”

“Then how come she doesn’t know how to use a fucking paper clip?” There’s a story in there somewhere, but I’m not pressed for it tonight. “Anyway, I just came over to say you’re doing great.”

I huff out a laugh. “That’s what I just said to Clara.”

“Well, she is too. You look good together. One hundred percent natural.”

I take a sip of my beer, the cool liquid sliding down my throat. I should feel happy. Instead, the truth twists deep inside. Together, we're a counterweight. A balancing scale. That much is real. *Get your head back in the game, asshole.*

Max opens his mouth to say something else when a guy steps up to us. Hair silvering at the temples and a white dinner jacket that says *I'm rich and I don't give a fuck what people say about my fashion sense*.

"Art," I say, holding out my hand. Art Shapiro, a former venture capitalist and member of Table's board, is all sharp smiles as he shakes my hand.

"Troy. I hear congratulations are in order."

"Thanks, Art."

"Art," Max says as the pair repeat the greeting.

"Quite the surprise." His attention moves smoothly back my way.

"Well, Art, some things aren't worth advertising until you're certain."

"An old flame, I heard. And here I had you pegged as an eternal bachelor, not that you seemed to be short of company." All that's missing from his speech is a bawdy wink. "Where is the lucky lady, anyway?"

"She's around here someplace." Powdering her nose. Regretting her life choices. Maybe wiping the taste of me from her lipstick.

"Well, don't lose her already. Investors like a settled founder."

"Oh, I have no intention of letting her get away." Until at least three months are up. Three months to hurt me again. *If I let her.*

"Excellent! The share price certainly seems to like your choice." He gives a booming laugh.

Next to me, Max rolls his eyes, kind of *Get this asshole*.

"Everyone loves a wedding."

"Your wife." Art lowers his voice a touch. "She comes from a family that understands the market. Longevity. Horizons." He makes an expansive motion, and I ask myself when the fuck did this turn into a geography lesson?

I give an easy smile and a considering nod. "Clara knows the game."

"That matters," Art says. "Especially right now." Tell me something I don't know, asshole. "Continuity is king."

"I like to think so."

"So do I!" he says, clapping my shoulder. "Congratulations again." And then he's gone.

Max shakes his head. “It’s fucking wrong. Your marital status shouldn’t have shit to do with Table’s success.”

I knock the neck of my bottle to the rim of his glass. “Yet here we are, Maxi. Here we are.”

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Chapter 29
CLARA

“And then she said, ‘I cannot believe you slept with a prostitute.’”

Around the table, snickers and smiles abound as Hugo tells his story. I force myself to smile along with them, though I feel a hundred miles removed.

Dinner is over. Dancing has been checked from the list, and I’m currently ignoring how the graveyard of glasses is making my fingers itch. I wish someone would come and clear them away.

“So Uncle Tom retorted, ‘But you haven’t been interested in bedroom activities for years.’” Hugo continues to tell his animated story, one arm draped around his date. A woman who seems bored and has barely said two words. “To which Aunt Laura replied—”

Troy slides me a questioning look. I paint on a smile as, under the table, his hand gives mine a reassuring squeeze. I’m not sure why it makes my eyes feel glossy.

“—bearing in mind this is at the dinner table,” Hugo continues, “on Christmas Day and in the presence of children. ‘Well,’” he says, mimicking his aunt’s voice, “‘I didn’t know you’d be willing to pay!’”

Everyone laughs, and I join in like an automaton. Why is Troy holding my hand when no one can see? *Because he wants to or because he’s just very thorough?* I don’t trust my own head right now.

Tonight has been a lot, and I’m still mentally kicking myself for panicking during our dance floor kiss. And for saying the reason I hoofed it from the dance floor like the devil was on my heels was because I was overstimulated.

It wasn’t a lie, exactly.

It did feel like a sensory overload. His hands on me, my heart pounding in my chest, that aching raw sound that rose from his throat. I wanted to drag him into a dark corner and make out with him—really make out. The kind of kissing that leaves a girl breathless and tingling all over.

Overstimulated or just stimulated? Either or. Maybe a little of both. But what really made me run was the way my brain began to whir.

This feels real, not like another check to the optics opportunities list.

We said boundaries. Did he mean it? Do I care?

Or did he close his eyes because he really hates my face?

My body began to burn, and my dress suddenly felt like it was clinging to my skin like wet, itchy sand. The music seemed to grow louder, and a burst of laughter from a nearby table sounded like an evil clown in a carnival house of horrors. I pulled away—got away. Tried to find the restroom and almost walked into the men's room instead.

The cringe. The cringe is so real. Charity balls and glamour are not my place anymore.

It takes me a moment to realize that Troy has adjusted his posture and now I'm almost leaning against him.

"*Naw!* You two look so frigging cute." Hugo looks on like the proud owner of a cat who just had kittens.

"That's on you, baby." Troy's retort is all grumbly and low as he presses a kiss to my temple. "I'm beat. How about you?"

"It's been a long day."

"Hit the road?"

I nod, grateful, then glance around. "It's been so lovely meeting you all."

"And you," Hannah gets in first. "Better late than never."

I don't know what the question was, let alone the answer. Further pleasantries are made. Goodbyes and see-you-Mondays, then we leave.

"And remember, kids, don't go to bed on an argument," Hugo calls after us. "Do it the right British way—stay up and fight!"

"Would it be wrong to flip him off?" Troy murmurs.

"Probably here. Send him the emoji?"

His mouth curls, and I love that for me right now.

"First public outing done. How do you feel."

Exhausted.

"Oh my God, Clara. Is that you?"

"Oh, hell," I mutter under my breath as Troy's attention flicks ahead.

"Who's that?"

But it's too late to answer as Hadley, my former friend, barrels down on us.

"It is you! Oh my God—I haven't seen you in an age."

Well, since I asked her to repay the money I'd loaned her months before. Her Casa Cipriani membership dues went unpaid thanks to a "banking error." She said of course. No problem. That she'd forgotten about it. And that's the last I heard from her.

"Hello, Hadley. It has been a while." But not long enough to my mind.

"You look well. Your hair is so . . . modern."

"Same. Love your dress. Red is such a brave choice with your complexion."

"We were just talking about you at brunch recently. You know, me and the girls."

"Nice to know I'm still entertaining you." I can't think of anything worse than brunch with those women. It feels so strange to me that this is how I used to live. Shopping. Parties. Dinners. Drinks. Brunch on Sunday, hangover notwithstanding.

"Wherever have you been all this time?"

"I took some time to find myself, but look who I found instead!"

"Is that . . ." Her eyes flick to the man by my side.

"Yes, it's my Troy."

"Hey," he offers, disinterested.

A flare of anger lights in my chest at how she's eyeing him like he's prime rib. She always had the hots for him. I turn my body into his, sliding my hand under his jacket. As easy as the tides, his arm comes around my shoulder and he gazes down adoringly.

"So you two are hooking up again?"

Troy gives a withering chuckle.

"I got married!" she says next, barely coming up for a breath. She wiggles her fingers practically under my nose, presumably to make the diamond glitter.

"Congratulations."

"Must be in the air, babe." Troy brushes his lips across my temple, my body softening further into his. It's just pretend. Or maybe it's because he feels safe.

"You mean, you—"

"Got married, yes." *Sorry not sorry to piddle on your parade.* My ring is infinitely cooler than hers, but I'm not flashing it because I have some decorum. Besides, the real prize is nuzzling at me. *Real prize. Fake husband.*

“I pinned her down this time,” Troy adds.

“Nice,” Hadley says, sounding anything but pleasant.

“Honey, where’d you . . .”

She turns to the voice, the man, her expression not exactly welcoming. Maybe because he’s around her height and kind of average looking.

“Troy Templeton.” Opportunities and dollar signs seem to flicker behind the man’s eyes as he puts out a hand. “It’s good to meet you. Perry Goldicke.”

I try not to snicker—I really do. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” I say, cutting him off from whatever he might see happening here. “We’re expected elsewhere, and we’re already running late.”

“Of course, no problem. Let me give you my card,” he says anyway. “If you ever need . . .”

I zone him out as I look Hadley’s way. “Mrs. Goldicke.” Props to me for not laughing. I might have the better ring and the better man, but apparently, Hadley wins thanks to Perry’s gold dick.

“Thanks for running interference,” Troy says once we’re out of earshot. He glances down at the business card before scrunching it in his fist. “A fucking litigation funder,” he mutters.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing but a hustler.”

“A hustler with a gold dick? Sounds to me like he’s in the wrong industry.”

“Your mind,” Troy says with a chuckle. We’re outside now, and the evening has turned cool. I must give a shiver as, before I can say *It’s all good*, Troy has slipped out from his coat and draped it around my shoulders. “I always thought your friends were the worst. My opinion remains unchanged.”

“Would it help if I said I saw that side to them too? Sadly it took for me to need them.”

“Why would that help?” He looks genuinely perplexed.

“Karma. Just desserts. Comeuppance. Take your pick.”

I don’t wait for his reply—the driver has already opened the car door—though I can’t help but wonder about the reason behind Troy’s sudden frown.

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Chapter 30
TROY

Past

Laughter, music, and clinking glasses. The sounds rise as we climb the stone steps back to the house.

"What are the chances she'll tell your dad?" I ask, pulling a piece of bracken from her shoulder.

"Urgh." Clara rolls her eyes like the question doesn't bother her one bit. "She will, but not tonight. Stepmommy Dearest never fails to use whatever ammunition she can gather." She shoots me a quick smile. "Don't worry. It's not like we were doing anything. Anything she could see."

"Shit, Clara." So much for making a good impression.

"It's fine. It's me she likes to needle. You'll be a footnote in her telltale story, if she mentions you at all."

"I don't like that any better," I say, taking her hand in mine. "You and me, we're in this together. When the shit hits the fan, you call me, you hear? I'll take those lumps."

"You." That's all she says as her eyes turn soft and she brushes her thumb against my chin. "You look really good," she says. "Did I tell you that?"

I glance down at my suit and give a gruff chuckle. "You did, but only because you're not looking too close."

"I always pay attention to you," she says with a considering tilt to her head. "I meant you look good here."

She can't know what that means to me, even if it's not true to anyone but her. It's tough being on the outside looking in, but it's enough to know she sees the potential in me.

We begin to climb again when Clara stiffens ever so slightly. I feel it more than see it, her hand tightening on mine. I follow her line of sight to where her dad stands by the open French doors. One hand wrapped around a glass of scotch, watching us like he's been waiting.

I don’t let go of her hand.

Edwin Forbes is tall, but not as tall as me. His clothes are expensive and his hair is dark like Clara’s, though silvering at the temples. His expression seems open, I guess. Friendly on the surface. Until you get to his eyes. Fuck, they are hard. I bet he’s never had to ask permission for one damn thing in his whole life.

“There you are,” he says as we approach. I say *we*, but he’s not looking at me.

“Sir,” I say.

He doesn’t return the courtesy, though his expression reacts like he just noticed someone took a shit on the carpet.

Beside me, Clara seems to brace. “Daddy,” she says sweetly, though she practically vibrates. “Good evening.”

“I wondered where you had disappeared to,” he says. “I see you found . . . company.”

Clara stiffens. I guess her assumption about the bony-ass bitch was wrong.

“We were in the garden,” she says quickly.

“Yes,” he says dryly. “That much is obvious.”

I feel the tension run straight through her hand into mine.

“I’m surprised,” he continues, now looking directly at me, “that you felt it appropriate to take my daughter down there.” He wants a reaction—he’s measuring me.

“Lightning bugs,” I answer evenly. *I’m just the guy in love with your daughter* over *She practically dragged me down there*. “The grounds see fewer pesticides down there.” The man knows I’ve worked in the gardens this year. “There’s also less light pollution away from the house. It makes them easier to spot.”

“Yes, I wanted to see them,” Clara puts in effusively. Her fingers curl tighter around mine. *Good save,* her hold seems to say. “It was magical.” *She’s not wrong.*

His mouth tightens. “You shouldn’t be wandering around in the dark with strangers.”

“Troy isn’t a stranger.” Her tone turns hard. “You know that. And I’m not a child.”

“Clara.” Even his gaze turns patronizing. “We both know you’ve struggled historically with judgment.”

She flinches, but this is about me, so I squeeze her hand this time. Just enough for her to feel it. *It's fine. I can handle him. I'm used to being underestimated. Fuck him.*

"Sir." His attention draws my way, and I hold his gaze. "With respect, your daughter is more than capable of making her own decisions. She's smart and principled, and doesn't need to be spoken to in that way."

For a second the air goes still and he studies me. He's not pissed. It's more like I've said something mildly amusing.

"And how exactly should I speak to my own daughter?"

"Like she's someone you respect."

I feel Clara's eyes, but I keep mine on him. Steady, not challenging. Open but firm. *But again, fuck him.*

"You seem very comfortable giving advice to a stranger."

"I make it a rule not to stick my nose in other people's business, but that doesn't mean I'm not comfortable pointing out when someone deserves better."

The music swells behind us, the band sliding into another song while the air between us feels sharp enough to cut.

"Well." He lifts his glass slowly, his gaze cool. "We'll see how long that confidence lasts."

"Oh, it'll last. Sir," I add a little belatedly.

"We'll see." His smirk is kind of evil. But I'll say it again, fuck him.

"Ah, Clara."

"Hello, Uncle Drum."

A man around her dad's age suddenly lunges in to kiss my girl's cheek. "Looking gorgeous, as always. And who do we have here?" He shoots a congenial smile my way.

"This is Mariam's son," her dad puts in before she can speak. "You remember Mariam. Our maid."

I guess I should've seen that one coming.

"Ah, yes. Lovely lady," the man answers. "She served a delicious lobster Cobb for lunch on the chef's day off."

Despite his aw-shucks tone, there's something about this guy I don't like. But he needn't be embarrassed on my behalf.

"You should try her *fattoush*," I say, deciding to burn the fuck out of this bridge. It's a shame, but it's clear I'll never be enough for Daddy's girl. At least, in his opinion. "Better yet, ask her to make baba ghanoush. Maybe

a little *mezze*.” As if there was such a thing as *little* when my mom gets to cooking. *Yes, Mr. Forbes, I’m sorry to say, not only is your daughter into the maid’s son but, shock horror, he has a little Lebanese in him. By default, you know what that means, don’t you . . .*

“Anyone can rustle up a salad,” her father drawls.

“Can they, Daddy? I doubt you could even find the kitchen.” Clara’s tone is bright. Like a knife glistening in the sunshine.

“I don’t need to, darling. That’s why we have help.”

I can take it. I even smile back—smile like the man fucking his daughter. So my mother cleans for him. So what? She’s worth ten of any of these assholes. Just like Clara is.

“Is your mother working this evening?”

“No, sir.” Thank fuck. “She’ll be back tomorrow, I believe.” *Cleaning up after your entitled ass.*

“Maybe I can get her to make me some baba ghanoush,” Uncle Drum interjects. “The last time I had some was in Beirut in the nineties.”

He was probably doing blow off a belly dancer’s ass crack. Something about him gives me that impression.

“You’re staying over, Uncle Drum?” Clara and her diversion. But what the fuck kind of name is Drum?

“Yes. Going to hit the old . . .” He makes a motion like the swing of a club. Golf, not seals. Though with these people, you never can tell. “And what do you do, Troy?”

“I’m studying finance and economics at the University of Connecticut.”

“Troy is brilliant,” Clara puts in quickly. “He’s in the top two percent of his class.”

“Impressive,” the man named after a musical instrument says. “I, myself, had a terrible time at college. I barely made it through.”

That’ll be the inbreeding, I don’t say. “I’m sure that didn’t hamper you one bit.” Because money talks.

“But then you were at Harvard.” Her father glances my way, and I get it. I’m not good enough. Just a phase. An aberration. A fly in this fancy party’s cocktail.

Asshole.

“Well, I don’t know about you gentlemen,” Clara says, “but I need a drink.”

“You aren’t yet twenty-one.” Her father’s angry retort is the first chink in his cool armor.

“I guess I’m just ahead of the curve, Daddy.” She plucks a glass from a passing tray.

“I didn’t raise you to behave like this.”

“Oh, I’m sure we can just blame the nanny.” Her eyes are wild and bright, the set of her chin stubborn.

“Such a firecracker.” Drum gives a chuckle as her dad’s eyes shoot my way one final time.

“Enjoy the party, Trent.” The rest goes unspoken: because this is the last time I’ll be welcome in this house.

“It’s Troy,” I call after him, unbothered and mentally adding, *I don’t need your approval to be inside your daughter.* Fuck me, I hate these people and all they stand for.

Beside me, Clara stands motionless, her hand still in mine. I realize something in that moment. I came to this party hoping for the best but expecting much less. The outcome might be no surprise, but I didn’t think I’d find that Clara is on the outside too.

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Chapter 31
TROY

Why can't you make me hate you?

In the darkness of the car, Clara fiddles with her tiny clutch. "Do you think it helped?"

I cant my head, not quite following as a streetlamp washes her complexion a ghostly white. "Meeting everyone tonight?"

Her eyes dart the driver's way, then back. "The narrative," she says quietly. "Our first outing. We looked the part, but do you think people bought it?"

"Yeah, they did." In fact, those kisses felt so real, they almost convinced me. I reach for her hand, but it's not until I have it that I see her surprise. I guess we're not supposed to be pretending right now. "I expect we'll see some shit online about us soon."

"I look forward to it," she says, sounding exactly like she would about a dental exam.

"You'll look great. Knockout."

"Says the devil in a tux." She reaches out and tweaks my tie, and for a mad moment, I see myself lunging at her.

Crazy on top of crazy, I want her in a way I can't rationalize.

◆ ◆ ◆

Lights glitter through the darkened window as we step into the apartment. I put my keys down on the console, Clara's heels echoing as she walks on ahead. I watch the natural sway of her hips until she's swallowed by the darkness. A light goes on. The *clink* of her purse as it meets the marble island. I slide off my jacket and pull at my tie as I belatedly follow.

"Want a water?" Clara pauses by the fridge.

I shake my head. I thirst for what I can't have.

She pulls on the door, and the bright light makes her hair shine. Wrapping her hand around the can, she cradles it to her chest. "I'll go wash

my face," she says. "Then you can . . ." Her gaze drops over me. ". . . do your thing."

"I need to get something from my office." My voice comes out gruff, maybe because that's bullshit. I just want to watch her some.

She turns to leave, and I follow from the opposite side of the island. I don't know whether to curse or rejoice that the other side of the apartment is off limits. We're always going to be in each other's space. Listening to her hum under her breath. Staring at her ass—

"Oh!" The can drops to the floor and she stops short, watching as it bounces ahead. It rolls and hits the baseboard before coming to a stop. Not that I'm watching. Or even breathing, given my hands are glued to Clara's hips. My hard pressed to her soft—I know she can feel it—as the heavenly smell of her hair assaults me in all the best ways.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I'm not. It's the truth, even if it is a careless one. I'm just grateful the can didn't spurt, because that would've been a little too telling. Too close to how I feel right now.

"No problem." It takes some effort to unfurl my fingers. But I'm no creep, copping a cheap feel. And Clara's not my girl.

She's my wife, but only on paper.

She steps away, one hand to her hair like she needs to do something with it. Dropping to her heels as she scoops up the can. Two more steps and my bedroom door clicks closed behind her.

I release a breath like it came from a pair of bellows.

In the office, I scan the shelves for that something I said I needed to grab. Might as well make it be small, I think, as I scan the spines on the bookshelf. *Steinbeck. Hemingway. Brontë.* I almost reach for Joyce's *Dubliners* before spotting Plutarch. *Essays.* Nothing says unsexy like an ancient philosopher.

I flick through the pages as I keep one eye on my bedroom door when a line seems to jump out at me.

Prosperity is no just scale; adversity is the only balance to weigh friends.

To weigh people, I think.

Thoughts begin to slide through my head—the ways in which Clara is both the same as she was back then, but also how she's changed. She's in a

transitional space right now. Maybe she'll be different again once she's through this. Once she has her trust fund.

She appears at the office door, pajamas in hand. Her eyes fall to the book as I snap it shut. She doesn't pass comment on my choice of reading material. *Thank fuck.*

"I'll let you . . ." My words fall awkwardly as I begin to move. This is her space now, I guess.

"I must've left my toothbrush in here."

I nod as we pass, and I find myself wondering if she's keeping it in here. *Does she think I might use it to clean the toilet?*

In my bedroom, I give her a minute to come back, but when she doesn't, I begin to unbutton my shirt. I toe off my shoes, pull at my socks, and because being draped across the bed like some lame lothario isn't a good look, I hit the bathroom.

"Oh, sorry!" Clara rears back as though she's caught me butt naked instead of shirtless and brushing my teeth. "I'll come back in a minute," she says, tugging at the T-shirt that almost brushes her knees.

I spit and run my tongue over my teeth. "Have at it." I point at the other sink.

She hesitates, though steps in, and we stand side by side, each doing the dental hygiene thing. The sound of our brushes isn't the only hum in the air as the space between us seems to crackle. A stolen glance. Then a bolder look. *Hers. Mine.* Small movements magnified; a shift of weight, a change of angle. I catalog it all. She misses nothing.

I finish first. *Bad form, I know.* But I don't move away, instead turning to face her as I lean against the vanity. Her complexion is pink and scrubbed shiny clean, the feline flick of makeup long gone. The gentle wave of her hair brushes her jawline. Despite the size of her T-shirt, in profile, it clings, the pebbles of her hardened nipples tauntingly obvious.

I can't adequately express what the sight of her does to me. Not physically, because that's a given. It's the simplicity that just undoes me. We never got this back then, these small domestic moments. Watching her brew coffee. Eat toast. Brush her teeth. In the dark, feel her. See her stir from sleep under me.

This is wrong, standing here, watching her. Torturing myself at what can't be. *What shouldn't be for the sake of my sanity.* Yet I'm still watching as she finishes up and sets her toothbrush down with deliberate care.

She turns toward me, though still says nothing, her eyes so wide and trusting. *This is never going to work*, I think as my hand rises anyway. I reach for her slowly, allowing her the time and space to step away. But she doesn't move as I cup her face, her dark hair falling in wisps over my knuckles. I trace a path across her jaw, lost to the softness and warmth of her. Down the side of her throat, my fingers brush. Down farther still, I scissor the backs of my fingers over her nipple. Lust shoots through me at her sharp inhale.

This is a mistake and it won't end well.

I banish all reason as I take the weight of her breast in my hand, so full, soft, and luscious. Her eyes swim with lust as I step closer, intent on tasting for myself.

"This is wrong," she whispers, though she makes no move to stop me. "Reckless."

"Probably." *Definitely*, as I brush my lips across hers. Maybe in apology. Maybe not.

Her head falls back as my hands take stock of her hips. I press a sucking kiss to her jaw, then draw my open mouth down the length of her throat. Everything in me tightens at her stuttering sigh. But I lock that shit down, keep a tight grip on myself. This might be the one chance I have before sanity returns. I'm gonna enjoy it. Draw it out. I'm not rushing the moment that feels like it's been years in the making.

This ache is different in tenor. Different in taste. And the truth I can't speak aloud is that I'm done with the past. I want to live in the now. Even if it risks breaking all over again.

"You're doing that on purpose," she whispers, half accusation, half plea.

"Am I?"

"Taking your sweet time."

"With a sweet girl." I feel the ripple of her swallow. Press my teeth over it. "The waiting sharpens everything."

"I don't remember this about you."

I press my smile to the base of her throat and kiss my way up the other side. "We were always so desperate for each other." Which is how I feel right now.

"God, weren't we."

"I might've learned a thing or two since then."

“Oh.” A ragged breath falls from her lips, her hands clasping my biceps, sliding higher. “I forgot how good . . .” Her words trail away, so I finish for her.

“The best. Always.” My lips make another pass over hers. “If we start this thing,” I whisper, “I’m not stopping here.”

“Don’t stop. Please.”

So I kiss her, soft at first, like restraint is part of my plan. But it doesn’t last—gone in a second as she gives a tiny whimper. The sound unravels the carefulness inside me, and I step into her as the tenor of the moment changes. My mouth on her jawline, my teeth scraping her neck. Her hand to my bare chest, the contact searing my already burning skin.

“God, I’ve missed this.” Did I say that? Did she?

“Give me your mouth,” I demand.

This kiss is different from our kiss on the dance floor. Slower, deeper, it feels like it has the power to devastate me. The tiny whimpers she makes are like fuel to my soul as the world narrows to just this. To sensation. To breath. To the heat building between us, and the urgent sounds we make.

“Oh, God, Troy.” On tiptoes, her hands sliding into my hair, pulling on the strands and making me growl.

“I want to touch you,” I whisper hotly in her ear. She gives a soft moan as I draw my teeth across the fleshy lobe. My palm skims her ribs, her waist, her hip, slipping under the hem of her T-shirt. Skin hot to the touch, I grip her ass over her panties, spreading my fingers wide to maximize the contact. She writhes against me, as hot as any flame. But it’s not enough.

I pull the cotton over her head. Take a half step back.

“*Fuck.*” It’s not eloquent, but it feels as profound as ten sonnets as the cotton drops from my hand.

The flare of her hips, the deep dip of her waist, the round fullness of her breasts. And the tiny triangle of her silky panties, ripe for ripping. Clara Forbes has been visiting my dreams for years, but my nocturnal mind has been doing her a disservice.

“You’re staring,” she whispers.

“And you’re so fucking lovely.” I fit my hand around the curve of her hip. Watch it rise all by itself, my thumb sliding over her rib cage. My mouth waters to taste her, to inhale her scent. To let the musk of her linger on my tongue. *After she’s ridden my face.*

I cup her breast, and the soft sighing breath she releases sounds like pure encouragement.

“My legs,” she whispers. Pleads. “The bed.”

“Hush.” I press my finger to her lips as my touches linger, tracing where I want to grip, stroking where I want to pinch. The restraint hurts in the best kind of way. It makes the wanting louder. In me. In her. “Your skin is so soft. And your tits . . .” My gaze lifts. I want her to see my face. “They’re fucking amazing, Clara.”

“Thanks.” Her cheeks flush, and she looks away.

“Ah, ah,” I murmur, bringing her attention back. “Don’t deprive me of this pretty face.”

“My knees feel like they’re about to give out.” The confession falls in a rush, her embarrassed expression seeming to unlock a new kink for me.

“Let me help.” I turn us, backing her up against the vanity. Taking her hands, I curl them around the edge. Shoulders back, the sight of her . . . I can’t resist sucking her rose pink nipples.

“Oh God.” The sound feels like a lick to the underside of my cock. “I-I don’t think this is going to help.”

“You think I’d let you fall?” I move my mouth over her, pressing my teeth to the soft swell. Then trace the shape of her with my tongue before pulling the taut bud into my mouth to start all over again.

“I want . . .” Soft sighs and puckered skin. Her breath hitting the air in static bursts. “I want you inside me.”

“You’re so fucking lovely.” I feather a knuckle to the front of her panties. “This is just the beginning.”

My name sounds like a blessing as her breasts rise and fall just below my attention but I can’t tear my eyes from her face. I swear I could drown in them and be satisfied with the trade.

Her thighs loosen as I stroke again. “That’s it, sweetness.”

Firmer now, between her folds, her panties growing wet as her body begins to move with me. Subtly at first. Then faster as I increase the pressure. The pace.

“I . . . I can’t. Not like this.”

“Yeah, you can. For me.”

“Troy, I—”

“You’re a feast for the eyes. A fucking banquet. And you know what that means.” Her hair makes a dark halo as she shakes her head. “I’m gonna

eat you all up. Lick you clean."

I turn her before she realizes what I'm doing. My hands at her hips, one smooth movement until she's facing the mirror. *Facing us.* She sucks in a breath that echoes in my balls. The sight of her hits hard—harder than I expect, for sure. Cheeks flushed, eyes dark, and lips parted like an invitation. My arms come around her, one hand holding her breast, the other slipping under the elastic of her panties, cradling between her legs.

The sight, fuck. It's everything. She's tiny, and I look like the devil curled around her. Tan skin against pale. *Ownership, need, mine, all mine* echoing in my head.

"God, you make me want you." In my life and in my fucking head because, my hands look like they belong. Like years haven't passed since I last touched her like this.

I roll her nipple between my fingertips, my lips laying claim to the soft skin of her neck. Fingers dipping lower, I begin to gather her arousal, and we both watch as I paint it to the bud of her clit.

"Oh!" She convulses against my slippery pinch.

I circle. I pet. Revel in the stuttering ache of her breath. Shape soft words against the skin of her neck. "Fuck, Clara, you're so warm, Clara. And so, *so* wet for me."

A soft, teasing circle, and her eyes flutter closed.

"Don't you look away." Because the mirror shows all. The tension in my jaw and the control it takes not to press her down. To take. To fuck her so hard, her cries bounce off the walls.

"I can't—it's too much."

"It's perfect. You're perfect." The moment seems thick with longing, all wet slide and hot breath fogging the mirror as I twist the moment for her. For me. Make it levitate. Watch her hover there on that delicious knife edge. In this moment, she's mine. Mine for as long as I make this last.

"Troy . . ." The ache in her tone is like music. The way her body bucks, chasing my touch, heavenly.

"I know, it hurts. But in the best way. Just a little longer. Get a little wetter for me, baby."

"Please . . ."

"I'll make it so good. You remember how good, don't you?" *Because I do.*

"You're torturing me."

“Nine years, Clara. When I fuck you, I won’t be holding back.”

“Oh, God.”

My fingers slip from her pussy. I relish the anticipatory hitch of her breath as I bring them to her lips, painting a wet stripe there. “I could eat you whole.” I turn her face to mine and give a groan at the earthy flavor as I lick her lips clean.

“Your mouth,” she whispers, all dark-eyed want. “I forgot how good you were with it.”

I give a dark chuckle as I hook my thumbs into the sides of her panties. “That’s an idea.”

“That’s not what—”

But I’m already sliding the satin scrap of her panties down her legs. Clara arches like a cat as I trail my fingers up the back of her calf. Gives a purr as I reach her thighs. The sweet gasp of her shock as I part her flesh ricochets through my insides.

“You’re so fucking pretty,” I rasp. “So pink and ready.”

She gives a soft moan as I press the flat of my tongue to her pussy and give one long lick.

“Jesus.” Toes *en pointe*, her fingers scrabble against the countertop as I begin.

Soft circles. A filthy flick of my tongue. Fingers, mouth, and dirty words, I use them all. I tell her how good she looks like this, spread wide and twisted with need. How pretty her pussy flutters and how delicious she tastes. Like honey and musk and the kind of sins I’d sell my soul to own. She tastes like she belongs to me. *In this minute, at least.*

But then I can’t talk any more as my need swells, and I begin to devour her.

It isn’t long before her body begins to tighten and her thighs to shake.

“That’s it, baby. Give in. Come for me, Clara. Let me drown in you.”

She peaks, crests, and the room fills with the sweet, sweet sounds of her climax. It’s beautiful. It’s also dangerous as a realization settles in my chest.

It doesn’t feel like we’re crossing a line. It’s more like coming home.

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Chapter 32
CLARA

The morning light is bright and obnoxious, none of this creeping in slowly to rouse us. Rouse me, at least. Troy is still asleep, his skin golden in the excessively cheery morning light.

Maybe I should be cheery, too, after three orgasms. Which is three more orgasms than I've had in the last two years. *Self-administered not included in those statistics.*

I sigh softly, the sound sort of wondrous. When I woke earlier, I hardly scuttled across the bed like a crab. Instead, I did the opposite, tucking myself closer, pressing my cheek to Troy's chest. I told myself that I wasn't seeking the sound of his heart as proof that last night was real.

Whether kissing me was part of the ploy, the narrative. Whether it was tension or biology or a yearning for the past, I refuse to regret what passed between us last night.

Bottom line? I feel okay in a way that's almost suspicious.

Could be the orgasms, I suppose.

Last night was probably inevitable. But we're adults, aren't we? We can deal with this rationally. *I hope.* Just because we had sex—mind-blowing, atom-bending, organ-rearranging sex—doesn't mean we're destined to be together. We're just good in that way.

We always were.

Troy looks like the boy I once loved when he sleeps, the hard edges of the man who runs boardrooms and worries about success softened into something that looks like . . . peace.

I watch him, for a moment, watch him sleep, the sight of him easing something in me. But then my head sharply turns. *This is the problem. I shouldn't feel like this—I shouldn't moon over him.* We can't be together. We both understood this long before last night, the reality like a fault line between us. We can pretend it doesn't exist, but we both know what happens when that line shifts.

People get hurt and hearts break.

I can't live through that again.

I close my eyes and swallow hard. I won't make those mistakes again. I won't tie myself up in something I can't control.

My gaze drifts back, despite what I tell myself, a memory of last night rising between us. The way he moved above me and the sounds he made as he broke. Every moment, every touch somehow familiar and yet at the same time new.

Too easy, I think. Too dangerous to fall into again.

Troy doesn't stir. His eyes just spring open before I can look away. He blinks, then his mouth curls as he sees me watching him.

"Hey." His voice is the kind of smoky that makes my insides flip.

"Hey." My cheeks pinken with giddiness as we just stare at each other.

"I thought I was dreaming." His voice sounds rusty as he reaches out to trail a fingertip across my shoulder. "But I opened my eyes and there you were."

I hear no regrets. No expectations either. *Please.* "Here I am."

"How are you feeling?"

I stretch a little, relishing a dozen new muscle aches and the satisfaction in his gaze at the knowledge that he is the orchestrator.

"I think the word is *replete*." No freaking out over here. No overthinking to see either.

His mouth curls. "That's a good one."

"And you?"

"Good." Muscles bunch and flex as he stretches out along the bed. Snuggling closer as the tension bleeds, and I bite my tongue against the question: *Shouldn't this feel weird?*

Maybe it doesn't, because we broke to raid the fridge partway through . . . proceedings. We munched on leftover lo mein and ice cream and guzzled down cans of water. He wore those thin blue shorts, and I wore his shirt, and everything felt normal and so unweird, I had to ask, "Is it just me?"

His thumb moves absently along my collarbone, stopping, then starting again. "Last night." I guess he's trying to arrange the words. "I'm glad it happened," he adds. "It was fucking amazing, Clara. You are—"

"It was." I cut him off, because it won't help to know what he thinks of me. I inhale, exhale, then repeat the things that have been swirling through my head. "But I have enough on my plate right now without any complications."

“Like a husband? Or are we talking as a hookup.”

“Either. Both. I have a life to rebuild. A world I need to rediscover my place in. And you have a life waiting for you too. That whole captain-of-industry thing, steering the helm. Making those shareholders billions.” My words are as light as the finger I draw down his chest. “We said three months.”

He doesn’t correct me but lifts my hand before it dips under the sheet, pressing his teeth over the felonious fingertip. There’s a playfulness in his eyes. Affection. Also restraint. “You know you’re not alone, though, right?”

That earns him a small smile, though I’m well aware it could be the sex talking. But I want to succeed by my own merit. I’m tired of people trying to manage me. “We can’t do this again.”

“Snuggle?”

He is a pretty good snuggler.

“I don’t regret it,” he says.

“Me either.” And that’s maybe the problem.

“I do have a question for you, though. Last night, when you came, did you cry out . . . better than gummy bears?”

“Maybe you need your ears tested,” I answer with a giggle.

“A fetish, huh?”

My giggles die away, and we stay like that for a while. It’s only after the moment has fully settled that I find myself turning onto my front, the sheet caught tight under my arms. *For modesty’s sake.* Hands under my cheek, my eyes climb to meet his.

“What is it?”

“Your friends, did you notice how they didn’t ask me what I do?”

“What or who?” So much suggestion in his tone.

“I walked right into that one. I meant for a living or whatever. I mean, didn’t Hannah have anything to say after seeing me serve those canapés?” She can’t have failed to have seen Troy hustle me out of the place.

“She thinks you did it as a way to see me.”

“Really?” I give a chuckle. “God, I’m desperate. I guess it explains how she wasn’t exactly looking to make me her best friend.”

“Hannah’s not really a girl’s girl. She’s more like one of the guys. As for what you do with your days, I guess they just thought . . . trust fund?”

“Clara the heiress.” Once, that wouldn’t have even registered as anything but the truth. Now it feels like a put-down. “You didn’t correct

them?" I haven't even got my trust fund yet.

"And say what? That you like to serve beer in dive bars?"

"I didn't like it," I protest.

"Yeah, you did. I saw you there, Gretch."

"Hey!" I give a little shout as he smacks my butt and makes it jiggle.

"A friendly tap," he says, holding up his hand.

"I don't see men smacking each other's butts as a sign of friendship."

"Happens in the locker room," he says with what I assume is supposed to be some authority. *Not even.* "And you are an heiress."

Maybe we've got this wrong. Maybe sex isn't the problem between us, and it's this. Warmth. Intimacy. And always, our history.

"Have you thought about what you want to do, outside of your trust fund, I mean?"

"A little," I hedge. I have been thinking about it beyond a vacation.

"You could buy a bar."

I slide him a look. "Seriously?"

"Why not? When this is all over."

"I didn't like it that much," I grumble. It's more like it was the only place in my life I had a little control. A little authority. "I'm not buying a bar, and I'm not going back to how it was before. Brunching with Hadley and bitching about nothing."

"Fair." He pulls a little at the sheet, swiping his finger down the exposed part of my spine. I want to stretch out, chase his touch. But I won't. Instead, I fold my arms under my cheek. "So, what's the plan?"

"I want to help people," I say, almost bracing myself for derision.

"How do you see yourself doing that?"

"By using my money for good instead of mimosas," I answer flippantly.

"Like last night? Host charity galas, polo matches."

"I'm not talking about the performance of goodness. I want to help people, not host the one percent."

"So no philanthropy. And no drinking establishments. Shame, you'd make a fortune. I could see those guys loved being abused by you."

"Sounds like you're suggesting I become a dominatrix."

He laughs. "I might know someone who might like to be at your sexual mercy."

“I won’t share exactly what just flashed in my head, but it involved you, a vacuum cleaner, and a pair of rubber gloves.”

“Sounds kinky.”

“More like a naked cleaning service.” Better get an apartment first. “I want to do something good with my money,” I say, frustration making me unguarded. “And I’m not talking about giving it away so I feel better about having it.”

“Why would you feel bad about having money?” He looks seriously perplexed.

“It’s not that I don’t want it.”

He scoffs a little and shakes his head.

“I’m grateful to have it, and for your help in that too.”

“It’s just down to our plans aligning.”

“Honestly, Troy. I’ll never forget the stress of the math not mathing, how one bill seems to turn into five, and that sinking feeling when the rent is due but your paycheck hasn’t cleared. I want to help others navigate their way out of that kind of existence, like you do with your company.”

“But I do it to make a shit ton of money.”

“You’re still helping, just in your own way.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Cut yourself some slack. You’ve only been a billionaire about a minute.”

“On paper.” His lips quirk, and I try to harden my heart to the sight. “Out with it. You’re obviously gearing up to something.”

“Suspicious much?” I demand, pressing my hand to my chest. Then realize the movement shows a whole lot of side boob, so I drop down again.

“Clara.”

“All right. I want you for your contacts.”

“Speak.”

“Okay, Don Templeton, bestie of Benny the Brick and . . . Jimmy the Fish.”

“*Clara.*” For a minute, I think he might be about to deliver a lecture. Or a smack to my butt. I know which I’d prefer.

“This wasn’t a conversation I imagined having in bed, but . . .” Deep breath, here goes. Two feet. Jump on in. “I don’t want to host galas. I want to put systems in place. I want to provide emergency funds to help people—women—out of bad situations. I want to offer legal help to fight unfair

contracts and give access to tools that teach people financial literacy. I want to help ordinary people get on in life instead of just feeling exhausted all the damned time."

He exhales slowly. "Okay. I can see you've put a lot of thought into this."

"I've done better than that. I've lived it," I say. "And so have you. Being poor makes desperate people invisible."

"You're gonna need a lot of money." A silence falls, but it doesn't feel wrong. "You'll want leverage, not applause. That sounds like an impact fund."

"I'd thought that would be the way to go, but I have no idea where to start."

"I'll help. Help set it up."

"Really?"

"I can make a start. Introduce you to potential like-minded donors, people who care about outcomes over invitations. And you'll need a board. One that sings from your hymn sheet and stays actively involved, in both the financial returns but also the impact that money makes. I can think of a few names already. I'll set up some meetings. Do you wanna run this yourself?"

"Yes—if I can learn on the job. I mean, I have a little experience after working in the family office."

"It'll help."

My heart feels like it has wings. "I don't know what to say."

"Nothing," he replies without hesitation. "No need to." His hand lies still at the base of my spine. A boundary, I guess. Will he respect it? And if he doesn't, do I have the strength to put up a fight? His thumb begins to move in a light caress.

"We shouldn't tempt fate," I say lightly.

"Shame," he says. "I was gonna suggest we start tomorrow. You know, like a diet."

"What?"

"No one starts a new diet on Sunday, Clara."

"You clearly know nothing about diets."

"I know about appetites."

"Vanessa never suggested I wait until Monday," I say, not about to touch that.

“Vanessa?” His eyes narrow.

“You remember my stepmother. She’d put me on diets all the time. To be fair, we both would’ve preferred for me to be a little . . . less.”

“When? When did she put you on a diet?”

“The first time? I was probably twelve.”

“She put you on a diet as a kid? That’s so fucked up.”

Is it? “When you’re my height—”

“You’re gorgeous. You always were.”

“Thank you.” A warmth spreads through me.

“I mean it. So gorgeous, I’d like to know how you feel about shower sex.”

“Shower sex is *never* a good idea,” I retort with mock seriousness. “It’s more like an invitation to a concussion.”

“Shower sex isn’t where it’s at,” Troy agrees, mimicking my serious tone. “Shower foreplay, however . . .” He gives a silly wiggle of his eyebrows, and I set off laughing. Which is when he whips off the sheet, pulling it over our heads and diffusing the light. “Abstinence tomorrow,” he whispers.

“Sex Lent?”

Oh, but his lips find my neck, and I arch under him, happy in the moment. Happy with what’s about to come. *Me, obviously.*

I can worry about the future tomorrow.

For now I think I’ll just enjoy being.

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Chapter 33
TROY

My office feels lighter than it has in a long while.

I'm standing by the window with my phone in my hand, city spread out below me, when I realize I'm smiling like an idiot. Three calls, all returned. Two enthusiastic. One cautiously intrigued but asking the right type of questions. The kind of people Clara needs—serious, principled, and allergic to bullshit.

I make a mental note to text her later that her board opens are coming together. I don't text yet because . . . well. Maybe I like holding the thought. Or maybe I don't want to be *that* guy. The one needy for attention. Who craves a pat on the head.

I just want to see her face when I tell her tonight. And maybe I want that more than I should.

I shake off the thought, refusing to dwell. I built this company from nothing. I know how to compartmentalize. How to put thoughts on a mental shelf and prioritize. Move forward. But my mind won't cooperate, continually coming back to her.

This week has been amazing, and I can't lie, I could get used to coming back to a woman in my home. I shake my head. *Can you spell* chauvinist*?* But that's not what I mean. I just like coming back to her. Back to Clara.

I did not see her plans for her wealth coming. The first conversation we had way back when—the one where she upped the ante on my fake-dating plan—I could see the reasons for her desperation. I'd lived that life, scrambling for the next dollar. I know what it feels like, and I know what I'd do to avoid falling back through those cracks. I guess you could say we entered this crazy partnership for the same reason. We're just at opposite ends of the spectrum this time.

Over dinner the last few nights, I've been impressed how clearheaded she is about her direction. While I'm at work, she makes reams and reams of notes, and over takeout and beer—wine for her—we go over how best to

action those plans. Listening to her talk has me rapt. Her thoughts and the way her mind works are just fascinating.

Clara has had money, and she's had nothing. Instead of those experiences creating fear, making her hoard her wealth (when it comes), she seeks to break the pattern for others. It feels good to help her with that, to help with something that matters. I admire the hell out of her for wanting something more than an ornamental existence.

I admire her for more than that, I think, tapping my phone to my mouth as my mind moves to last weekend.

How beautiful she looked at the gala and the ease of her within those walls. How easy it was just to be with her. Conversation flowed, and our silences felt natural. In my arms on the dance floor, it felt like she belonged. And then I kissed her, not for the optics, but because not kissing her felt like the lie. And the night that followed . . . It was like old times but ten times better.

Pity we've been on a no-sex diet since.

I give a gruff chuckle. *Fucking sex Lent.* She's been sleeping in the pullout bed in my office. The nearest I've gotten to having her is reliving the memories of last weekend.

In the shower mostly. *Good thing she can't hear me.*

She's in my head when I'm in this office. During meetings. On my way to fucking work. I can't seem to stop thinking about her.

But Sunday, fuck. It started with kissing, mouths and necks, which led to kisses in all kinds of other places. After we'd sated ourselves, we went to a local brunch spot, then talked and walked off the food until our feet were sore.

In the afternoon, barely through the apartment door, Clara had turned to me, her eyes so blue as her fingers reached for my belt. Yanking at my boxers, she pushed me back against the wall, the power dynamics flipped even as she dropped to her knees in front of me. She took me in her hand, her gaze lowered and kind of reverent, and the sight of my ring on her finger made me feel fuckin' wild.

"Look at me." I tilted her face, wanting to see those old-soul eyes. Needing her eyes on me.

"Hush," she whispered. "I'm busy visiting an old friend."

My cock bounced with my chuckle. At least until she leaned forward. My breath caught as she pressed a kiss to my tiny lobster tattoo, her eyes

flashing.

“I love that you have this and I wish . . .” Her words trailed off and her eyes closed.

I called that tattoo a mark of idiocy so many times over the years. I cursed the fucking thing. Bad enough I had her cutesy sentiment inked on my skin, but then to find out there was no truth in it, that lobsters don’t mate for life. The alpha has a fucking harem.

I even took that to heart for a little while. Became the kind of man I abhor. Unlike my father, I didn’t beat women. But I did use them. So yeah, I regretted the ink, but not right then. Maybe not anymore. And absolutely not as she wrapped her dainty hand around the base of my cock. Pale against ruddy. Cool against hot. Silk over steel, her lips pressed to the very tip.

I put my hand to my stomach as I recall the sensory brush of her hair, my abs tightening as though in anticipation. Her full lips opened, and my heart was fit to burst as she sank down.

Fuck, I need to drag my head out of the clouds and get some actual work done. Locking my shoulders, I tilt my head and stretch my neck. I have calls to make. Calls to return. A head to pull out of my ass when my phone buzzes in my hand.

My heart gives a little leap at the sight of Clara’s name. I open her text.

> I just got a call from the lawyers. My trust has been okay’d. The distributions start next month!!!

My heart freezes—blood and bone stupefied.

Her whole reason for this marriage—her timeline—lands in my body a way I didn’t expect it to. Sure, I knew the money was coming. I just didn’t expect to feel like this.

Like she might not need me anymore.

Like I can already hear the clock ticking.

Something tightens deep inside. It feels like panic. Dread.

She’ll stay, I tell myself, but my mind races ahead. I know too well that agreements mean very little when someone suddenly has other options. Haven’t I been here already? Standing close to Clara, believing in her with my whole heart, only to learn there’s a difference between what she feels in the moment and what she’s willing to stand up for.

Fuck. My eyes fall closed. I know how this story goes.

And yet, the thought of her leaving, of her walking away before I'm ready, makes me feel ill.

This will end—I knew that from the start—but I'm done pretending I don't want her. I already lost her once—and she'll leave again—but I refuse to forgo the moments between now and the inevitable.

You hear that, Clara?

I'll guard my heart but I'm done keeping my distance, done letting her set the pace.

The clock has started running, and I'm not wasting another second of it.

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Chapter 34
CLARA

"Want to tell me what you're doing?" Troy slides a lock of my hair between his thumb and fingers as though it's precious silk.

Who, me? I'm just pretending not to notice I'm naked and in your bed again.

I'm also wondering why your smile seems a little . . . smug.

"Clara?"

"I'm relaxing." Eyes closed, I give a little sigh, luxuriating in his touch. It feels so good. I've missed this, human contact, I guess. It's soothing. Almost therapeutic. And the man certainly knows what he's doing.

"You don't look relaxed with your arms crossed like that."

He means across my chest. It's an attempt to anchor the duvet. I didn't mean to have sex with Troy. *Again.* That's not to say it was an accident, exactly, either. It's not like we were playing naked-roommate Twister and his penis accidentally slipped in.

I wonder if I should buy a game of . . .

Stop.

All this to say that I'm not quite sure how it happened. We were on the couch, looking at commercial listings. Places to house the offices of my impact fund. Troy was working the trackpad of his laptop, talking through the merits of somewhere near his office. I argued the rent was more than I was willing to pay, when I found my attention drifting to his actions. Then his wrist.

Yes, his wrist. I know—positively Victorian.

Broad and lightly golden haired, I studied its contours, finding myself getting a little . . . hot under the collar. How masculine it looked. Thick. My gaze wandered higher, wondering how, in the light, his forearm looked to be carved from warm-colored stone. And the veins. *Oh, the veins.* I had the wicked impulse to trace them with my fingertip—*with my tongue*—just to test the theory that he was flesh and not stone.

Then I realized he'd stopped talking. That his finger was no longer moving. That neither of us were looking at the screen. I watched, sort of outside of myself, as he lifted his laptop and deliberately set it down on the ottoman. Next thing I knew, I was climbing over him, and we were tearing at each other's clothes like a couple of animals. Not that animals wear clothes. *Except maybe bougie poodles and Pomeranians.*

What followed was accidental sex.

On the couch.

Then in the shower.

And then in his bed.

"Tater Tot?" I feel the irrepressible curl of my lips at that ridiculous name. "*Habibti,*" he purrs next, grazing his teeth, his lips, across my bare shoulder.

"Your mom used to call me that." I know it means *my love* in Arabic. A sweet, though not necessarily loving, term of endearment. Like *dear* or *honey,* but not *sweetheart* or *love*.

"Are you meditating?"

I burst out laughing. "Even on my meds . . . No, Troy. I am not meditating. If you must know, I'm practicing my pose for my casket." I close my eyes again.

"Any particular reason?"

I open one eye. "Because you're going to kill me." *But what a way to go.*

He throws back his head, his hair leonine, his laughter pure roar. *Move over, hot Kovu.* The Lion King II. *There's a new king in town. Or should that be jungle?* "There are worse ways to die, though, right?"

"I don't want to die." I twist my head to look at him. "I want to live. I have a lot to live for."

"Yeah, you do." He begins to tug on the duvet. "I'd like to live a little between your legs."

"Stop that!" I slap his hand away and decide lying down is a bad idea. Not that we were lying down when this started. "We're not supposed to be having sex, remember?"

He gives a sigh as he pushes onto his back, adjusting the pillow behind his head. He leaves his hand there, propped behind his head. He looks like a cover model from one of my stepmom's old romance novels. *So I might've read one or two of them when I was a little too young.*

God, this is hopeless. Every time we cross a line it becomes harder to remember where the boundaries lie. Harder still to remember that this marriage, this experience, has an end date.

I admire Troy. I respect him. And I want to roll myself all over him until I smell like him and he smells like me. I want to open his brain and forage through his thoughts because I think he's kind of amazing, and I'm terrified I might fall in—

No, I won't let myself do that.

Fucking pheromones (literally) cloud everything.

I turn to look at him again, his hair mussed and his expression soft, then push out a slow breath, not quite believing what I'm about to say to him. I've been trying to work out a way that we might conduct ourselves . . . intimately. Chart a course where we might *do stuff* without the chance of catching feelings. And I might have a plan.

"Troy," I begin. "We need to talk."

"Sounds ominous." He shifts onto his side, his expression guarded as he braces himself on his elbow.

I pause, searching for words that might make this sound less impulsive. Or insane. "I think this is a bad idea."

His mouth hitches as he reaches out, skimming the backs of his knuckles across my cheek, like he's humoring me. "Which time? On the couch, or was it the shower?"

"We can't keep doing this. At least, not like this."

His gaze sharpens, but he doesn't interrupt.

"And I don't think we can pretend this won't keep happening. We're playing a couple in front of the world and sharing a space behind closed doors. And then there's our past. Our history. I don't know about you, but it's beginning to feel like an unrealistic goal to assume we can just say no to sex."

"We can say no."

"Yet we keep crossing that line." Enthusiastically.

A flicker of something passes his expression. "And that worries you."

I nod and swallow a sigh that it doesn't worry him. Another check mark that I'll be the only one of us at risk of catching feelings. "The more we do this, the less it feels fake. And I don't know how to protect myself from that." The admission makes me feel naked in a way I can't explain.

“What’s the answer? What do we need to make this okay? I don’t want to stop having sex with you, Clara. Not when you want—”

“I was thinking,” I cut in as my heart begins to trip. “Maybe we could get you one of those chastity cages.” Before the words are fully out, I’m laughing at my own absurdity. I’m not sure where that came from. *Neurospicy brain for the win?*

“Hard pass on that,” Troy replies with a sly-looking smile. “And while it might be ungentlemanly to say so, I feel I ought to point out that you kissed me first.”

“You put down your laptop.”

“And that turned you on?” *No, your sexy wrist did.* “If anyone’s wearing a chastity device,” he continues, “I think it should be you.” I’m not sure how he manages to make that sound sexy. Or even fun.

Reaching up, I scratch the base of my neck. “I was thinking more along the lines of us scheduling it. Scheduling sex, I mean.” I’m pretty sure my cheeks are about to explode. The man has had his mouth on more of me than I care to admit, but I can’t say “Let’s have sex in a specific way” to him?

“Schedule sex.” His mouth twitches, but his smile doesn’t give. “So . . . still having sex. But to a timetable?”

“Maybe it’s less about timing and more about parameters.” I sound unsure, like I’m spitballing.

“Boundaries.” He gives a considering nod. “To do what, exactly.”

“To take the romance element out of this.” I sit straighter and swipe my hair from my face, the duvet still pressed between my arms and my body as I give him a moment to respond. Maybe I’m expecting him to deny it—to say it’s only fucking. “Not that I’m saying it should be clinical, just . . .” I rack my brains for the right word.

“Controlled.”

“Yes. If it’s planned, prearranged, then maybe the lines are less likely to blur.” My teeth pluck at the inside of my bottom lip. “It might make things feel less like we’re in an actual relationship.” *I hope.*

His expression is unreadable, but at least he’s not looking at me like I’ve completely lost it.

“Okay, so tell me what this looks like to you.”

“First, we won’t have sex with other people.”

“Have *you* been having sex with other people?” His eyes are suddenly a fiery shade of gold.

“No. But I thought—”

“Then you thought wrong,” he mutters gruffly.

“Okay.” That knowledge is more than okay with me. “Good to know,” I add softly.

“You should’ve fuckin’ asked.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have assumed,” I say pertly.

“Keep that up and I’ll put you over my knee.”

“In your dreams, Templeton.” Or maybe in mine given the way my body responds.

“Back to the parameters.”

“Fine. We’ll only have sex with each other but not in the apartment.”

“Not—what the fuck for?”

“Because this is where we live. It’s where things are most real. Where we eat together and talk. I think it’ll be safer if we have sex elsewhere.”

“Okay.” But he doesn’t sound convinced.

“We’re not going to be friends in those moments.” My heart freezes as though he might correct me. “We’re just going to have hot, nasty sex.”

“Fuck.” He swipes a hand down his face.

“Is that okay with you?”

“I’ll take you however I can get you.”

It’s not a romantic response by any measure, but still my insides melt.

“I just.” I inhale over a growing lump of emotion. “I just can’t go on like this, not safely. And I do think we need to work this thing out of our systems before—”

“It ends.”

That anvil drops in my rib cage. I meant before things escalate, but *ends* might be more appropriate. Even if it feels like a complete lack of hope, it’s what I needed to hear. To remember. Three months is all we have. Or what’s left of it.

Troy sits up, the morning sun unfairly gilding him, taking him from 1980s-book boyfriend to deity. He’d be Bacchus’s better-looking friend—the twin brother of Venus. The god of desire and revelry. *Make love, not wine* would be his brand with none of the polite tiny-penis business the classics prefer.

“Kind of sounds like an affair.” He rubs a hand through his hair. “I’m not sure you can have an affair with your wife.”

“Fake wife.”

“Real marriage,” he says. “Fake sentiment.”

I close my ears to that. I’m getting pretty good at ignoring stuff. *Like my good sense.*

“But if it’s what you need, I’m happy to fuck you like my mistress anytime you like.”

“Thank you, I think.”

His mouth hooks up, amused. “What other plans you got going on in that head of yours?”

“That we could make it fun.”

“More fun than sex?”

“Come up with ideas?” My shoulders lift, more from awkwardness than anything else.

“Ideas?”

“Scenarios, if you like.”

“Your face could power the entire state right now.”

“Troy.” My shoulders drop, suddenly defeated. “Please, we can’t carry on like this. It already feels so dangerous.”

“You think this’ll make it feel less real?”

“I have to try something. I can’t afford to like you too much.”

“I’ll still be me,” he says as his expression seems to move through a dozen things.

And that is a problem, but maybe I can pretend to be somebody else in those moments. Take the pleasure, suck on the joy. Leave the messy bits, hearts and hurt, behind.

“That’s how you’ve gotten through these last months, isn’t it? By pretending? Gretchen and Sunny,” he adds.

I give a shrug. No. Yes. Maybe? I thought I was just doing what needed to be done. Holding on until I turned thirty. Maybe I was wrong.

“Okay, what else you got?” he asks softly.

“We could each pick a scenario. A scene. Something we’ve liked in a book or a movie.”

“What kind of movie?”

“I’m talking about the setup, Troy. None of this ‘Oops!’” I press my hand to my mouth. “‘I dropped my spanner.’”

“It sounds like you watch tradesmen porn.”

“I don’t watch porn,” I retort sharply. I force myself to relax. “But if I did, I’d probably be into watching dudes touch each other.”

“I’m not into that.”

“What if I wear a mustache?”

He makes a noise like he’s in pain, dropping his head to my shoulder.

“Okay, we’ll table the ’stache. Table it for later.”

“Burn it, more like.”

I give into a giggle, relieved the moment has turned less emotional. “We’ll call it strategy. Just another part of our deal.”

His thumb brushes once over my knuckles, slow and thoughtful. “Strategy it is.”

Relief and excitement bloom all at once. “You mean it?”

He leans in with a provocative little smile. “I do, because no one else is kissing you.”

His lips brush mine tantalizingly slow, and I allow him to press me back to the mattress. He whips away the sheet from us both and, in that instant, I get a flash of his ink. *My mark on him.*

With his eyes on mine, his expression seems as clear as glass. It’s like he knows this is my way of admitting I already want more than I should.

And way more than I deserve.

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Chapter 35
TROY

I can't afford to like you too much.

Her words, but I feel the sentiment deeply as I stare at shit on my desk. Summary notes of our last investor briefing. Revenue projections for Q4. A fraud exposure report. A stack of analyst notes I haven't gotten around to reading. And that's without the half dozen open tabs on my laptop. Daily transactions, the revenue run rate; the list of daily checks goes on and on.

But I just can't focus, not without thoughts of Clara sneaking in. The things I want from her that make no sense. The time I feel slipping through the hourglass.

Fuck it. I force it all away and reach for my phone to make the call I've been putting off since Mom got back from her cruise. *Maybe this'll help me pull my head out of my ass.*

I lean back in my chair as the call connects, a soft smile curling at the sound of my mother's voice.

"How's my favorite boy?"

"Hugo? He's just fine. Max, too, if you're interested."

My mother gives a gentle chuckle. "You know who I'm talking about."

"Hannah does have a huge set of balls on her but . . ."

"*Khallas!*" she chastises playfully. "Don't speak to your mother like this!"

"Sorry, Ma. I'm fine." *Other than feeling a little touchy about making this call to you.* How the fuck am I gonna explain this? My mother might not be into the financial press or gossip sites, but this isn't the kind of news that will stay away forever. And, truthfully, I'm in need of a little perspective. Maybe a reminder of what we went through might help drag my ass back to reality.

"You sound tired."

It's a familiar refrain. *You look tired. You're too thin. Are you sure you're eating? You need a wife.* But not this one, right?

"I'm fine, Ma."

"You work too hard. You should've come on the cruise with me!"

“Ah, no.” My idea of a nightmare.

“You need to take some time, Troy. Work will wait for you.”

If only. “This job isn’t so bad. At least I don’t have calloused hands, and my back isn’t breaking.”

“There is no shame in manual labor. Your position in life now is much more tiring.”

“I’m not working for some thankless boss,” I say, defensive.

“Maybe not a boss but you have all those people you answer to. The board, the shareholders. I’m just saying you ought to take a little time for yourself, *ya Sanadi*.”

I feel my expression soften. *My backbone.* It’s something she’s called me since I was small. At least, out of my father’s hearing when he was around. A child is the source of a mother’s strength, she once explained. The reason she was able to break free from him. And now I’m the strength that supports her. But that’s my pleasure, not a chore.

“I do take time. I have.” More and more recently. Time where I lose myself in Clara. *Back to the reason for this call.* “Listen, Ma, I have something to tell you, but I don’t want you to worry or anything.”

“That’s not how parenthood works, especially with an opener like that, *habibi*.”

“I bumped into Clara Forbes.” And now I’m bumping uglies with her, but that’s not the important part of this explanation.

“How is she?” My mother’s voice seems careful, her tone modulated.

“Good. She’s good.”

“That eases my heart.” I hear a little breathy give.

“What? Never mind.” I should’ve expected this. The older my mother gets, the harder she seems to work for a sainthood. “I’m gonna say something, and I want you to hear me out. I don’t want you jumping to conclusions or thinking the worst, okay?”

“This sounds like something I should sit down for,” she murmurs, and I hear the scrape of a chair.

I take a breath. “Me and Clara, we got married last week. A courthouse thing. It’s legally binding but not real. It’s not a love thing.”

I expect a sharp intake of breath. A dramatic cry or complaint, but maybe nothing as damning as a keening lament or a beating of her breast. So when she says “Oh,” I think I’m disappointed.

“You don’t have to say it. I know what she is.” Is it ridiculous I suffer a pang of distress at this spoken disloyalty? “I remember what she did.”

There’s a clink on her end. It sounds ceramic. Probably a mug of tea. The Lipton brand with a little cardamon. Or maybe *zhourat shamia* if she’s feeling fancy.

“Ma? You still there?” Fuck, maybe I should’ve tried to keep this thing with Clara under wraps for her sake.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” This pulls me up short.

“What? Why not?”

“I’m sure you have your reasons. Both of you. My son, you’ve been doing your own thing since you were old enough to express an opinion,” she says with just a hint of pique. “Your mind was always like a tightly locked door that only opened when you wanted it to.”

“Ma.” I’m not sure if that was an appeal or a reprimand.

“It’s not a criticism. I know you wouldn’t hurt her.”

That . . . wasn’t what I braced for.

“What about her hurting me? Aren’t you worried she might do that again?”

“I’m your mother,” she says. “I’m always worried. But it’s not the same.”

I lean back against my chair and exhale a slow breath. “It’s complicated,” I say, choosing the words carefully.

His mother hums. “Life is rarely simple.” She pauses. “Just be careful with her.”

“Be careful with her or be careful *of* her?”

“You heard me just fine.”

I frown. “She’s not some precious china doll.” This is not going the way I expected.

“She was the only one in that house to show me any kindness. I always felt sorry for her.”

I go still. Almost rigid. The woman cleaning the floors felt sorry for the Park Avenue princess? “Why—why’d you feel sorry for her?” I demand. After everything, this should not be my mother’s response.

“I know she was a little wild, but I saw that for what it was. She wanted attention, Troy. She needed love. There was none in that house,” she adds, her voice turning hard.

My eyes shutter as I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Don’t make excuses for her.”

“Things aren’t always how they seem, son.”

“And sometimes they’re exactly as you should’ve expected,” I snap.

“And I did wonder about the ten thousand dollars,” she adds almost casually.

“What ten thousand dollars?”

“I told you I had a little windfall a few months after you went back to college.”

“I don’t . . . I don’t remember that.” At that point, I was fighting to get Table to seed stage, my mind only half on my studies. *And my heart still smarting over Clara.*

“Your car needed repairs,” she says mildly. “How do you think I managed to help?”

I remember the car, or at least my dread. “I thought you’d saved,” I reply, not really convinced. I can’t swear to a timeline or a reason. Things are mostly a blur.

“From what?” she asks with a laugh.

“I don’t fucking know,” I mutter, defensive.

Her reprimand comes in the form of silence.

“*Ana aasef,*” I say quietly. *I’m sorry.*

“Perhaps,” my mother begins, equally as soft, “I didn’t tell you where I thought the money came from because you couldn’t bear to hear her name spoken. Sometimes need overrules feelings.”

“Do you think,” I begin, then halt as I try to reconcile the pieces of Clara. The girl I thought she was, the woman she’s shown me she is. And now this, a blast from the past, courtesy of my mother’s vault. *And she wonders where I get it from.*

“I think,” she says when I don’t continue, “well, I know, that money came from somewhere.”

“Right.” Clear as mud, then.

“I know it was hard. That what happened was hard for you to swallow. And then you had more of the same when you went back to college, worrying for me. But I think that scared girl did the only thing she could at that time to survive. And then later maybe, she tried in her own way to put it right.”

My throat tightens uncomfortably. “There was no putting it right.”

“You don’t think so? Perhaps you’re rubbing the scars too hard.” I find myself thinking of my stupid tattoo. “Look how well your life had turned out.”

In spite of her or because of her? I push the question away.

“She was something, Clara.” Her voice is full of fondness. “Beautiful. Loud and vivacious. Is she still the same?”

“In some ways. In others I think she’s changed.”

“She was loud to cover the pain sometimes, I think. Because if you listened in between the moments, you could almost hear the eggshells she was trying not to step on.” My mother sighs. “I know that sound. I’ve lived it myself.”

Fuck, I don’t know what to do with that. I know her father was an asshole, but to hear my mother equate Clara’s experiences with her own is a total head fuck.

“You think he was abusive.” I keep my voice even, like it means nothing. Like I don’t know the truth already, like it’s not stored in some part of me. Maybe I’ve been ignoring it as part of my own fucking narrative.

“I think there are many ways a man can hurt a woman,” she answers simply. “But I trust you. In whatever your plans are. I always have.”

I close my eyes, the phone still pressed to my ear, the weight of those years shifting uncomfortably once more. Taking a new form. Maybe a new reality.

“Thanks, Mom,” I murmur over the ache in the back of my throat.

“Sometimes it’s not that people are trying to hurt you. They’re just trying not to be hurt themselves.”

And with that, we say our goodbyes.

My chest rises, then falls once, twice. I put down my phone and scrub both hands down my face. Then I just stare—stare at nothing, my thoughts in disarray.

The story I’ve been telling myself all these years? Maybe it had a missing chapter.

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Chapter 36
CLARA

Days pass before I'm brave enough to bring up the topic of our sex schedule again. It's not even a schedule. Just a . . . *I don't know what the heck it is.*

But in those few days, Troy does his best to sway my resolve. Oh, he thinks I don't notice, but the number of times he's walked around the apartment shirtless, sometimes after having worked up a sweat in the gym. Sometimes not. I know what he's up to. Those thin blue shorts seem to get a lot of wear time, and there's even been a couple of incidents involving a slipped towel.

I ask you—is there really any need to be strutting around the kitchen in a towel?

There are texts with double meanings, which I ignore, along with impromptu hugs and accidental brushes that send my nervous system haywire. In the end, I pull up my big-girl panties and sit my ass at the dining table, timing it for when he comes home from work.

"What's this?" Troy eyes the pens and the squares of paper cut from a yellow legal pad I found in his office.

"Homework." He frowns. "Ways to get out of sex Lent."

"Oh?" He's fooling no one with that expression. He puts down his phone and his keys, then slips out of his jacket as though he's in no hurry. *Lies, all lies.*

"Where'd you want me?" Still with the double meanings.

"Just sit your butt down."

"Yes, ma'am." He grins as he does, picking up a pen. "What's the plan, my little sexual guru?"

"We're each going to write down an idea on a square of this paper. Then we'll fold it and put it in here." I tap the lid of an empty jam jar on the table next to me. "Then we just randomly choose a scene."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When do we choose a scene? How often? And who chooses?"

“I don’t know, I hadn’t thought that far.”

“Well, get on that,” he says, pulling a stack of cut paper squares closer.

“That’s a lot of paper.”

“I have a lot of ideas.” His mouth tips.

“Oh.”

“Which brings us back to my question: How often do you want to have sex?”

“How often do *you* want to have sex?”

“Clara, you already know the answer to that.”

“All the time?”

“*All the fucking time.*”

I can’t articulate the reaction that has on my body.

“How about this,” he says. “We keep the lid on the jar, and when you’re feeling . . . frisky, you loosen the lid. That’ll be my signal.”

“Like Batman?” I frown doubtfully.

“I’m more than willing to put the bat in your hand.”

“Knock it off with the innuendo,” I retort, snatching up my pen. Troy is already writing. “How many have you got?” I don’t mean to sound so worried.

“Fantasies?” His gaze lifts and glides over me. Slowly. Sensuously. “I’ve had a while to think, lying in my bed all alone.”

“Not in the bed.”

“What?”

“The purpose is for us not to catch feelings. The apartment is a no-go zone, as is your bed.”

“What about a hotel bed?”

“A hotel is fine.”

“My bathroom?”

An image flashes to life. Red lipstick. Rosso tile. A breath-fogged mirror. His eyes lowered and his tongue tracing the rise and fall of my flesh.

I give my head a shake. “Not your bathroom.”

“Other bathrooms?”

I give a shrug. “You do you.”

His smile. It’s like I can almost feel it pressed between my legs. “Oh, you know what I’m gonna say to that.”

“Let’s just get on with it.”

Troy bends his head, and the paper begins to fill with a slanted text. With a flourish, he slides it to the side and begins again. “You need some suggestions?” he asks without looking up. “I’m happy to offer. Or even demonstrate.”

“I’m good,” I murmur as my pen moves over the paper.

This time, he doesn’t pass (innuendo-filled) comment.

The moments pass as my own papers fill with my looping, cursive script. *It’s not like I don’t have my own ideas.*

“Are we sharing or keeping each other in suspense?”

“Share, I think. In case one of us feels uncomfortable.”

“So we can veto.”

“I guess.” Before I can say anything else, his big palm comes down on my pile.

“Let’s swap,” he suggests. “It’ll be more fun that way.” He picks up a square of paper. “*A chance encounter with a mysterious stranger.*” My words in his voice raise goose bumps along my arms. “Good one,” he adds, his gaze meeting mine, golden yet all kinds of smoky.

I duck my head but it comes up sharp. “*Banging the boss*?” I demand.

His smile lurks. “I knew I should’ve gone with *workplace encounter*.”

“Which of us is the boss in this scenario?”

“What do you think?” he asks silkily. Excitement trickles through me as he reaches for another square. His brows rise. *“Man in uniform.”*

“Have you got a problem with that?”

“Got any preference?”

“I don’t have a bellhop fetish, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Is it a soldier one, or do I get to be a policeman who’ll frisk you, then dig out the cuffs?”

South of my waistline seems to like both of those prospects. “I’ll let you choose,” I say quietly.

“You wanna play doctors and nurses,” he purrs, before I can take my turn.

“It says *doctor and patient*,” I put in primly. “Don’t worry, I’ll warm my stethoscope. My turn now, greedy.” I glance down. *“Sex with a stranger.”*

“That’s like the chance encounter, only less poetic.”

“There’s room for both,” I suggest.

“There are a lot of strangers in this world. And some of them stranger than others.”

My gaze skates away at his sensual threat.

We take turns recounting the rest. Some we laugh at; others make us fall quiet in anticipation. *A paid date at your beckoning.* In other words, an escort. *Sex in a car,* though we’ve been there, done that, and almost got caught in the past. *Batman and Robin.* That one was mine. I said that if he vetoed my handyman porn, I’d settle for superheroes. *Art model and painter.* Tickling brushes. *Professor-student.* Sexual favors for better grades. *CEO with a very bold job candidate.*

“I like the idea of that one.” His eyes burn with encouragement.

“Lucky for you I have a lot of interview experience.”

“Not the kind I’m gonna give you.”

The assumption. I’m not even mad about it.

We fold the papers into anonymous squares, then place them in the jam jar and screw on the lid.

As I stare at it, my insides seem to hold a small riot. Or maybe a celebration.

I can’t help but wonder if my plan will work or if I’m just fooling myself.

I guess only time will tell.

◆ ◆ ◆

It isn’t long until I’ve unscrewed the lid, though I bend the rules by texting Troy a picture of the unfolded square before he gets home. He texts me immediately, and we begin a back-and-forth exchange.

Troy: Is this what I think it is?

In response, I text him the address. Then spend the afternoon in a state of panic.

At 6:00 p.m., I enter the place and look around. Then decide I’ve made a mistake.

I should’ve gone with a five-star hotel. This place is a little more spit and sawdust than I imagined. Maybe I’ve been missing the atmosphere of O’Rourke’s without realizing.

The bar is also louder than I'd expect anywhere to be on a weekday night. Music, glasses clinking, laughter, and the sharp kind of screeching you hear when girls hit the town. I lean my elbows against the bar, and something wet and slimy catches the sleeve of my shirtdress.

Ew. Poor bar staffing. Sloppy work. I check under my purse, but it's fine. I place it down again and tap the top, safe in the knowledge that my beautiful wedding ring is tucked inside. I wasn't about to slip it off at the bar, because the thought of anyone seeing made me sweat like I'd caught a nasty illness. I've spent enough of my life being judged. And I guess I'm tired of being defined by the mistakes I've made.

I order a drink—a glass of wine that would strip paint—and drink it slowly as I watch the door in the bar's mirrored wall. And while I'd like to say I feel Troy before I see him, like an extrasensory perception born from our connectivity, it's not true. What happens instead is the gaggle of noisy girls suddenly shut the hell up. So I turn.

Called it.

I think one or two of them might need to pick their jaws up from the floor as they stare at him as he plays his part so beautifully. His jacket off, sleeves rolled, posture loose in a way that it is when he's being himself. Our eyes meet, and a frisson runs through me—an aesthetic thrill. A skin orgasm, I heard Chelsea describe it as once.

Sounds about right, I think as I turn away from the sight of him, from the amusement in his eyes. From the heat.

The bar itself isn't busy. Just a couple of guys at one end and me at the other when Troy takes a seat between us.

My stomach gives a little twist. How on earth is this going to play out if he's sat all the way down there? I bet he gets hit on first. And then I'll have to step in, and get territorial, then our little interlude will become . . .

I realize he's staring at me, cocksure and confident. He gives a jerk of his chin. *What's up?*

My attention snaps back to my glass, butterflies fluttering inside me with wings as sharp as blades. This is part of the game. The hunt. The master at his work.

A chance encounter with a mysterious stranger.

I give in to another little shiver.

Troy orders himself a beer, and though I'm not looking his way, I'm aware of everything. The angle of his shoulders and the way his hand loops

the long bottle neck. His ease with the middle-aged bartender and the way he taps the edge of a beer mat against the brass rail.

Morse code?

But then he appears next to me. Tall, wide, and smelling divine.

“Is this seat taken?” His question strokes like a caress.

I slide him a covert glance, lifting my shoulder in answer. *Take it or leave it, I don’t care.* I’m playing my chosen character, and it does feel safer this way. That’s not to say I’m not a tiny bit terrified also.

He sits and takes up deliberate space with those wide shoulders and manspread-y thighs, his fingers drumming now instead of the beer mat. “Buy you a drink?” he asks, his voice a touch lower than usual.

I half turn and give him a smile that doesn’t feel like mine. “Depends,” I answer as my gaze flicks over him. “Are you interesting?”

His mouth twitches. “My wife doesn’t think so.”

I almost protest—the reason we’re here is because I find him far too interesting. But I remember the roles we’re playing, even if I don’t recall my piece of paper noting a cheating spouse.

“That’s rough,” I say. “I guess you’re gonna say she doesn’t understand you.”

“Clichés are a thing for a reason,” his low voice rumbles. He signals the bartender with two fingers, and it’s hard to think straight for a minute, remembering how good he is with them.

“What doesn’t she understand?” I eventually return, moving my head from Fingering Land to his smirk.

“How hard I try,” he says smoothly. “How little it seems to matter.”

I click my tongue sympathetically. “That’s almost tragic.”

He laughs then, soft, genuine, and for a second the game wobbles. I press my knee into his, bringing him back to the person he’s supposed to be.

The bartender arrives. He looks unimpressed, and for a beat, we both struggle to keep in character. *Was I ever this judgy?* Troy orders me another white wine—not that I’ll be drinking this one—and the bartender pours, then sets it down in front of me.

“You were telling me about the ways your wife doesn’t understand you,” I prompt, once he leaves.

“I work so hard, but it’s never enough for her. And she complains so much about my raging . . . sex drive.”

I purse my lips so as not to snicker. “That sounds . . .” Almost familiar, though without the complaining. “Sad.”

“She can’t meet my needs.”

I bet she could, comes my internal retort. *If only she’d let herself.*

“What about you?” he asks, angling his attention my way. “What brings a pretty girl like you here all alone?”

“I’m not alone.” I give a silly little shimmy. “I’m available.” How I manage to say that with a straight face, I don’t know.

His gaze drops over me, bold and seductive, making my insides heat and shimmer. When his attention returns to mine, his gaze seems sharpened somehow.

We talk a little. He asks where I’m from, and I tell him nowhere significant. I ask how long he’s been married, and in answer, he tells me his wife is very important to him. I get a stupid little tug in my chest when I hear that, until I remind myself that we’re pretending.

Then he asks how I like to spend my nights, and I stop short from admitting they’re best when I’m with him. The way we circle each other is both ridiculous and exciting, and I tell myself it’s better contained this way. Flirtation and sex tied tight within a boundary wall. We’re allowed to want each other within these confines, this little pocket of pretend.

Outside of that, the most we can hope for is to be friends.

Or maybe that’s just my hope.

Troy leans in quite suddenly, his lips almost brushing my ear. The sensation echoes between my legs. “Want to go somewhere quieter?”

I glance around, feigning innocence. “Where do you have in mind?”

He stands without answering and holds out his hand. Where he leads, I follow, because this is my role.

The restroom is . . .

“Really?” I glance over my shoulder as Troy follows me through the door.

“You said . . .” He looks confused. At least until he sees what we’re in for. A sink. A toilet. Fluorescent lights and industrial tile.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I reply quickly. “I obviously didn’t think this through.” The door swings closed behind us and the scent of bleach tickles my nose. *At least it’s clean. And separate, no line of stalls.* Maybe I was trying to keep things impersonal. And quick?

“I’m glad this isn’t your idea of a good time.” His relief is delivered through a reluctant smile.

“Maybe if we had a pen,” I say, lifting my hand as though writing in the air, “we could write that on the wall. *For a good time, call . . .*”

“I think you’ve done enough damage with a pen for one day.” He reaches for my hand. “Where’s your ring?” he asks with a sudden frown.

“In my bag. I was committing to this.”

“Can you commit to putting it back on?”

Confusion gives way to a flicker of delight, though I give a tiny lift of my shoulder as I open my purse. “Better?”

The way he looks at my hand, then looks at me feels like a lick of warmth to the pit of my stomach. I think he must read that in my expression as he leans in and puts his lips to mine. Like a match to tinder, the moment explodes. Troy grabs me by the waist, his tongue dipping into my mouth. I give a tiny moan and slip my arms around his neck, goose bumps and tingles spreading across my skin. My heart pounds as his fingers tighten and he presses me backward. My butt hits porcelain, and . . .

I lose it right there, laughter bursting out of me in that instant. The noise is sudden and loud, uncontrollable as it bounces off the cold tiled walls.

“I’m so sorry!” I fold forward, one hand over my mouth, the other braced on the edge of the sink as my shoulders heave. “You’re right. Not here. This isn’t sexy at all.”

He stares at me for a beat, then shakes his head, a smile escaping. “So you’re saying you don’t want to fuck me in the restroom of a bar?”

“No thank you,” I reply, still chuckling. “I clearly didn’t count on the ick factor, the hygiene issues and . . .” I wave my hand. *I can’t even.*

Troy cradles my cheek in his hand. “You’re impossibly lovely but equally odd, my little Tater Tot.”

“I hate that nickname,” I lie, ignoring how hearing it burns like a candle flame inside. My heart races and anticipation still hums beneath my skin. Because he’s here, and he’s him. My Troy, not my barfly lothario.

“Why don’t we go home? There’s a perfectly good bathroom there, as you know.”

An image flashes in my head—a mash-up of memories. My mouth softly open, painted the same color as the Rosso marble. Troy behind me, hands bruising on my hips. A wire runs through me, charged with

electricity. So much for distance. For pretend. How quickly it can turn into a truth.

"No, not the apartment," I say softly, sliding my arm into his. "How about a hotel?"

"Okay." He presses his lips to my head, and a sweet ache fills my chest. We leave the bar together, where a car waits.

"We could pivot," I suggest, looking up at him. "Find somewhere to park and tick off car sex?"

"Let's stick to the hotel," he says. "We have time to revisit car sex another day."

I force a smile. Time. It's running out. We know when this will end but how . . .

As he opens the passenger door, I decide I'm not going to think about that now.

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Chapter 37
TROY

I have plans to meet Clara for dinner tonight—real dinner plans, not pretend. We're not playing professor and student or hot demanding chef and besotted sous.

We're meeting at a much-hyped restaurant in SoHo. Somewhere new and high profile, a place that's already had actresses and famous folk pap'd outside. I thought Clara might get a kick out of that. Be mildly impressed? But at the back of my mind is that all-important narrative.

The reason we wed. Got to keep reminding myself of that.

"I expected something a little . . . fancier."

"Jesus, Hannah," I mutter, exasperated. "You must be a nightmare date."

"I'm discerning," she retorts, taking a sip of her martini that, not five minutes ago, she described as the best she'd ever had. "There's a difference. It wasn't a slight. I'm just saying this place has been all over the socials as star studded. I thought it would be a little more . . . select."

She makes a tiny gesture to the trio of girls pulling pouty faces at the bar behind her as one of them uses their phone to grab a snap. Short skirts and sleek hair, they're obviously dressed to draw attention.

Next to Hannah, Hugo makes a *meow* sound, swiping a hand through the air like a kitten.

"I'm just making an observation. I thought you couldn't get a reservation here for love nor money."

"Well, he did." Hugo tips his head my way. "Can't be that hard."

"Thank you, Hugh." I tip the rim of my glass to his as I give in to a twinge of regret. I failed to mention to Clara that I invited this pair along at the last minute.

It was a knee-jerk reaction after thinking back on the conversation with my mom. I'm still trying to process that some of my reality, my reasons, might've been built on unsteady ground. I guess I'm having a hard time butting up my experiences alongside the things my mom said. What if I didn't understand that night the way I always thought I had?

The idea . . . it sits under my skin like an itch I can't scratch. Irritating and niggling. And for that reason, I didn't want to be alone with Clara tonight. Sitting across a table from her, mood lighting and low music, forcing myself to smile. Hand holding and stolen kisses.

The narrative, or so goes the story.

My need, as it turns out.

I'm in no mood to lean into any performance right now, let alone that of high-profile newlyweds. So I brought this pair to run interference, not that they're aware. To help me feel like I'm in control, instead of feeling like a man wishing he installed new brake pads when the vehicle is already careening off a cliff.

"It's probably easier to reserve a spot at the bar," Hugh, my human buffer, suggests.

"If you're willing to line up for hours," I put in. "According to Paolo."

"I bet he didn't stand in line." Hugo's gaze glides to the microinfluencers at the bar again, tipping his drink in their direction. "I also bet that, if you look like them, you won't have to wait long."

"Do you want to go and speak to the pretty girls, Hugh?" Hannah turns sideways in her seat as though to let him pass. "Shoot your shot," she encourages, flicking her red hair over her shoulder.

"Not my type." He gives a shrug.

"Then why are you looking so hard?"

"Because there's a mirror behind them. And I'm a pretty boy."

"And what he means by that," Hannah says, glancing my way, "is he's offended they're not chasing him." She gives a roll of her eyes as though to say *he's hopeless*.

She's right. I don't know what it is about him, but women just fall into his lap. Sometimes literally. He'd say it's his boyish good looks, but my money is on his accent.

"They haven't got a thing on you, Hansy." He picks up his drink, watching Hannah somewhat consideringly.

Huh. I tilt my head and study them. *Nah.* I'm reading too much into this. Hugo and Hannah would be a match made anywhere but heaven. She's too straitlaced. Ballsy. And Hugh is . . . well, him. He'd drive her crazy.

"It's a shame Max couldn't make it," I say, trying for a change of topic while I reset my brain.

"This isn't the kind of place to bring a kid."

“I don’t know.” Hugo gives a sly smile. “Little Archie can be my wingman any day of the week, especially after he informed the whole restaurant at brunch last month that I had a massive knob.”

“Is that the same Archie who then told the old lady at the next table he knew why it’s called a penis?” Hannah’s lips draw together in a purse.

“Pretty smart, if you ask me.”

I scoff. “The kid’s thought process was that you pee out of it and the nuts are underneath.”

“Pee plus nuts equals penis. Near enough.”

Hannah reaches for her glass. “You really can’t rely on the word of someone who stuck a peppercorn up his nose to see if it would make him sneeze.”

“Hugo is who he is,” I reply prosaically.

“Oi!”

Peeling back my jacket sleeve, I glance at my watch.

“Naw, look.” He pulls the same face he does when he sees a puppy out for a walk. “The boss man is all eager for the little woman to arrive.”

“How’s it going?” Hannah’s gaze is, as usual, sharp. Not in the cutting sense but acute. It always feels like she’s seeing the things you don’t want her to.

“It’s going great.” Which is true. Or it was. I thought I had problems enough with the idea that she might leave now that she has her trust fund. I’m mean, she might still bail if things become too difficult. Or if I start asking questions she’s not ready for.

Fuck. My chest feels like someone has secured a steel band around it for some reason.

“That’s good. It’s nice of Clara to meet us here . . . so soon into your marriage.”

“She’s looking forward to it.” I mean, she might have. If I’d told her. “She wants to get to know you guys.”

“And we want to get to know her,” Hugo says. “She must be a top bird, given your timing and stuff.”

“Top bird?” I repeat, trying to decipher his meaning.

“Cool chick, in your speak.”

“She is amazing,” I say. I sound like I mean it, and maybe I do. I thought that about her once before. And she was. Until she wasn’t anymore.

For years the story has been simple. She didn't choose me, and I paid the price.

But now? Fuck, I don't know.

"I can't believe you're making her live through your reno," Hannah says. "The floor space must be tiny, what with the ceiling caving in—"

"It didn't cave in," I say evenly.

"No, they pulled it down." Hugh gives a snicker.

"Still, I'm not sure I'd like to live through it."

"There's method in his madness," Hugh retorts. "He's got a cozy pad just built for two." He winks as though he's on to me. "What time is this table booked for, anyway? I'm so hungry, my arse is beginning to munch my undies."

"Nice." Hannah's tone says otherwise.

I say nothing as, at the end of the bar, Clara arrives at the hostess station. She looks up, and our eyes meet, her expression lightening in a way that I feel in my chest. She looks happy to see me. Like, really fucking happy and trying not to show the extent of it. I know how that feels because that between my ribs? It feels like the sun rising over a hill.

"*I can't afford to like you too much.*"

She said that. And I fucking feel that.

"They've turned the bloody music up. *Oontz-oontz-oontz.*" Hugo's bobbing head drags me back to the presence of my friends.

The light in me dims, my smile along with it. I shouldn't have invited them. I don't fucking want them here. *I want her to myself.* And maybe that's exactly why I need a buffer.

As Clara crosses the space, I stand to greet her, then press a kiss to her cheek. "Hey, Tater Tot." The diminutive sounds all kinds of low and gravelly as I pull her close.

"Pet names," Hugh crows. "How fucking adorbs!"

"You okay?" she whispers.

I look down to find her dainty fingers on my chest. I nod. "Yeah, great." I take her hand before she pulls away as she turns her attention to my friends without showing an ounce of surprise.

"So lovely to see you both again." She's all friendly smiles and open expression. She would've made the perfect diplomat's wife. Too bad she had to settle for a CEO.

There's always next time, a little voice whispers in my head.

I feel like hitting myself.

The guys return her greeting as Clara takes her seat, her black coat revealing a flash of green velvet and a whole lot of smooth thigh.

My pee + nuts are having very sudden and very real regrets for extending the invitation suddenly.

Clara opens the conversation by telling Hannah how amazing she looked in the society pages after the Stanley Ball.

“She scrubs up well.” Hugo offers her a grin with his backhanded compliment.

“At least I brushed my hair,” Hannah retorts.

Hugo’s hand goes there. “Girls love my hair, Hansy.”

“Can’t think why.”

“They love to run their fingers through it,” he says, bowing to offer her the chance, though she playfully pushes him away. “You’re missing out. What about you, Clara? Ever dated a man with long hair?”

“Troy had longer hair once upon a time.” She slides a fond smile my way.

“I forgot about that,” Hugo replies. “It’s so weird that you two knew each other when we knew each other. But we never knew about you.”

“Summer romance.” Clara deftly sidesteps the topic.

“We’d kind of orbited the same space for a few summers before.” One summer doesn’t feel like it was enough to encapsulate the experience.

“How was your day?” Clara turns the casual question my way.

“Productive.”

“Like a cough.” Hugh gives a laugh.

We order another round of drinks, and the conversation is easy. One drink becomes two before the hostess arrives to take us to our table. Good timing, because the bar area is getting rowdy.

Stepping into the dining area, we’re immediately insulated from the noise of the bar when hip is exchanged for understated in terms of ambience. There’s a definite Rat Pack vibe about the place.

The hostess offers to take Clara’s coat, and I want to bite my knuckle at the sight of her. Black heeled ankle boots and a thigh-skimming green velvet dress with tiny capped sleeves and cut so low at the front, I expect to see her navel. But it’s not so revealing on second glance, thanks to the low V being kept the right side of modest by a row of tiny gold buckles. But the

boots, the hair, the color make her look more than ever like a woodland fairy.

A red-hot woodland fairy, I think, as I stare down the attention of a guy or two. I keep my hand at the small of her back, the placement proprietary —*don't look, all mine*—as we're led to a huge corner booth with a view over the rest of the place. We order wine, and Clara joins Hannah in a martini served from a tableside cart while we inspect the menu.

"Look." I point at an item. "Lobster rolls topped with caviar." Clara and I exchange a fond look.

"I'm sensing a story," Hugo sings. "Share with the class, Troy Boy."

"Troy Boy?" Clara is amused.

"Troy Boy the man toy," he says, completely oblivious to the piercing look Hannah serves him.

"I know you spend your day dreaming up code, but maybe you should engage your brain elsewhere," Hannah mutters.

He gives a dismissive swat of his hand. "That was *years* ago—pretty sure our last year in college was his peak. Not that he hasn't always been popular with the ladies. We've all got eyes," he adds. "The man is hot!"

"You're not my type, H."

Clara pats my arm. "You're supposed to say you only have eyes for me these days."

She doesn't know how true that is.

"Anyway, lobster rolls." He makes lobster claw motions with both hands. "Anything to do with your tattoo?" He turns to Clara. "Only he'd get away with something so bloody girly."

"How do you—" Clara looks suddenly embarrassed.

"A lot of people have seen your husband naked," he replies.

I put down my menu. *Fucking unbelievable.*

"Dude!" Hannah catches him a good one in the chest. "Read the room."

"Oh, right." He shoots Clara a bright smile. "Sorry, I just meant that your husband sent a naked photo to the group chat instead of to the girl he was trying to shag."

"How is that any better?" Hannah demands.

"It's fine," Clara says with a smile I haven't seen before. So *this* is what fake looks like on her. Is she jealous? Because I like the idea of that. "We all have pasts."

Well, that wiped the smug right off my face. I don't want to hear about her past. At all.

"I was quite impressed," Hugh continues, oblivious. "It's very pretty."

Clara claps both hands to her mouth to smother a giggle, eyes wide and very blue over her dainty fingers. My ring sparkling on the fourth finger of her left hand. I get a kick out of seeing my ring on her hand. A bigger kick than I should.

"Pretty, huh?" I lean back in my chair as I examine him. "You wanna revisit that statement?"

"What?" *Wot?*

"You were quite impressed," Hannah prompts. "Because it's pretty, apparently."

Hugo looks so hard at Hannah that he gives himself a double chin. "I was talking about his tattoo, not his todger, you deviants!"

Even Hannah laughs at this.

"Not that seeing his cock is a big thing," he mutters, reaching for his wine.

"Again, do you wanna revisit that statement?"

"I'm saying it's not weird that I have seen your cock."

"I beg to differ," Hannah puts in.

Hugh brings his wine to his mouth. "If you haven't whipped your knob out in front of me, drunk at a party, I ask myself, are we even friends?"

"Apparently not." Hannah quirks a brow.

"Not you, Hansy. Though I'm well acquainted with your massive set of balls."

Turns out, my cock is an excellent icebreaker, and from there on in, the evening is effortless. Drinks are enjoyed, and food is ordered from a menu that's kind of kitsch. We start with a whole lot of sharing plates, including spinach and artichoke dip, pizza rolls, a Caesar salad that's more cheese than leaf, plus a serving of those caviar-topped lobster rolls. Clara declares these aren't a patch on the ones served on Long Island.

Hugh orders steak frites, Hannah the salmon, and Clara says the Wagyu French dip sandwich is calling her name. I go for the rib eye, but we end up sharing, Clara dipping half her sandwich into the jus before feeding it to me.

Huge keeps us all laughing, regaling us with stories from the tech department, who's staff don't seem to be of this world. He is, as usual,

animated, unaffected, and extremely funny.

And they say I'm the charming one.

I find myself thinking how great it is that Clara gets along with my friends. She's just herself, paying attention and asking questions that aren't decorative. I watch her more than I ought to. Fuck, I drink her in. She's so fucking lovely, I just can't help myself.

I invited these reprobates to dilute the day, to flatten whatever charge builds when we're alone. But the longer the evening goes on, the less that seems to matter. And when Clara laughs at something Hugo says and reaches for her wine the same time I reach for my drink, our fingers brush. The charge feels larger than just an exchange of electricity or lust.

Maybe my friends aren't here as a buffer, or to insulate me from my feelings. Because, right now, it feels more like I need them here to witness the proof of what she means to me.

Later, after the others have left, and the night air is cool as we wait for our car, Clara steps closer, and I assume she's seeking my body heat as I wrap my arms around her.

"You didn't have to bring reinforcements," she says quietly, her eyes searching my face.

She thinks I asked them here to keep us decent. To keep me from breaking the rules.

"I thought it would be easier," I say, offering her a truth.

"Was it?"

I look at her, then shake my head. Despite everything—the past, our present, the way this is supposed to end—I find I want her more than ever.

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Chapter 38
CLARA

Past

“You take care of yourself, Clara. And that lovely young man of yours.”

“Thank you, Bessie, I’ll be sure to.” I press my lips to her papery cheek before her companion leads her away. 9:00 p.m. Time for her bed, I guess.

Elizabeth Landry is our elderly neighbor and such a sweet lady. She reminds me of my grandmother. It was nice to see her after so long, and she was *very* taken with Troy. I give in to a tiny smile, wondering if he’s managed to find her that glass of sherry yet.

“Clara, a word.”

At the sound of my father’s voice, my stomach shrinks in on itself. I straighten my spine and turn to face him.

“Can’t we do this later?” I drawl, my tone bored.

“No,” he snaps. “My office, now.”

I pull an unimpressed face, glad that Troy isn’t here. The way he defended me earlier . . . I was literally stunned into silence. No one ever stands up to Edwin Forbes, and no one ever stands up for me. The way he told my father I deserved respect made tears jump to my eyes. I felt uplifted. Treasured. But also feared a little on Troy’s behalf. So that’s when I stepped in and moved the target. Some blatant underage drinking was bound to get my father riled.

Fingers crossed, that’s what he wants to talk to me about.

Talk *at* me, more like. Belittle. Humiliate.

But better me than Troy.

“What about your guests?” I give a bored sigh along with my last-ditch attempt. It wouldn’t be wise to give a straight-out *no*.

“They can spare me a moment,” he says in that well-used brooks-no-argument tone of his.

I’m still watching for the warning signs as he makes a grab for my elbow. I try not to flinch, shame flooding my veins that I would allow him to treat me like this. There are people watching, people who might say I get what I deserve. I feel like I’m twelve years old as my father moves me away from the party, his hold firm. Possessive. *Like he ever really cared that I’m his.*

He pastes on a smile as he passes Vanessa and murmurs that he’ll be back “in a jiffy” with a glass of Armagnac for the senator she’s boring. “Clara needs to speak with me for a moment,” he says with a pleasant nod. “A catering concern.”

She isn’t fooled, but she also doesn’t care.

The hallway grows quieter the farther we move along it, my heels clicking loudly as we move toward his private office. This is a vacation home; the clue is in the title. Yet Daddy Dearest spends most of his time cosseted away in there.

The distant music dulls and laughter disappears as he closes the door behind us. In this hallowed hall of masculinity, I take my place in front of the hearth. The carpet and a silence stretch out between us.

My father examines me, playing his usual power game: First to speak loses.

In private, I pretty much always lose.

“Well?” My hands lift and fall.

“What do you think you are doing?” He doesn’t shout. In some ways, I think that would be easier.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You’re too old to play games, Clara. I told you I did *not* want that boy in my house.”

“That boy has a name. And you said you didn’t want him here, not that I couldn’t bring him.” I know, I know. The attitude isn’t going to help.

“I suppose you think that’s entertaining.”

“I just thought—”

“That must be novel for you. A thought. The truth is, you *never* think. Not beyond the moment you’re standing in.”

The usual bullshit. Only tonight, it hurts more because it’s not just me he wants to bring down. The irony is, Troy is worth ten of those assholes here with their parents tonight, flattering and kowtowing to the great Edwin Forbes. Those supposed nice boys from good families want to be near him.

Want to flatter him. Yet they'd still plow the great man's daughter given half a chance.

"If you just have a conversation with him," I say, hating the pleading note in my tone.

"Entertain the son of a criminal? A murderer, no less. I see you don't know him as well as you imagined."

So smug. God, I hate him.

"It doesn't matter to me who or what his father is." Though I don't believe him, I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of arguing about it. "I care for Troy, and I wanted him here tonight."

"You care for no one but yourself. And you only brought him here because you wanted attention. As usual."

"Poor Daddy," I pout. "For a business titan, you're a little slow on the uptake. I stopped looking for your approval years ago."

His jaw flexes, distaste washing over his face. "You're an embarrassment."

"Troy doesn't seem to think so," I taunt, unable to stop myself. "He kind of loves who I am." My father hates how I look, all tits and ass, so I play up to the stereotype he thinks I am.

"Enough." His hand cuts through the air, and I find myself flinching. "He is *not* one of us."

"That's why I like him." Why I love him.

"You bring him here, into my home. To *my* anniversary party. Do you have any idea what people are saying?"

I think of the room we just left. The polite smiles. The looks. "I have a fair idea. They're saying poor Edwin." Because it's all about him and how he looks. "He's got his handful with that *dreadful* daughter. Whatever did he do to deserve her?"

"You enjoy it, embarrassing me." My heart gives a little jolt as he stops dead in front of me.

"Not everything is about you." My voice is unsteady. "I'm done with trying to earn your attention—done with it. Troy is smart, and he's loyal, and—"

"Smart and loyal are good only for dogs. Breeding and connections, that's what's important. He will never be welcome in my home, unless he's pruning the hedges or sweeping the yard."

My throat burns as my hands curl into fists at my back. He is so hateful. I wish he could see that. *Maybe he already does.*

"It's not passion or love you're feeling. It's your own insecurity. You'll find any excuse for a rebellion. I pity you that."

"Insecurity," I repeat. "Gee, I wonder how that came about."

"He is beneath you. You know it, and that's why you brought him tonight. To provoke. To prove you still have the power to humiliate me."

"That's not it!" I cry.

"You always want attention," he snaps. "Any kind of attention." The words slither easily into old wounds. I know exactly where this speech goes. I've heard versions of it my entire life. "Well, you clearly have *his*." His eyes flit disdainfully over me. "But for how long?"

That's new, the way he looks at me like I'm a piece of meat. *New and uncomfortable.*

"You do what you like and expect others to clean up the mess. But this time, you're endangering far more than your own reputation."

"You mean your reputation? That's all you care about." My reputation is an extension of his.

His smile is ugly. "You never did learn when to keep that mouth closed. And the trouble seems to have spread to your legs."

I inhale a sharp breath. This is a whole other level of Edwin Forbes's contempt.

"What do you care?" I spit.

"If you want me to care, stop making me regret having expectations of you."

The barb is sharp, mean, and perfectly aimed. But I say nothing, because it looks like he's running out of steam.

"Go back to the party." He gives a dismissive flick of his hand. Like I'm a bug in need of swatting. "We'll discuss your punishment later."

If looks could kill, he'd already be under the grass as humiliation and fury flame inside me. I'm a woman, not a child to be chastised, to be grounded.

I pivot and make for the door without a backward glance.

Fuck him and his prejudice.

Fuck him and his lack of care.

Just . . . fuck him.

Music seems to swell to meet me as I reenter the party and make straight for Troy, my expression arranged into something pleasantly bland. *I hope.*

"You okay?" he asks with a quiet concern.

"I'm fine." I smile too fast. Too hard. "Sorry, there was a catering concern." It's a lie so obvious it feels like a dare. Maybe I expect him to challenge it. When he doesn't, I slide my hand into the crook of his arm. "I'm parched. Let's get a drink."

I steer him in the direction of the bar, where I order a champagne. I don't want to drown my sorrows but blunt my anger. As it turns out, it only serves to sharpen it.

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Chapter 39
CLARA

Chelsea stands in the middle of the floor, arms folded and her chin in her hand as she studies the window like it's some great piece of artwork. Something MoMA- or Louvre-worthy.

"It's not exactly giving emotional healing, is it?" she asks, turning her head over her shoulder.

"It's not giving sunlight either. Just . . . brick wall." I lean against the kitchen countertop as the Realtor drifts into the hallway to take a call. Or maybe the call is fake, and she's embarrassed by the ridiculous figure she just quoted Chelsea for a one-bed, third-floor walk-up in Washington Heights. *With an outlook over a brick wall.*

I'm so glad my days of living like this are done.

We can do better than this. She can do better.

I feel a little like living with Troy has given me perspective. That maybe I didn't realize how hard I was struggling, stuck in the thick of it. I want the same for Chelsea—a fresh start, not a man.

A man is not the solution for all womankind. *The right man, though . . .*

I glance down at my wedding ring. *Troy certainly seems to like to see it on my hand.* I snap out of that train of thought before it can catch. It was probably about the narrative for him.

"Do you think it's a metaphor for something?" Chelsea is still staring at the wall.

"Yeah, a dead end, but not of your search."

She pivots, her high ponytail swinging. "You think I should look somewhere else?"

"Hell, yeah." My answer is two incredulous syllables long.

"But what if I lose out on the bursary?"

"Why would that happen?"

"I don't know." Consternation pinches her brows together. "But I would die if I did. I'm just so frickin' tired of living with strangers."

“You won’t lose it, I’m sure of it.” Especially as I’m the nameless benefactor. “This is only the third apartment we’ve seen.”

The impact fund will take months to get up and running, and I don’t want to wait before I start helping others. The idea of improving Chelsea’s life came to me when I was researching office space. A quick call to my new lawyers, and boom! Chels got an accommodation bursary through her acting school. She’s moving up in the world. Just maybe not as high as I hoped.

Her financial circumstances must be worse than she said. No surprise there, thanks to those old friends’ shame and the fear of judgment.

What is it with women and money—how we tell ourselves we’re no good with it? It’s just some historical misogynistic bullshit that seems to perpetuate. But getting on my soapbox isn’t going to help Chelsea. I just need to find a way to increase the figure without it looking suspicious.

Speaking of money, my old landlord forwarded my mail, including another demand from the IRS, courtesy of dear old Dad and his machinations.

Troy suggested (again) that he should go and see my dad to sort this out. Put an end to his games. As touched as I am that he’d do that for me, what would be the point? This is just his parental swan song.

I’m going to fight the IRS and prove the charge is unfounded. I’m done being walked on and I’m done being ruled by him.

“You’re right.” Her shoulders straighten with a sudden air of determination. “I’m being a doomer. I need to back myself up and manifest the shit out of a space that’s a reflection of who I am.”

I want to give Chelsea options, space for her thoughts, both figuratively and literally. A future to feel positive about over a life of disconnection and strife, which is what that share house was to me. I was grateful to have a roof over my head, but I hated living with strangers.

Living alone is just a matter of weeks away. My stomach dips at the unhappy thought.

“My last apartment was the worst,” I offer with a smile. “What do you think that says about me?”

“That you were destined for better things,” she replies in the tone of *duh, obviously*.

Better things. I want to do better things and soon. Thanks to Troy, I’m meeting the first potential member of my board this afternoon. It’s just a

first meet—she might not even be interested—but I'm so excited to get the ball rolling.

"Hey, you haven't told me what the marital abode is like."

What's Troy's apartment like? *Heavenly* is my immediate thought. I imagined such close confines would be hell, but it's turned out quite the opposite.

It'll be an amazing home once the remodel is over. Troy was so animated when he showed me around the place after the crew had left a couple of afternoons ago. He was so proud, and quite rightly so. Not that he would admit it—and not because he's humble. He's just not going to show his soft underbelly. Least of all to me.

I'm not going to think of moving out again. Not right now.

But his apartment, like his company, is a symbol of how hard he's worked. How far he's come. It's more than a possession, more than a home. It's his fortress, a place he's built that's entirely his. Somewhere safe and stable. A place he'd never give up. Not for anything.

"Clara?"

"Sorry. Zoned out. I was thinking about lunch. But the apartment? It's currently a construction site." I twist off the top of my water bottle to avoid looking at her.

"How's it going?"

"The construction?"

"The marriage!"

"It's going." I take a gulp.

"So does a train, girl! Woot woot!"

"I hadn't finished," I say, pretending not to be amused by her silliness. "It's going well."

She bites back a smile, mischief dancing in her eyes. "As in, well, this is a time? Or as in, well, this man rocks my world?"

"I didn't realize there would be a quiz."

"Come on, let me live vicariously." She gives a playfully petulant stomp of her feet.

"It's good. Really good. We . . . gel." Who knew asking Troy Templeton to marry me would be one of my more successful impulsive decisions.

"Called it!" A couple of steps, and she's leaning against the countertop, her eyes still wide and sparkling. "The man has *dreamboat* written all over

him.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him you said so.”

“Don’t you dare!” she says, bounding upright. She gives a wistful-sounding sigh. “You know, I’ve never been the one. Actually, no. That’s not one hundred percent true. I’ve been the one they lost their virginity to. And the one they cheated on,” she says, unfurling a finger for each account. “The one their mom hated. And the one who hit them with her car.”

“Those are some tales,” I say with a nod as I try to digest.

“Let’s just say there will be no manifesting an ex for me.”

I take another mouthful of my water.

“I’d kill to have what you have. Your marriage is giving legit fairy-tale vibes. Cinderella, but make it billionaire,” she says, framing her thoughts with her hands.

“If the shoe fits?” I smile, indulging her.

“Girl, you have the stepmother.”

“The Grimm fairy-tale version,” I say, scrunching my nose as I reflect on what Troy said about her putting me on a diet. I never really considered it as something awful. But sometimes you need a little distance to see things for what they really are.

“But now you have your prince, so the suffering was worth it, right?”

In answer, I smile. I can’t allow my feelings to deepen. I can’t fool myself that this might turn real. Because our moments are so easy, they’re dangerous territory.

It would be so easy to fall for him.

“That man is down bad.”

“You can’t know that,” I scoff.

“Girl, I saw the photos on the socials!”

Heat creeps up my neck. “It’s . . . good. We’re good. Things are good.”

“That is a whole lotta goods. But I have eyes.” She makes a V of her fingers. “You both looked so happy. I could practically feel the love outpouring. It’s such a classic romance arc. Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy finds girl again, wearing his angry face mask that she *dared* to cross his path. Then, *boom!* Second-time soulmates.”

The irony presses against my ribs, though I give a soft chuckle that I hope sounds convincing. “I’m hungry,” I say. “You?”

“I could eat. *Ooh*, how about *dosa*?”

“Sounds good.”

As we make our way out of the apartment, I remind myself that soulmates don’t schedule sex to avoid feelings. Especially when it feels like it might be too late for that.

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Chapter 40
TROY

“Fuck, they’re multiplying.” I put down my keys, my gaze sliding to the sample boards I stacked against the wall after Clara moved in. They’re still there, so unless a design studio exploded on the island, these must be new. *Fuck.*

“Julian dropped them off earlier,” Clara says from the sectional.

“Do you know him?” That sounded way more pointed than it should. Jealous, almost. *Fuck.*

“First time we’ve met.” She sets down her water glass and stands. “He seems great, though. Really thorough.”

“Right.” I don’t want to hear that my interior designer, who looks like a pro surfer, is great. And I definitely don’t want to hear he’s thorough.

“Talented too.”

“Uh-huh.” My gaze dips to the color-coded boards and the marble samples, another stained three different shades of wood. A swatch of fabrics fanned out in an arc, and a brass pull that looks like it’s already been used. *Sometime in the 1890s.*

“He said these are the final selections,” Clara says from the other side of the island now. Bare feet and in pale washed jeans, she pushes the sleeves of her fine-knit sweater up her arms before sticking her hands into her back pockets.

I drag my gaze away to glance at the shit stacked against the wall again. “Couldn’t he have just picked something from those?”

She gives a tiny laugh. “He doesn’t choose. You do.”

“I am drowning in choices,” I say, rotating my neck as though my head is heavy. “Why do I need to when he already emailed me a digital rendering of how he sees shit?”

“Well, did you like what he sent?”

“Probably. If I was living in a game of *The Sims*.”

She fucking beams.

“That shit isn’t real,” I grumble. “I just gave it a glance. I’ll know whether I’ll like the fit when I see it finished.”

“So when it’s too late?” Her eyes widen as though surprised.

“I need the visual.” I’m a visual creature, like, I know I like what I see right now. Not that Clara needs to hear me say that. “It’s just the way my brain works. Besides, style isn’t my wheelhouse.”

Clara’s eyes track over me. Dark-gray suit. White shirt open at the neck. “That’s so not true.”

“I can pick a suit,” I reply, trying to ignore how I experienced the brush of her gaze. “A pair of shoes.” I reach for a blue velvet pouch, emptying the contents. “I can’t get emotionally invested in . . . miniature brass faucets.”

“It’s just a sample.” She attempts to throttle her amusement. “And you’re not meant to get attached. Just have an opinion.”

“My opinion is I’m paying that beach bum to choose for me.”

“Beach bum?” The words spurt from her like honey.

“The hair.” I wave a hand in front of my face. “The sunglasses even when it’s raining.”

Whatever she thinks about my little outburst, she doesn’t say. “It’s your apartment.”

“But it’s *his* job. What he chooses will work. Probably.”

His expression twists. “It’ll function, but that’s not the same.”

“The kitchen works, right? Both functionally and aesthetically.” I even surprise myself there. “Hell if anyone really knows what that means,” I add gruffly.

“Aesthetic? It means to give pleasure through beauty.”

Some things just hit viscerally. *Clara. That word means Clara.*

“The kitchen is beautiful,” she goes on, coasting her touch along the bullnose marble like a hand model. My mind jumps from hand model to hand jobs. Hers specifically, while she’s wearing my ring. That she’s wearing it right now and not for show or to support the narrative is a beautiful thing. I fuckin’ love seeing it on her hand for some reason. She doesn’t usually wear it around the apartment. And I should know, given I’m here more now than I’ve ever been.

“Did you help?”

“Huh?”

“The kitchen. Did you help design it?” I give my head a quick shake. “Well, they did a great job. But if you want, I could give you a hand?”

I would love a—

Get your head out of the gutter, man.

"We could run through your options here," she says, glancing at the samples.

"Sure. Why not? Give me a crash course in style." I just like hanging out with her. Though it seems kind of unfair that she isn't going to be here to see the end product. *Kind of unfair to both of us.*

I shrug out of my jacket as she rounds the island, her gaze covertly taking the movement in. It makes me wonder if I shouldn't stop at the jacket. Except that would be fucking up the (literal) fucking schedule.

I miss her in my bed.

Jesus, I've got to stop torturing myself.

She has her trust fund but she's still here. I should be grateful for that—take what she'll give with the understanding that this can't be anything more.

"So." She comes to a stop next to me, her arm almost touching mine as she picks up one of the miniature marble slabs. "What do you think?" she asks, almost weighing it in her hands, then tilting it toward the light.

"I think it's marble." It's white. Veins running through it. Brown, gold, a little black.

Her soft laugh whispers over my skin like a slipped sheet. "It's Calacatta. The veining's warmer than this one," she says, putting it down and swapping it out for another.

I rest my palms on the countertop. "It's only for the guest bathrooms. I won't even use them."

"That's not the point." She turns, standing the darker marble against the backsplash. "This one is too cold for the light you get on the other side of the apartment, I think."

I study the sample, then the kitchen, trying to see what she sees. Cold is a temperature, not a color. "Then let's go with that one."

"Cheat." She smiles, then tilts her head thoughtfully. "Okay, so let's figure out what you respond to."

You. The word feels like a punch to the gut or a slap to the face as I shove my hands into my pockets as Clara, oblivious to my lust, begins laying things side by side. She chats animatedly as she does so. *Contrast. Texture. Space. Visual versus tactile. Layering and light interplay.* But I can only think of the words in terms of her.

The contrast of her pale thigh sliding up mine. The velvet texture of her pussy against my fingertips and the satin-soft brush of hair across my cock. The way the moon turns her skin milky and the thick sweep of her lashes jet black. How my chest feels cracked open at the sight of her.

Fuck, how I long to close the distance between us. Slide my hands around her waist. Lift her to the countertop and kiss the fuck out of her. But she's enjoying this, playing designer. I'll let her design till her heart is content. She can choose the materials, the colors. Decide where the furniture should sit, make this place a home and—

Then she'll leave. She'll move on. The way we planned.

Her absence will echo through the place, and . . .

I'll probably tear the apartment to pieces and start again.

She slices her hair behind her ears as she says something about night versus the morning. I stifle a sigh. *I want Clara's nights. I want her days too.* In my pockets, my fingers ball into fists. I shift my weight to one foot as though it might help this pent-up energy. But it just brings the floral scent of her closer, my focus narrowing to the plush cushion of her mouth.

It's not just how she looks. I'm genuinely in awe of her in so many ways. Yesterday, I had the privilege of sitting in on her meeting with her first prospective board member, and she impressed the fuck out of me. The way she passionately pitched her ideals to Sue Vergara, a no-bullshit veteran of Goldman Sachs, was nothing short of beautiful. She cut straight to the consequence, the reasons for her actions, spoke of profit margins being important but secondary.

Clara wasn't trying to impress her—whether we're in a coffee shop or an office or a fundraiser, she treats everyone with the same care and attention. From a junior staffer to a bona fide mogul, she's fair to all. She wants better outcomes for strangers and friends who'll never know she's intervened. She genuinely cares, and that just . . . that just makes me feel all kinds of inconvenient things.

She looks up, and I instantly realize she's waiting for an answer to a question I didn't hear.

"What?" I go with brazening it out.

"You're not paying attention."

"I am. I'm paying attention to you." I did say brazen, didn't I?

Her hair falls forward as she ducks her head to hide her expression. I reach out and hook it once more behind the shell of her ear. *Tell me you're*

obsessed without saying so, right?

"What are you doing?" she whispers, chewing a little on the inside of her lip.

"I told you, I'm paying attention. I like it when you're enthusiastic."

She slides me a look that makes me want to laugh. So, yeah. I'm always thinking about sex.

"You're incorrigible," she says, swatting her hand to my chest. It begins to slip away, but I don't let it, the tiny hitch in her breath twisting something inside me.

"But you kind of love that about me," I say, my words all sandpapery.

Our eyes lock, and between this breath and the next, our lips are fused together and we're kissing. Fuck, are we kissing. Bypassing the slow buildup, we jump straight to throw-down moves. Our mouths are hot, and wet, and carnal as I seize her by the waist and back her up against the fridge.

"What are we doing?" she rasps, tilting her head to give me better access to her throat.

My hand skims up her body, shaping her breast. "If you're going to say stop, say it," I growl. *Please don't say it.*

"We shouldn't. We said . . ."

But she tastes too fucking good, and her tits are already heaving under the thin knit of her sweater. I shouldn't look—I shouldn't suck her over the cotton like I'm trying to persuade her of something.

Her body bows, but then her hands find my shoulders and I know what's coming.

"I heard your husband isn't home tonight." My words are all growl and, my brain, when it catches up, is pretty fucking impressed.

"You heard?" Her answer is tremulous. Amusement. Excitement. Maybe a little relief.

"Yeah, when he called me and made a booking." I press my lips to a tender spot beneath her ear, hoping she's not about to call me out. *The jar. The apartment.*

"What did my husband say?"

Thank you, Jesus. "He told me he didn't want you to be lonely while he's out there, working hard. Or was that hardly working?"

"How." She swallows. I feel it as I press my lips there. "How thoughtful of him."

“He seems like the thoughtful type. Thorough too.” I slide my finger into the waist of her jeans and her breath hitches as I find skin. “Told me he wants you to come at least twice before he gets home.”

“When he’ll be too tired to make it a third.”

Never. “Well, he’s paying me a lot of money.” I pop the button. Unzip her fly. “So maybe I can take care of that for him.”

“You’re awfully confident.”

“I come with a guarantee.”

She laughs, the sound joyous, sweet and thick. I want to suck it from her mouth. Inhale it for posterity. “Shouldn’t that be the other way around?”

“I come with a guarantee. You’ll come when I tell you to.”

“Big talk, but I think I should see what my husband is paying for.” Her fingers shake as they begin to pluck at my shirt buttons.

“Allow me.” Yanking the cotton from my waistband, I reach between my shoulder blades and pull the shirt up and over my head. Then mic-drop it to the floor.

Her mouth is a pert pout, and her delight is blatant. “He must’ve paid a premium.”

I give a low rumble of assent, my abs responding to the trail of her brazen fingers, the rumble deepening as her tongue flicks over the flat of my nipple. I force myself to stand still as she touches and teases, as she palms my cock through the fabric of my pants.

“My husband has excellent taste.” She grips over my hard length.

“Fuck yeah, he does.” Without finesse, I pull the sweater over her head. Black bra and pale skin, nipples taut beneath the lace. My thumbs grazing the hardened buds. With a gentle moan, she arches into my touch.

I want to take her to bed, press my want into her skin and my touch into her cells. But I’m already breaking the rules, starting things in the apartment. I just pray she doesn’t pull away.

“I hope your husband knows how lucky he is.” I skim my hands over her silken shoulders, then drop my mouth to the side of her neck. Breathe her in.

“You’d have to ask him.”

“He’d say he wants you so badly that he can barely think straight.” I flick the button of her jeans and count to five before sliding them down her legs. “Step out.”

She does, and I press her back against the fridge before kissing her the way I want to fuck her. Slowly, thoroughly, and without coming up for air. My hand clasps her left wrist, and I press a kiss to her palm before sliding it above her head. I lift the other, and her breath catches as I hold her there. *Like a butterfly pinned.*

"What happens now?" She's all fast breath and dark-eyed want.

"Well now," I say, swapping my hold on her to one hand. "Now I'm gonna get you off." I sink my hand into her panties and, to our joint delight, find her already wet. "Baby, you're so slick." I whisper my praise as I trace the shape of her with the pads of two fingers. "So soft. And all for me."

"F-for my husband."

My gut tightens so pleasurably. "Too bad he's not here, huh?" With a whimper, she flattens her back against the fridge. "That's it, sweet thing. Slide those feet wide." I nudge the side of her right foot with mine. "You look so, so pretty like this. So fuckable." The sight of her drives me wild. "Do you think your husband would like to see you held down, and at my mercy?"

"I don't know." Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. "Would he?"

"Maybe we should send him some photographs." I give her wrists a gentle squeeze, a silent instruction to keep her hands where they are. I pull my phone from my back pocket.

My first shot is of the valley of her cleavage. The next, the slope of her neck. The triangle of her panties, my hand sunk under the fabric. Her expression as I push a testing finger inside.

"You think he'll like them?" I withdraw. Replace one finger with two. "Or shall I keep them as a memento."

"That's . . . oh, God."

"You're right, I should keep them."

"F-fair's fair," she mewls.

"Ah, honey, you're so sweet." I work her, all slow tease and appreciative hum until she's writhing for more. "And so fuckin' sexy."

"You're just saying that b . . . b . . ." Her eyes follow the line of my bicep, her chest rising and falling with her tight little breaths.

"Because he's paying me to? He said I'm not allowed to taste you, but that doesn't sound fair. Does it?"

She shakes her head in staccato. "He doesn't own me."

“Oh, but I think he’d like to. Yeah, just like that,” I whisper as she begins to move with my touch.

“*Oh, God.*”

“No, darlin’. Not God. I’m just the man paid to make you come.”

“F-fighting words.” The corner of my mouth hooks up at her valiant attempt at sass. “I don’t even know your name,” she mutters as I palm her clit, trading gentle strokes for come-here curls. *Come here. Come right now.*

“You can call me Al, baby. Al Nightlong.”

Her velvet walls contract around my fingers as I bend to swallow her mirth.

“You make me feel so fucking greedy,” I whisper, suddenly serious. I put my mouth to her breast and suck over the lace. “I don’t know whether I want to fuck you or wear you like you’re my favorite cologne.”

“*Oh.*” Her eyes shutter closed under the weight of her pleasure, her hot walls tightening as she chases her peak. It’s a beautiful thing to behold, to witness. But as much as I want to watch her, I also want to be seen.

“Look at me.” My body arcs over hers, the difference in our heights so much more pronounced thanks to her bare feet.

Her eyes spring open, and in the depths of her gaze, for a moment, I see everything. Our truths. How neither of us will leave this experience untouched. I see our histories. The girl she was and the woman she’s become, quietly fierce and strong. She blinks, and the sentiment changes, and what I see is longing, the moment a convergence.

“Clara.” My tone seems to ache. “Look at what you’re doing to me. You drive me so fuckin’ crazy,” I admit, playacting falling by the wayside. “I am too old to be making myself come in the shower when your hot little body is just a few feet away and dying for this.”

“You . . .”

I press my mouth to hers, the kiss truly decadent. “You like the sound of that, huh? Me fucking my hand while you lie in my office, sleeping.”

“I imagine it,” she whispers hotly. “Imagine the sound of the water and opening the door. The look on your face as I drop to my knees.”

Her admission detonates inside me, an erotic montage flashing across the walls of my brain. “Do you touch yourself, Clara? Do you play with this pretty little pussy while thinking of blowing me?”

“*Please.*” The plea is almost breathless as I taste her whimpers. As I demand.

“Tell me.”

She licks her pink, kiss-swollen lips, the sight so intoxicating. “Yes, I touch myself.”

“Why are we doing this to ourselves?” I almost lament.

“Troy, I need you.”

“Tell me how—how you need me, baby.” I sink my fingers deep inside her, and she cries out as I hold her on that precipice.

“I need to feel you, Troy. Feel every part of you against every part of me.”

Her admission pulls at me—pulls at my heart—as she reaches for my belt. And I let her. Button, zipper, the way she quickly swipes her panties down her legs. There’s no slow striptease or finesse, just haste as she reaches behind, loosening her bra.

I suck in a breath at the sight of her, all curves and contrasts. Her tiny waist and the flare of her hips. The fullness of her breasts, her milky skin and those eyes as dark as sin.

Condom. I begin to turn, the motion is aborted by her hand on my bicep. “My wallet,” I begin to explain.

“I haven’t had sex with anyone else in over a year.” My whole body goes taut with suppressed desire. “I’m safe. I know you wouldn’t put me at risk.”

I’d rather tear out my heart, I think as she slips her arms around my neck.

Skin to skin, I take my cock in my hand, my jaw tightening as I line myself up. Her breath holds as I push inside.

Oh, God, the sensation of her body accepting mine is everything. The past, the present, everything we were and are now coming together in one exquisite moment. Palming her ass, I hold her there, absorbing the beauty of our fit. Raw. Bare. Eyes drinking the other in. I drive inside her again. Clara moans and I inhale it, our mouths meeting messily, need turning wild as my hips flex and my hands tighten in their hold. I want to rule her. Dominate. I want to share this obsession, this pleasured pain. She’s so fucking beautiful, my Clara, her body pressed to mine so ripe and full. If I live to hold her for a hundred years, I’m not sure it will be enough.

“Harder,” she demands. And I deliver, the pulse of her body making my wits unspool.

“I’m going to make you scream.” I punctuate my words with my thrusts. “Make you feel me inside you all week.”

“*Yes, Troy. Yes!*”

“Louder, Clara. Shake the fucking walls.”

She begins to thrash and twist, those first ripples of awareness run through her, through me, like a live wire.

“You’re so fucking sweet. Ripe, like a fucking peach.” My mouth finds her ear. A hot swirl of tongue, and her walls, they clench. I can’t get deep enough, can’t feel enough. “That’s it.” The hot, tight pulse of her almost robs me of breath. “Come for me, Clara. Fucking come for me.”

She’ll leave her mark on this place—her mark on me—then she’ll leave.

Because that’s the way it’s got to be.

She gives a plaintive cry and, a moment later, I reach that place too.

And in the aftermath, that ebbing exquisiteness, I wish with all my heart that she wouldn’t.

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Chapter 41
TROY

Two days later, and I'm in the inner sanctum of a building I never thought to find myself: Manhattan's oldest members' club. I'm kind of disappointed. I expected something a little bougier than heavy furniture and scuffed wood. The place smells of furniture polish, old leather, and older cigar smoke. But the bar, at least, is impressive, its backlit shelves of crystal and amber arranged like a show of wealth.

"Thanks, Pete. I'll take it from here." I press my hand into his huge meaty one and give a firm slap to his upper arm.

"I thought you wanted to look around?" Pete's brow furrows, but maybe he's just seen the shock on Edwin Forbes's face. Or heard the way he just traumatized *The New York Times*. I wonder if someone's gonna need to iron that for him now, given it feels like I just stepped back in time. "You weren't really thinking of joining this place at all, were you?"

Pete is one of Table's very early investors. He has a nose for the right ventures and money up to his eyeballs as a consequence. I guess that's how he has membership to this place, because, as a Dallas transplant, he's not exactly what you'd call a blue blood.

"Nah," I admit, adopting an aw-shucks expression. "The wainscotting, the fireplace, the leather wingback chairs filled with wrinkly dudes in sports jackets. Not really my kind of vibe."

"What were you expecting?"

"Half-naked women swinging around poles?"

Pete chuckles. "It's not that kind of gentleman's club." He must've heard about Hugo making that mistake.

"Dammit, I must've gotten it wrong," I say with a grin. "I thought there would at least be whiskey and cigars."

"Now you're talking," he replies, amused. "But something tells me you're more a Casa Cipriani kind of guy."

"Truthfully, I'm not much into the group thing."

He gives a bellow of a laugh. "I don't know. I can see you in there, sitting under a red-light panel in the gym."

“Well, now, I didn’t say I wasn’t interested in keeping my skin pretty,” I say, rubbing my hand across my cheek.

He shakes his head as though I’m a long-standing pain in his ass. “If you want to check it out, we can visit there anytime.”

“Pete, you’re a gentleman,” I say sincerely.

“You should’ve just told me what you needed,” he says, his eyes sliding to my father-in-law again.

Fuck, father-in-law. Not sure I like *that* realization. Or the association. And I’m sensing he feels the same, judging by the shade he’s throwing my way.

It’s like I’m shit on his shoe. *Ah, fun times. The good old days.*

He’s barely changed. He’s a little older, a lot grayer, but he still has that inborn nose-in-the-air kind of superiority.

I offered to step in, maybe mediate between him and Clara. And she looked at me like I grew a new head. A much stupider new head. But I’m not here to meddle or because I think I know better. I’m here because he called.

He didn’t call personally. I doubt his lily-white hands ever do their own work. His assistant called mine to schedule a meeting. I can’t say I saw it coming, and I’m mightily intrigued. Though I am pretty sure I’m not here to receive his wedding felicitations.

Anyway, the meeting is scheduled for next week. In his office.

Surprise!

But back to Pete.

“Well, I wasn’t sure you’d still sign me in to these hallowed halls.” Pete pulls a face that I read as *bullshit*. “Not sure these assholes would have me anyway.”

“Fuck they wouldn’t,” he mutters in return.

Maybe the rules have relaxed. Only, I’m *really* new money and not nearly as rich as Pete.

I glance over my shoulder at her old man again. Good. He’s managed to put his game face on. *Get that gumshield in, old man.*

I know, I know. Clara wants to fight her own battles, and I respect her for that. But after she told me about her love letter from the IRS, I decided to see why her old man is insisting on being a colossal asshole. And to tell him to cut it out. Or else.

If I stand by and do nothing, what kind of man would that make me? Not the kind of man who deserves to hold Clara as she sleeps in his arms.

Jesus, what a night. Who would've thought a little role-play developed on the fly would turn into something so profound? When we finally came down, and when I got the strength back in my legs, I scooped her up and carried her to my bed.

Without complaint.

I laid her down with such reverence, then climbed in beside her. I'd tucked my knees behind hers and pressed my lips to her hair. And when the morning came, I was delighted to find she was still wrapped in my arms.

I feel my expression waver as I recall breakfast, watching as Clara reached for paper and a pen. She had a couple of new fantasies to jot down, she said. *Excuses*, she meant.

If you can't beat them. . .

Pushing away my frustration, I joined her at the table and made a suggestion of my own. *A teenage boyfriend sneaking into his teenage girlfriend's house.* Not quite a fantasy but maybe a little history will help. A little reminiscing and a lot of fingering, I expect.

Ah, fingering. There's just something about the closeness, the kissing, the eye contact. It makes a man feel like a conductor of pleasure. He gets to drink in all the small shifts as he nurtures her pleasure as it grows and grows until she can't hold back any longer and feels fit to burst.

"Gonna leave you here, friend," Pete says.

I snap back to myself, smiling like an idiot. I mean, fucking is king, and head is amazing, but when I'm fingering Clara, it's all about the visual. "Sure. And thanks, Pete."

"Don't get into any trouble now, you hear?"

I give a quick salute. *As if I'd give that old bastard the ammunition.*

Pete wanders off, and I turn and pull up a chair over to the niche dear old Dad is seated in.

It's just a conversation. I'll keep my cool. Use an even tone. Stick out my pinkie, if I need to.

"Marriage," Edwin says, his tone mild for someone who looked dangerously constipated a few moments ago. "I'll admit it, I didn't anticipate it." He makes a show of crossing one knee over the other before folding his hands in his lap. *I am unbothered*, the motion says. *Your presence has barely ruffled my feathers.*

The vein pulsing at his forehead says otherwise.

“Good surprise, though, right?” So maybe I want to goad him a little as I lower myself to my chair.

“It was clever. A touch dramatic, but that’s Clara for you.”

My agreement hits the air in a soft chuckle. “Maybe not as dramatic as the kind of shit you’ve thrown her way recently.”

His mouth gives a considering pull. “Perhaps the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, after all.”

“I’m not sure I see the likeness myself.” Not even if I squint.

“We only see in others what we want to see.”

“Interesting.” I nod as though considering. “With respect”—with zero fucking respect—“that’s not how I find things.” Because I’m looking at a gaping asshole. A black fucking abyss. And nobody wants to see that shit.

“Clara is—”

“My wife.” I give a bland smile as I twist that knife deep.

“That is unfortunate.”

“For you, maybe. I, myself, am the living, breathing embodiment of matrimonial bliss.” I stretch out, full of self-satisfaction. “Can’t think why we didn’t get hitched earlier.”

“Unfortunate for Clara.” His tone turns flat and his eyes sharp. “This marriage only serves to prove how she needs to be protected from herself. From her impulses.”

I give a condescending waggle of my finger. “That’s not gonna wash, Ed. Not with me.”

“It was a rather abrupt union.”

“When you know, you know.” I lace my fingers together over my waist. “And maybe this romance has been years in the making.”

“Clara has a tendency to mistake attention for true feeling,” he says, ignoring me.

“We’re . . . talking about your attention here, right?” Pretty sure he’s not deaf. So it must be selective hearing as he ignores me again. “Either way, I’m happy to report she doesn’t have daddy issues.”

I see a tiny chink in his bland armor as his gaze narrows. But his answer, when it comes, is fucking flavorless.

“I meant from men like you. Men who benefit from her instability.”

Dude, you’re barking up the wrong tree. “Given I won’t benefit from Clara financially, that I have *way* more money than her, I’m not sure what

point you're trying to make. You know what?" I sit straight again. "I think I get it now. You're just full of shit." And I'm bored with playing things his way.

"And you're uncouth. Common."

I give a considering pull of my teeth. "Or maybe I just say things as I see them, Ed. Or should I call you Dad?" The outer corners of his eyes tighten. He should give in. Go the full hog and just fucking scowl. "Call off the dogs. You have no power over her. Not anymore."

He gives an airy wave like he's some indolent aristocrat in a period movie.

"You know what I wonder? If this freelance consulting Clara supposedly undertook, the shit that has her on the radar of the IRS. I wonder if the CEO of that company is a member of this club." I glance behind me. "Shouldn't be too hard to find out, right?"

He gives an amused breath. "Half of the Upper East Side are members here. Our fathers and our fathers' fathers were members. It is an institution, but that's not something I would expect you to understand."

"Ouch." I press my hand to my heart, then lean forward like a striking snake. "I don't give a fuck about you or your decrepit friends and their uppity ways. I am, however, fascinated by how this claim came about. And I hear the IRS doesn't take kindly to being manipulated."

"You appear to have a rather active imagination."

"We can always go straight to the source—ask the bureaucrats what they think."

"I don't take kindly to idle threats," he murmurs.

"How about actual ones? It would be better for all concerned if you just left Clara alone. No more accusations. No more drama. No revisiting the ways you've abused your power and let your daughter down. All of us could just . . . move the fuck on."

"And what if my wishes for Clara are more important."

"More important than your reputation?" I shake my head. "We both know that's untrue. Appearance is everything to you." Same old shit as before.

"You know nothing about me."

"I know that it must fucking kill you that you've failed to prevent Clara from making a success of her life."

"She was serving beer," he spits. "Waiting tables."

Because of you, I want to say. But fuck it, he doesn't deserve to hear her future plans.

"Oh, Eddie, such a snob." I give my head a slow shake. "What happened to respecting good, honest hard work?"

"There is no merit in that kind of *menial* . . ."

"Give it up," I say wearily. "No one is gonna believe Clara can't manage her own life, no matter what you say." I don't think I truly got it until now. Fuck, he's as bad as my old man. "How can you do it?" I don't mean to ask but I can't help myself. "Your own flesh and blood. How can you enjoy making her suffer?"

"I don't have to explain my reasons to anyone, let alone *you*."

I make a noise like a buzzer, and from the way his eyes flick behind me, I guess I must be drawing attention. *Good.* "You owe the explanation to *her*." He should be on his knees, begging for forgiveness.

"And what of you and this marriage out of nowhere? Do you think you're serving her any better?"

"It's not exactly from nowhere, Ed, is it?"

"It's unseemly."

"You're saying you're not happy we're hot for each other?"

"I'm saying your marriage looks like a ploy."

"Have you had a health check recently, Ed? Sounds like you might be suffering from delusions. Age comes to us all, I guess."

"A ploy that benefits both husband and wife," he continues angrily. "One gets early access to her trust fund. The other gets the legitimacy of my name."

"Listen, asshole, I don't need your name. I'm no longer that kid from the wrong side of the tracks. I'm an upstanding member of the financial establishment. A CEO with a bank balance that is, quite frankly, blinding. You have no power over me or Clara. Leave her the fuck alone."

"That was quite the speech."

"Don't force me to make problems for you."

He gives a cryptic twist to his lips. "You've built something impressive, Troy. It would be unfortunate if the regulators took a sudden interest in it, especially at such a precarious time."

"That sounds like a threat." I press my hand to my cheek like I'm really bad at acting. *I'm glad his daughter doesn't think so.*

“Newly public companies are such fragile entities. And the industry . . .” He tsks. “Fintech is so often seen as the Wild West of the financial sector. And the regulators, the SEC, can be overzealous. They do so like to think of themselves akin to Wyatt Earp cleaning up the O.K. Corral.”

“You have no control over the SEC,” I retort, ignoring the sudden rash of cold sweat dappling my spine. He’s bluffing. He must be. No way he’s that powerful.

“Control?” He turns over his hand as though to examine his fingernails. “Influence, however. And friends in such useful places. It’s quite the irony, isn’t it, you appearing here today to brandish your own intimidations?” The fucker sounds amused. “Of course, you’re new to this. Still a little green. A little wet behind the ears.”

An old instinct stirs inside me, unwelcome and familiar. Like I’m suddenly on the outside looking in again. “What do you want?” My tone turns flat.

“I want you to walk away from Clara.”

“So that’s it? Walk away from Clara or you’ll set the SEC on my company?” Who the fuck does he think he is? I’ve built a company worth billions, secured my place in a world he imagines he can just remove me from.

“That’s the gist of things.”

“Let me get this straight. You think I’ve married Clara to benefit my company? But if I leave her, doesn’t that mean I then lose the benefit? I don’t know, Ed. Sounds like you’re giving me the choice of being hanged or shot.” I force myself to relax into my chair.

“Take a reputational hit, Troy. Better than a regulatory death. Bad publicity is survivable. A narrative can easily be spun, and share prices do eventually recover.”

“And what about Clara?” He wants to humiliate her.

“Clara will survive. She did so before.” I shake my head, disgusted with him—with myself for listening to this. “Perhaps she’ll even continue, as you’ve said, to thrive. Without my influence.”

“Gotta tell you, your leverage is piss poor.”

“I don’t think so, Troy. And neither do you. The market is a fickle beast. One hint of a problem whispered in the right ear, and your share price plummets. Forensic accountants and lawyers are crawling all over your offices and your board of directors are shopping for your replacement.”

“*I need to feel safe.*” Clara’s words curl around my ear. That day in her crappy apartment, her expression was so solemn as she slid the eviction notice across the table to me. *My father’s reach is strong and his pockets deep.* She wasn’t kidding.

An icy-cold fist twists deep in my guts. “The fuck did I ever do to you?”

“I don’t like you, and I don’t like what you stand for. But more than that, you should not have involved yourself with my daughter again. I was led to believe that you’re a reasonable man. Perceptive, so they say.”

“I don’t give a damn what you’ve heard.”

“As I understand it, my daughter has plans to become quite the philanthropist.”

“So?”

“I know you dislike the comparison, but perhaps you ought to reconsider how alike Clara and I truly are.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Because you remember what happened the last time she was made to choose, don’t you, Troy?”

“Leave her out of this,” I growl. Does that mean he’s gonna offer her the same deal? Leave me or he’ll fuck up her foundation? Jesus, I want to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze.

“I have no intention of involving my daughter in this discussion. But we both know that when it comes down to it, Clara will always choose herself.”

“No one is choosing anything!” The words burst angrily from me. I refuse to allow my mind to go back to that night. “You don’t know who the fuck she is.”

“In your heart of hearts, you know what I’m saying is true. Because you remember. You have firsthand experience.”

Nothing. I say nothing. Though I might be about to crack a couple of molars.

“Choose your company, Troy. Save yourself. Before my daughter does.”

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Chapter 42
TROY

The door clicks open, and I turn my head over my shoulder with a snarl. “Fuck’s sakes, Paolo, I said—”

“Yeah, he told me,” Max says, frowning back at me.

I glance away, not sure what to say. What to think. What the fuck to do except return to staring unseeing out the fucking window.

“Why aren’t you picking up your phone?”

I could be in a state of shock. Or maybe grief. Whatever it is, I feel like the rug has been pulled briskly out from under my feet. And I’m still teetering.

I had denial. *He can’t do this to me—I won’t fucking let him.* Anger. *I’m gonna tear off his pompous head and shit down his neck.* Bargaining. *Just let me have them both—Table and Clara—for a little while longer.* Sadness and acceptance can both fuck right off as I loop straight back to denial. *What the ever-loving fuck.*

“What’s going on with you? Are you even listening to me?”

I pivot, arms still folded across my chest like I’m trying to hold myself together.

“You look like shit.”

“Perceptive.”

“You ill?”

“Sick,” I say with a tilt of my chin.

Max’s gaze narrows as he tentatively steps closer. No one with his responsibilities can afford to get ill. The job is enough, and Archie might have a nanny, but a sick kid only wants his daddy. And a sick daddy is—

Something Clara knows well. I huff out a laugh.

“What’s funny?”

“Not a thing.” Sounds better than *I’m fucked.* And without the happy payoff.

“Jesus, sit down before you fall down.”

But sitting feels like conceding something. It feels like giving in.

“I’m not that kind of sick.” I mean, I am pretty close to the wheels coming off. My heart hurts, and my guts are swirling. My muscles feel tense, and my head feels like someone took a jackhammer to it. But apart from that, I’m hunky-fucking-dory. Which is probably why I lean back against the window and bounce the back of my head off the glass. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

“You’re definitely some kind of ailing.”

Heartsick. Worried sick. Sick-to-my-stomach sick. What’s the difference?

“I saw her dad,” I say, which, in hindsight, sounds apropos of nothing. Nothing but the conversation rotating through my head.

“Who’s dad? Clara’s?”

“Yeah. About that.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“Maybe you’re the one who should sit down.”

He doesn’t but rather leans his ass against my desk, which would ordinarily piss me off. He folds his arms, mirroring my stance. “What is it you haven’t told me?”

“Clara and her dad don’t get along.”

“Why’s that?”

“Her old man is . . . well, he’s old, white, and entitled. He’s also mean and fucking vindictive.”

“But those faults aside, he’s an upstanding guy?”

“Put it this way: I wouldn’t piss on him if he was on fire.”

“Sounds like he’s the poster boy for the patriarchy, as Hannah would say.”

“President of their social club. Did I mention vindictive?”

He flicks out a hand and begins to count using his fingers “Old banking family. Generational wealth. Privilege. Entitlement. Yada, yada, yada. Story kind of checks out.”

“The sooner assholes like him check out, the better for the world. Because.” I push out a gust of a breath. “Because the old fucker has been playing games with Clara’s life, and it seems he’s about to shift focus.”

Max says nothing as he stares at me.

“I know what you’re thinking. What the fuck was *I* thinking.”

He opens his mouth but then closes it again. He glances away. Then back. “You’d better explain the level of shit we’re in.”

“He may have threatened to pull strings with the SEC to fuck with us.”

“What the fuck!” He bounds upright. “Jesus, Troy, I knew this was a bad fucking idea—did I not say that to you? That marriage is a sacrament, not a fucking joke.”

“It was a business agreement,” I begin, not sure why I’m defending myself. “And not all of us have experienced your blessings.” I immediately regret my outburst and begin to say so. “Max, I’m sorry, man.” He might’ve been raised in a house full of rowdy siblings and love, but his own marriage didn’t exactly have a fairy-tale ending.

“Yeah, you should be sorry, because you’re right. You’re not as lucky as me. Apparently, you’re not as intelligent either.”

“I think you might be right.”

“And your emotional intelligence is in negative figures. Asshole,” he adds in a mutter.

I tip my head back against the glass again. “I thought I was doing the right thing. For the company. And Clara thought she was doing the only thing she could. She was frightened enough of him to have—”

“Married you?” he says with distaste.

“Yeah. He was trying to cut her off from her trust fund. Her independence. Marriage was supposed to be protection. As it is . . . her choice of groom kinda tipped him over the edge.”

“Jesus, Troy.”

I push my hands into my pockets and examine my ceiling. “I know, I’m a catch, right?” How do I explain this? Do I even want to drag up our past? “This could really damage us, Max. Damage me.”

His eyes narrow, creases fanning in the outer corners. “You think he’s serious? You’re sure he wasn’t posturing? Making empty threats because you married his little girl?”

I shake my head. “The man bears a heavy fucking grudge.”

“So this isn’t about Clara? He has it in for you?”

“I don’t know what the fuck this is. But the irony is, what happened before—almost a decade ago—it was me who was fucked over back then. Not him.”

“By Clara?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Or so I was beginning to think.

“And you thought marrying his daughter was a good idea?” *You idiot,* his expression says.

“I haven’t seen him in years!” It’s not much of a defense. I still find it hard to comprehend how he spoke. As though he was discussing the weather or a zoning variance when he threatened to dismantle everything I’ve built.

“So he goes to the regulators—the SEC. Let’s walk through what that looks like,” Max says, changing gears as he slips into lawyer mode. “Best case? He files a complaint.”

“Anyone can do that.” The SEC gets thousands a year.

“Right,” he agrees. “So they take a quick look and find nothing. The case dies quickly.”

“Not a man with his connections. They’ll take a magnifying glass to our internal systems.”

“So we’re talking lawyers. Auditors. A shit ton of people reading every email we’ve ever written.”

My stomach churns and my head is a fucking mess. “But that’s not the worst of it.”

“No,” he agrees. “It’s how it’ll look.”

“Like we can’t be trusted.”

The room goes quiet but for the sound of the rain.

We’ll lose confidence, then market share. Our lines of credit will tighten. Shareholders will jump ship, and the price will plummet. Control will feel fragile, not that it’ll be my problem, because I’ll already be gone. Removed by the board. Replaced by someone else.

“It’s only a matter of time,” I add, meeting his gaze.

His jaw tightens because he knows that’s true. “You’re sure he’ll do it—he’ll go after you?”

“It wasn’t posturing.” My feet suddenly feel as though they’re filled with wet cement. “Though he did give me an out.”

“Which is what?”

“Walk away from Clara.”

“So he can, what?” He scoffs. “Make her move back home?”

“I think it’s more like he wants to ruin her life.” My shoulders rise and fall. Her life or mine.

“*Choose your company, Troy,*” he warned. “*Save yourself. Before my daughter does.*”

Like history repeating itself.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Fucked if I know. If I stay with Clara, I’m no longer CEO. And if I leave her . . .” Outside, rain begins to hammer against the window. It feels like a personal assault.

“You’ll be crushed.”

I’m relieved he doesn’t ask when this marriage turned from business to something else. Life without her . . . I can’t contemplate. But without my company feels like washing years of struggle down the drain. It’s not even that the title of CEO means anything, because labels are temporary. I could walk into another CEO position tomorrow anywhere within the industry. If I walk away, I won’t lose my financial stake. *Just my say.* And that feels like a shift in gravity—like the ground is coming up to meet me fast.

If I’m not the CEO, who am I? And who speaks for this company in these rooms I built? If I don’t have control, do I even have a home? Or a place in this world?

“I cannot lose Table,” I say more to myself than him, the words sounding low and harsh.

From a spark of an idea, we built this company from nothing. Brick by brick, decision by decision, every step, every acquisition, every move calculated. To me, this company isn’t just revenue and assets and prestige. It’s proof that I’m not defined by where I started.

As Max rakes his hand through his hair, my attention is pulled back to the present. “We’ll tell the board. Make a clean breast of it.”

“You make it sound like I’m guilty of something.”

“You are.” He gives a wry smile. “You’re guilty of being an idiot. Or human. But if we can—”

“There is no *we* in this,” I reply with a pathetic excuse for a smile. “And it would be my word against his. The new kid versus the stalwart of a banking dynasty.”

The rain gets louder, hammering now against the windowpane as my mind shifts back to Clara. Last night, lying in the dark, it felt as though something between us had settled into alignment.

“*Clara will always choose herself.*”

A voice inside of me whispers something ugly: *What if he’s right?*

What if he offers her the same deal? Walk away and he . . . what? Leaves her alone. Doesn’t threaten her impact fund. Would she choose me over uncertainty?

Max is still talking. Contingency planning, talking about employing external counsel, but what's the point?

"I won't give him the power." My voice is low and hard.

"Then you remove his leverage."

The words land like an axe, cleaving me from Clara.

My stomach pits. Bottom line? I cannot lose the company. *I won't.*

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Chapter 43
CLARA

The pin-striped pencil skirt is a little difficult to walk in coupled with these heels. Or maybe it's that I'm still out of practice despite the number of charity galas, networking dinners, and other events on Troy's social calendar I've attended on his arm.

He's quite the charming socializer, I think, tempering my smile. I slide my hand into my open trench coat to straighten the front of a white blouse that's cut low enough to suggest invitation and definitely not safe for work. As I step out of the glass revolving doors, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirrored wall. I'm wearing my Velma glasses, my hair is ironed straight, and my lipstick as red as a warning.

The building is busy, people to-ing and fro-ing, some dressed for the office, others for what looks like the skate park in baggy jeans and hoodies. Maybe one of the companies in the building is having a bring-your-disgruntled-teen-to-work day. My mind hops from teenagers to fathers and then make-believe husbands who offer to stand up for you.

I'd left my redirected mail—my letter from the IRS—on the dining table and Troy had spotted it. And it wasn't so much what he said, which was something along the lines that I really ought to let him speak with my dad. It was the way he stepped closer as though to shield me, not because he thinks I'm a fragile flower, but because he cares for me. The sentiment was in the intensity of his words and in the way he looked at me.

For a moment, I imagined the two of them in the same room. My father's cold authority meeting Troy's unyielding will. The collision would be catastrophic, and though I'm beyond touched that he offered, I couldn't do that to him. There's no way I want him in my father's line of sight.

I sign in at the main reception and get my visitor's pass. My heels echo as I cross the foyer for the escalator, and I begin to wonder if I haven't thought this through enough. Even with the trench coat covering my outfit, I still stand out like a sore thumb. No one wears six-inch heels to the office, especially not red ones.

But I wasn’t aiming for subtle. And I expect I’ll look much worse on the way back out.

At the mezzanine floor, I make no eye contact with anyone as I swipe my pass at the elevator bank. The car arrives immediately, and the doors are almost closed when a hand slips between them. As they part obediently, Hannah steps in.

“Hey there, Clara.” She looks genuinely pleased to see me as she swipes her own pass despite the button being already lit. She looks so pulled together, her striking red hair pulled back from her face and her outfit immaculate.

“Hi, Hannah, how are you?”

“I’m good. What brings you here today?”

That was a little direct. Troy said Hannah isn’t a girl’s girl, which is fine. But I really can’t help the feeling she doesn’t much like me.

“Lunch date,” I lie, hoisting my purse higher on my shoulder and wishing I’d nixed the glasses.

The elevator begins to move and, in its mirrored surface, I look mildly perturbed. I also look like I’m playing dress-up, cosplaying office vamp in her too-bright lipstick and inappropriate heels. Meanwhile, Hannah looks like the real deal. Effortlessly stylish and unbelievably chic in black wide-legged pants, low-heeled pumps, and a cream silk pussy-bow blouse I’m pretty sure is TOM FORD.

I try not to sigh. It’s like I’m in that old movie *Working Girl*. She’s Sigourney Weaver, the boss, and I’m Melanie Griffith, the impostor. Minus the ’80s big hair.

“He’s . . . intense today,” Hannah says suddenly.

“Busy?” My fingers tighten reflexively on the strap of my purse. Maybe I should’ve called ahead, but he said I was welcome anytime—he even gave me a pass.

“Focused,” she corrects gently. “Like he’s in another world. I’ve seen this version of him before,” she goes on, examining the wallet in her right hand. “It happens when he’s under a lot of pressure, but you’ll know that already. It’s like everything else fades into the background, except the thing he’s concentrating on.”

“Yes,” I reply, scrambling to cover my surprise with concern despite this sudden sinking feeling. He’s been okay with me. *Hasn’t he?* Where’s the pressure come from? Is there something he isn’t telling me? Has the

stock fallen? I've played my part—there have been multiple snapshots in the press and the socials of us eating brunch together, leaving events together, looking all loved up. *Feeling the same.*

"I haven't seen him like this in an age." Hannah frowns, which makes her words seem less of a slight somehow. The moment stretches between us, not sharp but not exactly comfortable. "The problem with focus is that everything else gets left by the wayside."

Is she talking about me or her? Warning me?

"There was a time in the past," she begins almost carefully, "when personal matters collided with a high-stake point in his life."

Clinical words but we both know what she means. Something heavy and unpleasant drops into the pit of my stomach.

"He couldn't see past his . . . circumstances, I suppose. It could've gone badly." A frown ripples across her brow. "In fact, it almost did."

"You're talking about his last year of college," I say softly. "About me."

"It was a long time ago," she concedes.

"I hurt him. I know that." I wish he'd told me she knows, but I can't be angry with her when she's just looking out for her friend. "But this isn't like before." Not like before, but it's also not how it's supposed to be.

"I know he's happy, Clara. He's been happier than I've seen him in a long time." My heart lifts as though it has wings. "He's even been seen leaving the office before ten," she says with a faint smile. "But this week something has changed. I'm worried about him."

"Because you're a good friend."

"Something is going on," she says, disregarding the compliment. "People tend to react one of a few ways when things get tough. Some people soften under pressure. Some harden, and others brace." Her eyes meet mine in the mirror again. "Then there are those who push through at all costs. Troy is usually in the latter camp. But right now, it's like I see him bracing."

Bracing for the worst—preparing for impact?

"He almost walked away from it all back then."

"That won't happen." My answer is strong with conviction. Whatever's going on, whatever this is, I know he won't walk away from the empire he's built. It's part of him. Part of his identity.

I would never ask him—never *expect* him to.

The elevator doors glide open, and Hannah gestures me ahead. “Take care of him,” she says as I pass. “And yourself.”

My mouth turns down as she walks away. But then I notice the receptionist, Wendy, smiling. I return the gesture, but she’s already lowered her head. It feels like a signal: You’re on your own here.

Maybe Hannah was being polite, and when she said focused she meant he’s in a really bad mood.

I pass Paolo’s empty desk, and by the time I reach Troy’s office, my pulse is hammering and I’m having second, third, and fourth thoughts, my brain flipping from thought to thought like a chronic channel hopper.

I should turn around. Leave.

If Troy is preoccupied, the last thing he’ll be interested in is jam-jar sex.

The door swings open, my analysis paralysis busted. Paolo smiles shortly at me. He looks stressed, though he says hello as he ducks around me, leaving the door open for me to pass.

Troy is on the phone, sleeves rolled up and jaw tight, and there’s a sharpness to his voice I haven’t heard since that Friday he found me in this building dressed in an apron.

“. . . I’ve heard your opinion,” he says without glancing up. “You don’t get it. We’re not the kind of position where we can give two fucks.” Is this boardroom-mode Troy?

Maybe I should call back when he’s less preoccupied. But at that moment, he looks up and spots me. I’m already stepping into the room when I realize that his surprise wasn’t exactly accompanied by delight.

Bracing, I repeat to myself. Whatever that means.

I’ll tell him I was just passing. That I only have a few minutes to spare. Only, my trench coat, this lipstick, these heels and stockings say otherwise.

“I know that,” he says, the phone still at his ear. I slip off my coat and set it and my purse to the couch. Lord, the lick of heat against my skin as his eyes drink me in. “You know where I stand.” Meanwhile, I’m not sure how I’m still upright, given the way my knees have turned to taffy.

He finishes the call without a farewell and sets the handset down.

“Hey.” I link my hands together at the small of my back. A cheap shot, but an effective one, as his gaze drops to my breasts.

“It’s a surprise to see you.” He frowns, one finger rubbing his eyebrow.

“A good one, I hope.”

“Dressed like you’re about to . . . audit me?” he says, sidestepping that.

That wasn’t one of his fantasies, was it? It wasn’t the one I picked out of the jar, anyway.

“You didn’t respond to my text,” I say, taking a couple of slinking catlike steps his way.

His brow furrows as he picks up his phone, his thumb sliding across the screen. His eyebrows lift as he sees what he sees. I thought I’d shake it up a little. Instead of the unfolded square of paper, I took a photo of a pair of red silky panties along with my Velma glasses.

“Hello, Mr. Templeton.” I keep my tone coy, though my gaze is bold. “I’m your twelve thirty.”

“My twelve thirty what?”

“Appointment, silly.” In for a dime, in for a dollar, right? “You wanted to go through me—I mean, go through my review. Personally, you said.”

My breath holds as he processes that.

“Your six-month review?” His voice drops, his eyes half horny, half amused.

My answer is to nod like my head is 90 percent air. “One moment, please.” I turn back to the couch and bend over my purse, pretending to search for something. I hear the leather of the chair creak as he sits back. At least I have his attention. *And my butt in the air as I angle it his way.* “It’s in here somewhere.”

“What are you looking for?” The rasp in his tone makes me long for his hands, a roughness in his hold.

“My notes.” My fingers close around an old pocketbook. Then like Elle Woods herself, I snap upright with a tiny but visible jiggle of the girls through my thin blouse. “Found it!”

I totter over to his desk, flip closed the cover of a report, sliding it away without asking him. Then I move his laptop to the right while leaning over him. My blouse gapes, as intended, and he doesn’t miss the flash of cleavage, the hint of my lacey bra.

“That’s better.” I turn with a smile and lean back against the edge of his desk, my thigh almost touching his chair. I make a show of straightening my Velma glasses before opening my pocketbook.

“So . . .” A smile tugs at his lips. Mine now, too, because I have him.

“It’s Candy, sir,” I offer with a simper. “And while I’m sure you have a lot of ideas what to do with me, I wondered if I could just take a moment to be honest with you.” I toy a little with the strands of my hair and give a ridiculous flutter of my lashes.

“Of course, Candy. Go ahead.”

“I’ll just refer to my notes.” I run a finger down the blank page. “The thing is, sir, I really need a raise.”

“I’m not sure now is the time to discuss monetary matters.”

“But I’m desperate,” I say, flattening my hand to my chest. “And I do have some ideas how I could . . .” I drop my gaze to his lap, then wet my lips. “Earn it.”

Troy cocks a brow but doesn’t fully break character. He makes a gesture with his hand: *Go on ahead*.

I return to my book as though reading from a list. “I’m a hard worker, but I have more in me. More I could show you,” I add, trailing a finger along the neckline of my blouse. “I feel I’m truly underutilized here. I don’t get used enough.”

“Oh, really?”

“I have an extensive skill set that you’re simply not taking advantage of.”

“I see,” he muses as his gaze crawls up my stocking-clad legs.

I wiggle a little, letting the fabric of my short skirt ride higher. “I want to show you *everything* I can do. I love this job, and I want to give it my all. Give you . . . my all.”

“That’s very interesting.”

“I really would accept *any* position you put me in.”

A strangled noise rises from the chest, and he fakes it into a cough.

“I can take it, sir. Just try me.”

“I’m not sure you’re ready for the responsibility, Candy.”

“But I really, *really* need that raise, and I was thinking that, if you could consider me, I could do more. For you.” Playing with the front of my blouse now, I’m all big eyes and sincerity.

The chair creaks as his weight shifts when Troy reaches out to run his finger along the hem of my skirt. “What kinds of things did you have in mind?”

“I could help you with your personal—tasks!” That comes out on a little squeak as his hand curls around my knee.

“Go on.”

“You work so late some nights, I could stay behind with you and give you a hand.”

The look he sends me? Dangerous. “Give me a hand with what, exactly?”

“With anything that might come up.” Subtle isn’t a word that Candy can spell, let alone understand.

“What kind of things would you expect to be handling?” His hand skims higher, tantalizing the soft skin of my inner thigh.

“Anything. Any way you want to use me. I deserve to work directly under you.”

That’s when he breaks, his laughter low and real and unmistakably him. “Well, aren’t you eager, Miss Candy.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” I purr, sucking in his joy. I loosen a button on my blouse. “Not only am I eager but I’m also very, very willing.” Two more buttons as Troy watches on with the kind of intensity that makes my vision go a little hazy. My shirt falls loose and I caress the valley of my cleavage. “And very, very able.” With a soft shimmy, the fabric falls from my shoulders.

Everywhere his gaze touches burns. “This is certainly the hardest I’ve been for a meeting.”

“I want your complete satisfaction, sir.”

“You want that raise.”

“I want it *so* bad.”

“Well, Candy. There are some areas you’ll need to improve in if you want my full attention.”

“Anything, sir.”

“I’m not sure you can take it,” he says, turning in his chair to fully face me, spreading his thighs wide. “It might be a lot for you to swallow.”

And now we’re both laughing softly, his eyes sliding to the door.

“I locked it,” I say, dropping out of character for a moment. “I’ll try my best,” I add breathily again. “I’m a quick learner. And enthusiastic.” I deliberately drop my eyes to his lap. “Oh, my. That looks like a gross misappropriation of company time.”

“Gross?”

“So large.” I pull my blouse from where it dangles at my wrists. Dropping it to his desk, I press my hands to his knees when he slides off my

Velma glasses.

“I love your tits,” he says, cupping them. His touch, his coarse compliment, creates a tiny explosion of pleasure deep inside. “I want to fuck them.” He pinches over the creamy lace, making me gasp. “Put you on your knees and come all over them.”

“I’m at your service,” I whisper, ghosting my lips over his. Pepper kisses along his taut jaw. He groans as I swirl my tongue around the shell of his ear. “Just thinking about taking you in my mouth makes me wet.” I begin to lower to my knees when he catches my elbow.

“You want to suck my cock.”

“Like a B-list actress wants a sex-tape scandal.”

His mouth curls sinfully. “You haven’t earned my cock yet.” I give a little pout as lust spikes through me. “I have another task in mind. Lift up your skirt.”

“Sir?”

“Lift up your skirt, show me your ass, then bend over my desk like a good little worker.”

Heat drops to my center, pooling between my hips as I begin to gather my skirt up my thighs, sliding it higher in tiny, teasing increments. His eyes and the brush of fabric does something delicious to my skin. Higher, my stocking tops are revealed. Panties. Garter belt. *If you’re going to be a cliché, there’s no point half-assing it.*

“Yeah, that’s good.” His voice is gruff, his gaze glued to the aching space between my legs.

“You’ll take care of my stockings, won’t you?” I slide my finger under the garter belt. “I don’t have a lot of money and they’re kind of pricey to replace.”

“I’ll take care. Palms on the desk.”

“How’s this?” I glance over my shoulder and allow my gaze to skate over him, biting my lip when I get to the outline of his cock.

“Perfect. Just perfect.”

My insides pulse. “That looks uncomfortable,” I murmur, staring quite obviously. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like me to help you with it?”

He palms himself over his pants. “I hope you’re not telling me how to do my job.”

“No, sir.” I slide my gaze away, thoughts of him in the shower flooding my head. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” *Too much.*

The chair creaks as he moves, and my anticipation spikes.

“There are some things you need to learn first.”

“I’ll do my very best,” I whisper, sticking my butt out. The central air turns over, brushing over my skin.

“Reach back and lift up your skirt higher.” Like sultry smoke, his voice seems to curl around me. “All the way now. Don’t be coy.”

I pull the fabric over my tailbone, the cool air apparent now in places it hadn’t been.

“Oh!” I physically start as his palm skims across my right butt cheek with deliberate tenderness.

“I see you’ve been contravening the office work-wear policy again.”

“Oh dear.”

“These are hardly business professional. I’m afraid you leave me no alternative.”

I shiver as he slips my panties down my legs. He lifts my foot, once, twice, and I watch over my shoulder as he stuffs my panties into his pocket.

“I’ll have to expense those.”

“You do that.” His jaw flexes. “Spread wider for me.”

“What?” I blink, all owl eyed and confused. Is he angry suddenly?

“Slide your feet apart. I want to see what I have to work with.”

Oh my Lord. That shouldn’t make my insides pulse and heat. But . . .

I drop my head, my cheeks stinging red as I take that step. More cool air on heated flesh. I feel like I’m burning from the inside out.

Troy gives a low rumble as his finger skates up and over one cheek.

“Does it look like something you might be able to manage?” I ask, hiding now under the fall of my hair.

“I think you already know the answer to that.”

I give a whimper as the pads of two fingers swipe through my center. My heels come up off the ground at the sensation as every nerve ending within my body seems to relocate to the space between my legs. A teasing circle, and I whimper, feeling myself growing wetter. But Troy says nothing as he continues to toy, until his fingers thrust. I cry out.

He withdraws immediately and I almost sob. His fingers appear in my line of sight where he rubs them together as though allowing me to examine the silky properties of my own pleasure.

“Do you know what this does to me?” His voice is a puff of air against my cheek.

My hair falls in my face as I shake my head, but there's something in his voice that gives me pause. "You, the boss," I whisper tremulously. "Or you for real. I don't know which role you're playing."

"Who says I'm playing a role? Everything I say to you, everything I do, is always true. The escort, the boss, the guy in the bar, they all want to pick you apart, to feast on your body until all that's left are your sighs."

He doesn't sound at all happy about it.

The moment, this interlude, is more complex than I'd intended. It was stupid to think that jam-jar sex would insulate us from messy consequences. I'm in over my head. I think I've known that from the start. I want to be his—his forever—not just for now. *For what remains of these short months.*

Emotion swells in my chest. *Not now, not here,* I tell myself as I force those thoughts from my head. But as a soft whoosh sounds, my brain instantly empties out. I make a garbled noise and my center throbs in the aftermath of the swift connection of Troy's palm to my pussy.

Did he really just do that? Did he really just slap me there*?*

And if I ask him nicely, will he do it again?

"Get out of your head, Clara."

"I—" The second time, I don't care how embarrassing I sound as the impact shifts me across the desk.

"Get out of mine." The metallic *clink* of his belt buckle sounds. "Fuck, you're the only thing I've ever failed to contain in my life." His voice turns suddenly sweet as his lips brush the nape of my neck. "Maybe the only thing I've never wanted to."

My eyes begin to leak bittersweet tears. I screw them tight at the sense of his body curving over me. His right hand lands next to mine, his thumb hooking around my pinkie finger.

"I've needed you," he whispers. "Needed this."

I whimper when he puts the head of his cock to my center. I'm so wet that, when he rolls his hips, he seems to enter me so effortlessly, his lust-filled groan liquefying my bones. I'm stretched so exquisitely, as we just stay like that, absorbing the moment. It might not be satin sheets and scattered rose petals, but there is no doubt this is lovemaking.

I love him. The thought escapes and my body jolts.

"Do that again." He rubs the day's stubble across my shoulder. Presses his lips there.

“No action replays,” I whisper, forcing myself to make light of the moment.

“You hold me so beautifully, Clara.”

I’m in his head, not his heart. He needed this, not needed me. Meanwhile, I’m beginning to realize that I’ve always loved him.

“You always feel so right.”

No more dwelling. My body is lit with pleasure at the delicious drag of him. He splays his palm at the small of my back, delivering a round of shallow, teasing thrusts. He feels so big as he holds me there for his pleasure. As he gives. As I take. As he whispers filthy encouragements.

“You feel so fuckin’ tight. You’re gonna make me come so hard.”

His arm comes around me, sliding between my legs, fingers slippery on my clit. I begin to move with him, hot liquid pleasure spreading through my internal world.

“So perfect, Clara. So goddamn perfect.”

I wish, I think. I wish I could be perfect for him. “You feel so deep.”

“Fuck.” His rhythm stutters. It feels like the best kind of compliment as my body meets his thrust for thrust.

“I want you to . . . I want you to . . .”

“Say it,” he commands as he drives himself deeper.

“I want you to come inside me, Troy. I want you to fill me up.”

“Fuck! *Fuck.*”

Dirty talk, but make it rough as this thing between us builds and twists, driving us higher and higher with each collision. The moment feels elemental—a primitive need like hunger or thirst.

“You’re mine, Clara. All mine.”

God, I want to be.

With one final thrust, our bodies converge, no space between us. Light and heat begins to burst through my veins as, from behind me, Troy gives a shudder. But I’m already lost to the moment, falling into that blissful, throbbing dark as I cry out my love.

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Chapter 44
CLARA

It feels almost surreal as we sit on the couch in his office, tucking in to food that Troy ordered from an Italian deli. Endive salad with walnuts and pears and the best Sicilian pie this side of the isle itself, apparently.

He looks more relaxed than he did when I arrived—good job, Clara—though maybe still a little preoccupied. His hair is ruffled and his shirt kind of creased, and my heart gives a little ping like a guitar string at how handsome he is.

Handsome and wonderful and mine. If only for a little while.

"Excuse me." I cover my mouth with a tiny, hiccuping burp. "How embarrassing." But I guess I did almost inhale that slice.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about. You worked up an appetite."

"You did all the work." I reach for a napkin and press it to my mouth, not quite believing I said that aloud.

"Well, I don't mind being the brawn of this operation." He leans closer and slides a hunk of hair behind my ear. "You're the brains. And the beauty."

Ah, me. There go my heartstrings playing sweet music again.

"I saw Hannah on the way up here earlier," I say as he leans back into his seat.

"She does work here."

A suffer a split second of indecisiveness before: "You didn't tell me she knew about us. From before."

He says nothing for a moment. "Did she say something to you about it?"

"No, nothing like that. She was perfectly nice. It just would've been nice to have known there was a reason she doesn't like me."

"Clara, that's not true."

My smile feels polite. Or fake. "She doesn't, and that's okay," I add quickly. "She just needs time to get to know me better."

Troy's expression turns puzzled before I realize what I've just said. *The future we don't have. I'm not going to be around for her to get to know*

me, am I?

"This was really tasty," I say as I grab for a walnut left in the salad tray. I pop it into my mouth and pray my expression isn't transparent. "Thanks for lunch." *Now, smile again. Make it look like a real one.*

Troy's chest expands as though he's reluctant to speak. "She doesn't know. About before. Not really. But I guess she pieced some of it together after I got drunk one night. After." *After us. After I ruined everything.* "I was being an asshole, and she was worried that I was about to press the self-destruct button. No, not like that," he adds wryly, taking in my sudden wide-eyed shock. Maybe the way I clutch my napkin. "I was gonna leave. Leave college. It felt like there was too much going on."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper as my heart sinks. My chest aches, probably from the weight of the guilt I feel.

"It all turned out okay." His attention flicks around his office space as though to say *behold Troy's current circumstances—life is sweet!*

"No thanks to me."

"It doesn't matter. It's in the past now." But how can it not matter when the past is the reason we have no future together?

"Hannah said you're under a lot of stress." I feel like she wouldn't have mentioned it if not to see if I could help. I mean, being bent over the desk seems to have relaxed him some, but I want to offer him more than physical comfort. If I can't have my true heart's desire, then maybe I can be a good friend too.

"It's all good," he says, brushing off my concern. "Pressure comes with the job."

"Well, if it gets too much, I know a sweet little catering company that's always looking for gigging servers."

He gives a small smile. "I'll bear that in mind. How did you come to be working for them, anyway?"

"Because money. And pesky stuff like rent and food."

"No, I mean, why'd your dad cut you off? Apart from the fact he's a colossal fuckhead."

A laugh trips out of me like a motorbike, low, rattling, and throaty.

"You disagree?"

"That is about as far from Edwin Forbes's vernacular as you could possibly get, yet it's the best way I've ever heard anyone describe him."

He inclines his torso over his hand like he's taking a bow. I laugh again, until I realize he's waiting for my answer.

While I wonder why he's asking this now, I also know I couldn't have told him before. He wouldn't have been able to reconcile the Clara that denied him all those years ago with someone who might do the right thing. Who knows, maybe he might still question it. Humans are complex creatures, and forgiveness isn't a linear journey. But as he reaches for my hand, I think it might be time.

"I . . ." I glance at our linked fingers, feeling both happy and sad at the sight. But the buildup to this explanation already feels eons long, so I don't make him wait. "I wouldn't lie during a deposition for him."

"Fuck." The expletive is low and harsh.

"Indeed," I say on a wobbling breath.

"Why did he need you to lie for him? I mean, what'd he do?"

"It wasn't for him." I give a tiny shrug because the point feels academic. "He wanted me to lie on behalf of an old family friend. You met him once. Drummond East?" But maybe he won't remember.

"Uncle Drum," he says without inflection. I guess he would remember that night as well as I do. "The man with the name like a musical instrument. I barely spoke with him, but I remember thinking I didn't like him a whole lot."

"You're a better judge of character than me."

His expression hardens. "What'd he do?"

"Something awful," I say, pulling away to reach for my mineral water. "But not to me." He seems to relax a little at that. "I went to his office on an errand," I continue. "And found one of his staff, Chloe, trembling like a leaf. She was in shock, I guess. She started to cry and just . . . crumbled. And between hiccuping sobs, she told me he'd come on to her pretty hard."

"Jesus."

"Seems he had a hard time hearing no, and he assaulted her." I give my head a slow shake, disgusted with him, with my father, all over again. "Then he just left her there, in the office, all shaken up. He told her that no one would believe her, but I did the minute I walked in."

"Was she okay?"

"She was terrified. I took her home and did the best that I could to make sure she would be okay. And I told my dad. I expected him to be shocked. Instead, he just gave Drum the heads-up. He tried to use his power

and influence to make it all go away, which was awful for her. Eventually, she took Drum to civil court. I was called, and my father didn't appreciate that I'd been honest during the deposition." A fragile laugh slips out of me. It feels like disgust in its purest form.

Troy shifts, bringing his knee on to the sofa to face me. "He seriously wanted you to lie?"

"He called it loyalty. Said I owed it to him. But yes, that's what he expected."

"That low-down . . ." Maybe he can't find a strong enough description as his words trail off. He balls his napkin and tosses it to the table. "Credit to you, Clara. You chose to do the right thing over your own comfort."

"It wasn't really a choice." I remember how frightened she was. How she clung to me. And my father's reaction when I went to him. How I truly didn't expect his reaction. It was like she meant nothing, like her suffering didn't have any value.

"It cost you to do the right thing, but you still did it."

"I mean, I did hope he'd come around about the money." I give a huff, not quite a laugh.

"But he didn't." Our eyes hold, his caramel, coffee, and sincerity. "And you stuck to your guns. Stuck to your principles."

"I couldn't do anything else."

He glances down and runs his thumb over the edge of his nail as though just discovering a roughened spot. "You chose not to be like him."

"I thought I was choosing not to let him hurt anyone else." To think I might be even a little like my father . . . God, perish that thought. But then I gather that Troy must, on some level, think that I am. And that makes me so sad. "He's hateful."

Maybe it's like that old adage, you don't always remember the things a person says to you, but you remember how they made you feel. And I made Troy feel like nothing when I stood by my father's side that night, letting him shoulder the blame for something he wasn't responsible for.

"He's definitely something," he says, his tone full of grit and distaste.

"Do you know he once told me your dad was a murderer?" I'm about to say something like *there are no depths my father won't stoop to* when I notice the change in Troy almost at once. *Like the swift raising of a guard.* "It wouldn't have mattered." My truth hits the air immediately. "Not to me."

He says nothing and the quiet stretches out. It's almost as though I can feel the tension gathering within him. And then? It just gives.

"That fucker," he mutters with a slow shake of his head. He seems disgusted, embarrassed, and maybe betrayed. Lord only knows what else. I don't know what to say and almost flinch as his gaze lands on my knee. "The only reason he knows is because my mom had to ask for time off for the court case."

"You don't have to tell me," I say, covering my hand with his. "But, equally, I'm here if you want to talk about it."

"What's to say? You're not the only one with an asshole for a father."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Sorrier still I didn't know. But then, I'm guilty of the same secrets, I guess.

"It was a bar fight." His words fall fast like a confession. "When I was small, I used to worry that the person he'd end up killing would be my mom." My heart, I feel it fracture for him. "At least, until we got away. We just disappeared one night and moved around a whole lot after as a consequence. I remember how she was always looking over her shoulder, worried that mean son of a bitch would be one step behind."

"Oh, Troy."

"It was a long time ago." He blinks as though dragging himself from the past.

"I'm sorry I didn't know."

"No one is supposed to know. That was the point."

"I won't say anything." He gives an uncomfortable-looking shrug. "But you could've told me. It wouldn't have mattered, and I would've kept your secret for you." *I was so crazy about you. Crazy about you still.*

"Shame is an efficient silencer." A faint, humorless smile touches his mouth.

"Yeah, that's true." I know it. I've lived it.

"I'm sorry too," he says out of nowhere.

"Don't be. I get it, it's your history. You get to do what—"

"No, I mean I'm sorry for strong-arming you that night. Out there." He tips his head in the direction of the door. "For treating you the way I did."

"It's okay," I say, my eyes skating away. "You were shocked, that's all."

"But I shouldn't have said—I should've treated you better." His hand rakes through his hair in an unconscious, aggravated motion. His apology

isn’t polished and it looks uncomfortable. Real.

“It’s all water under the bridge,” I say, recalling one of my grandmother’s favored sayings. I carefully fold my take-out napkin against my knee as I ponder how warmth isn’t the same as heat, but how it can feel just as exquisite. “After everything, it’s hardly surprising you reacted that way. I know you don’t have to forgive me for what happened before, but I would really like for you to hear me out. Let me say sorry.”

My chest tightens as I brace, and he makes a groan of my name, like I’m asking too much. *Too much of him.*

“I just . . . I really need to do this,” I say, plucking at my blouse. I put my water back on the table instead, not wanting to look like I’m trying to distract him. “You think I choose him over you,” I add quietly.

He doesn’t disagree, but I see those thoughts on his face anyway.

“Because I didn’t defend you, that I let you take the blame.” My tongue darts out to wet my lips, the words not coming so easily. “I know that’s what you remember, and you’re right.”

Something cold and a little confused mars his brow. I hurry on, my throat tight and aching.

“But I wasn’t choosing him over you—I want you to know that. I didn’t let you shoulder the blame because you meant nothing to me.”

“That’s not what I think.” His tone turns rough.

“But you think I chose myself.” Tears prick at my eyes. “And maybe I did, but I was only trying to survive him.”

“Your father wouldn’t hurt you.”

“You think?” My words are a tiny bit incredulous. Troy looks torn. “Well, he wouldn’t leave visible scars, at least. A lot happened that night,” I say, rushing on. “He said some things that he couldn’t take back. He hit me, and then—”

“He fucking *what*?”

“That’s not important now.” My throat works thickly. “I shouldn’t have let it happen.”

His hand lands on my knee. “Enough,” he says softly. “It’s done. It hurt, but I got over it. And, truthfully, I used the experience as rocket fuel.”

He got over it. Got over me. It’s strange that I never had that luxury, and the longer I spend with Troy, the surer I am of this. I broke his heart, but in doing so, I also broke my own. Maybe being with him has healed me some. For now, at least.

“Hey.” I’m unsure what to do with that tender note in his tone or the way he cups my cheek.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. It’s not enough. And it’s not everything.

But I hope someday he’ll be ready to hear it.

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Chapter 45
CLARA

After Candy's (my alter ego's) successful appraisal and our somewhat breakthrough lunch, Troy orders me a car back to the apartment. Trying not to dwell on the things I can't have, I type out an email to the interior designer / surfer dude to advise him of the final decisions for the bathrooms, along with some adjustments to Troy's decorating scheme. They're really my adjustments, but Troy seemed to be relieved to hand the whole thing over to me. And if I can lighten a little of his load, I absolutely will.

Maybe I'll get to see the efforts of my labor in the future as a visiting friend.

I sit with that thought for a moment: Troy as a friend. I ask myself if I could do it, live with only his friendship. I turn the question over in my head like something fragile. *We could be friends, I suppose.* But it feels like I'm looking at our relationship as I would a dish with a hairline crack, being careful with it so as not to chance worsening the damage.

I chew my lip as the cursor blinks on the unsent email. It's not about what I want. I need to be realistic. Three months was what we agreed. Living together, at least. Friendship is probably the best I can hope for afterward, outside of sex. *And I don't want to be that kind of friend,* I think, glancing down at my gorgeous wedding band. No matter how great sex is between us.

It's been a ride. It's been a lot of things, but ultimately, it hasn't been real.

To be part of Troy's life in any way is more than I would've expected at the start. So maybe being in his life will be enough, because loving him openly—outside of the boundaries we've set—isn't an option. Not for him, at least. And not for me without risks and heavy penalties.

Not without unraveling everything we've rebuilt.

A friend. This could be the version of him I get to keep. Something steady and manageable. A place in his life where I don't ask a lot and I

don’t take up too much space. Where I can love him quietly from the fringes as I try not to secretly wish I could have all of him.

I’m not crying as I hit “Send.”

It’s just the dust in this place.

◆ ◆ ◆

Welp, so much for that version of Clara.

Clara the martyr might have a certain ring to it but there’s no truth in the name.

It’s evening now, and I’m telling myself that I’m not waiting for Troy. That the kitchen light is on only because I forgot to turn it off. That my phone is face down on the coffee table just because, and not because I’m angry with myself for checking it every five minutes to see if it still works.

Troy’s huge TV plays in the background, the sound muted and set to a sports channel I have no interest in as I stare out at the darkness, trying to concentrate on something other than this knot in my stomach. It’s not a nervous reaction. It feels way more violent than that.

Because it’s almost 9:00 p.m., and Troy hasn’t come home yet.

Oh, I know. I’m not his mother. I’m not even really his wife. *Except on paper.* But it felt like we had a breakthrough this afternoon, and he can’t pick up the phone?

We opened up to each other. Laid some ghosts to rest. Then later in the afternoon, I persuaded myself I could survive just being his friend. Settle for a small place in his life where I wouldn’t ruin everything.

All I can think now is those fucking pheromones must’ve been the slow-release variety, because *something* made me delusional this afternoon. Sitting at his dining table all misty eyed, ignoring the pink elephant dressed in a frilly tutu, holding a neon sign that read: Clara is delulu. I mean, I told myself I could settle for making over his apartment—make it all nice—before stepping to the sidelines of his life.

What a crock! I would end up ripping out my own hair—ripping out the hair of the first woman he brought home to sit on the sofa with the covers and cushions *I* chose! If I’m crawling the walls with this kind of intensity because he hasn’t the courtesy to return my texts, then what chance is there of friendship between us?

Zero fucking chance.

I was trying to be gracious—trying to be good. But I'm obviously not that girl.

I love him, but he doesn't feel the same. And that's fine (it's really *not* fine). He's kept to his side of the bargain, fulfilled the promises he made. I'm the one who broke the rules, and I guess that's why I'm angry. But I'm also angry with Troy that he's failed to communicate his evening plans like a fucking adult!

I blow out a breath. *It's fine. It's not all about me.*

It's anything *but* fine as I give in to the impulse to swipe up my phone.

I stare at the lines of text again just to be sure I included no accidental subtext.

5:05 How does Greek sound for dinner?

Nope. Nothing there to suggest I want to lock him down and have his babies.

5:08 Without the smashing plates, obviously. Unless you don't want to load the dishwasher.

Haha, see how cute and funny Clara is?

5:21 I'm thinking grilled calamari, swordfish kebab, lemon potatoes, and a salad?

Check it out—she's great wife material. Temporary or otherwise.

I got a reply at 6:10.

Troy: Not for me. Snowed under right now.

Me: Shall I save you some?

This I sent at 6:14, forcing myself to wait a few minutes before answering. I didn't want to look too needy. Not that it matters as that message is still on unread.

Maybe his phone is flat, I'd thought while still in my good and gracious mode. Except, he made it sound as though he was still in his office. I mean, maybe he went out to dinner with the team. Or his friends. That's allowed—it is Friday night.

But why wouldn't he have just said so? Communicated something!

It's not like it's the first time I've eaten dinner alone since I moved in, though it has been a while. It's the first time I've found myself at my go-to stress response of a gummy bear dinner, though. And I am *not* having fun. I didn't even bother biting off their feet to stop them escaping.

By nine, anger irrationally consumes me, and the apartment feels desperately empty. I pull back the plastic tarp from the forbidden side of the apartment to see if there's anything lying around that I might smash. Thankfully for my extremities, and maybe also for Troy's, there are no power tools lying around. The urge to smash is short-lived, vanquished by a stray nailhead I almost tread on.

By ten, steam is coming out of my ears and I'm at the point of believing I imagined our growing closeness—that it's all been pretend. A big fat fakery fake. We've made no promises. I'm only his wife on paper. The marriage isn't real.

It feels like he's not the only one bracing for something.

In my case, it's disappointment, I think.

Disgusted with myself, I begin to trace my fingers on the arm of the chair, swirling patterns on the velvety nap. I will *not* pick up my phone. Yet I somehow find it in my hand again. The screen flares to life, and I swipe to my messages again.

I want to send him another, a reminder that I'm here.

Hello—remember me, your fake wife?

Real marriage, fake sentiment. His words come back to me like a slap to the forehead. Good God. I really have been delusional. I huff out an unhappy laugh. Of course, it's been easy for him. He got to decide the terms. He set the boundaries. And I just went along with it for my trust fund. *Or so I told myself.*

I told myself I could handle it, that feelings wouldn't come into it. But look at me now, incandescent with this . . . this frustration that I've brought this on myself.

My jaw tightens. His lack of thought aside, none of this is his fault. How I feel is on me. I allowed myself to go there. I tap my phone to my

chin and, because I clearly have no self-respect, I run through a list of reasons I might message him again. *Okay, excuses.*

I'm off to bed. Which bed shall I take?

I've decided to hit a club with Chelsea. Don't wait up!

I could go to an actual club.

I flatten the idea immediately. A club would require clothes and makeup and socializing. It would also require a girl called Chelsea who works most Friday nights. Also, what would be the point? He's not going to get jealous.

I return to texting thoughts.

I hope you're having a good night!

And by *good* I mean *awful*.

Hey, Troy, how is it you've taken over my heart in less time than it takes a season to change?

But that's a question I should be asking myself.

I go to bed without texting him. I won't be the woman who asks where he is. I can't be her. I'm the wife without wifely rights.

I hate how my mind continues to spiral. *I can't go on like this.* So I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and begin to run through a therapy script.

Recognize.

This tight, angry, and humiliated twist inside me has a thought underneath: I walked into this marriage knowing exactly what was expected.

Real marriage. Fake everything else.

He said it, and I said yes to it. No one forced me. I brought this on myself.

Restructure.

I agreed, but I didn't agree to feel like this.

I didn't decide to fall in love with him, like it was an option on our boundaries list.

Fall in love? Yes/No.

Drive yourself insane in the process? Pass, thanks.

I chose this situation, but I didn't choose these feelings.

Repeat.

I didn't sabotage myself. I entered into an agreement that, beneath its apparent simplicity, had lurking complications. *Our past. Our history. How I felt about him once. How I feel still.*

I made a choice that, at the time, seemed to be my only option. But I have options now. And now I get to choose again.

My anger burned out, I go to bed, my footsteps almost silent in the hallway. In Troy's home office, the bed is back in the armchair position, so I pull out the bed and change the linens.

I make my way into his bathroom, my ears on stalks, still listening for him. Then I trundle back to the office, not quite closing the door before I turn in. The bed still feels too narrow, the mattress thin enough that I can feel the frame beneath my hip. Lying on my side, the temptation to watch for the light through the crack of the door feels too strong to ignore. I move onto my back but my mind won't settle, thoughts pinging around my brain like a pinball game.

I misread signals. *Ping.*

Our intimacy made me hopeful in ways it shouldn't. *Ping.*

He doesn't feel the same way. Today in his office was just a moment for him. *Game over.*

I use the back of my hand to swipe at a rogue tear. I shouldn't have let myself soften. I shouldn't have let my guard down. Was it not lesson enough, learning to build a life without depending on anyone else?

I can do it again. I'll grow an outer shell as hard as nails.

The sound of the front door closing comes just after midnight, and my heart reacts instantly with a sharp and humiliating leap. I keep my eyes closed as though he can see through walls and doors as I listen to him moving through the apartment. The weight of his footsteps and the sound of the fridge opening. The crack of a water can. Footsteps in the hallway, and the low lights that come on automatically.

I inhale and hold that breath, waiting for the moment he realizes I'm not in his bed. I imagine a quiet knock on the office door, my name said in a low and careful tone. But it's just wishful thinking as his bedroom door closes.

The silence feels definitive.

I release that breath, my chest aching now. The bed creaks when I shift, the sound so loud in the stillness. I stare at the ceiling for what seems like forever. I'm probably the only one of us still lying awake. I shouldn't care it doesn't matter to him that I'm not lying in bed next to him.

It was silly to think he might feel my absence in the way I have his.

Deep in my heart, I can't really blame him.

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Chapter 46
CLARA

The morning feels wrong before I can name why, maybe because I realize my back is aching the moment I open my eyes. Add to that, it feels like someone is continually tapping their index finger on the top of my head.

I don't bother opening the blinds, or getting dressed. Instead I stumble into the kitchen, assuming Troy won't be up yet. But that's where I find him. Jeans and a T-shirt, thousand-dollar sneakers, tucking into his bowl of cereal like there's nothing wrong. Meanwhile, I've shoved my ratty pink robe over shorts and a T-shirt.

I should've bought a new one by now, I castigate myself. Then I decide it doesn't matter.

Not now.

"Morning," he says, reaching for his coffee. His eyes lift but only briefly.

So I wasn't imagining things. My stomach sinks, and I mumble something that sounds vaguely similar as I head for the fancy espresso machine. If he can't trust himself to look at me, then there was a reason he didn't come home until late. His home.

"Want me to—"

"I can manage," I snap. My back to him, I take a centering breath. I'm not going to do this right now. I will have an explanation from him but a showdown requires a calm head. Caffeine. Hydration. And probably pants.

"The machine and I are now friends," I add in a nicer tone, making a show of stroking the shiny chrome. Tipping onto my toes, I reach for a cup. "Want a refill?" I turn my head over my shoulder and find his eyes on my legs. Yesterday, I would've felt different about it.

"I've got a meeting soon," he says, glancing at his watch. It looks like the fancy F.P.Journe today. The private jet of watches.

I tamp the freshly ground coffee a little too vigorously. Lock the filter into place, hit the button, and move to the fridge for milk.

"You're kinda quiet this morning."

“Am I?” I hit the “Steam” button, so I don’t have to answer. Once my coffee is done, I take a seat on the island next to him, because even I’m not that petty.

“You okay?” he asks as he sets down his spoon.

I nod. “You?”

“Just really busy. Sorry I didn’t make it home for dinner last night. There’s a lot going on at the minute. Lots of moving parts that can’t be left on their own.”

“It’s fine.” I’m impressed by how even that sounded. How believable.

“I’ll probably be in the office all day.” *Oh, friend, I’ve got it. We’re not spending the day together.* “Do you have plans?”

“Yeah, lunch with Chelsea.” Possibly. Hopefully. Though she likely has work. I take a sip of my too-hot coffee and burn my tongue. It should be a preventive, but I can’t seem to stop myself. “I thought we—” No. I’m not doing this now.

“We what?” He slants me a look.

We . . . what. What even *are* we? The words shrink on my tongue, that finger back to hammering on the top of my head.

“Do you have any Tylenol?” I ask with a genuine wince.

“Probably in the bathroom. Want me to get you the bottle?”

“No, thank you.” Don’t be nice to me now. “I’ll drink my coffee first.”

“What were you about to say? You thought we . . .”

I allow my expression to falter as though thinking. “Not sure.” I arch my stiff back a little and ignore the weight of his eyes on me. “I probably won’t be home for dinner,” I add as I tighten the belt on my robe. Thank God that sounded normal, because I still feel as salty as a fishwife. But salty is better than sad.

“Oh?” I think I hear a note of disappointment, but I’m probably just fooling myself. “I mean, okay. But let me know if you need a car or anything.”

“I will.” Not a chance.

Troy leans back in his chair, rubbing his right eye with the heel of his palm.

“Tired?”

“Yeah. I haven’t spent as long in the office since the run-up to the IPO.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” That doesn’t ring true, not the way his gaze avoids mine.

“You’re sure?”

“Just some . . . teething problems. We’re still finding our feet.”

“Right.” If he can’t tell me, I’m not going to push.

I’ve held up my part of the bargain, and I’ve seen our faces on the internet plenty, leaving restaurants and gala evenings. Soft smiles and adoring looks. Holding hands. Bodies close. If it’s not working to plan, if this marriage isn’t achieving all he hoped, that’s not on me.

“What time did you get in?” Like I don’t already know. Like I’m setting a trap.

“After eleven, I think.”

“Wow. Long day.” Because *obviously*, I wasn’t waiting for you to come home, watching the clock on my phone. I take another scalding sip as I wonder how we’ve been reduced to this. From passion and honesty to fake pleasantries and stilted conversation.

“And the same today,” he says. “Meeting after meeting.”

“Really?” I allow myself to look at him in his T-shirt and jeans. *Oh, what do I care?* More than I should, apparently.

“Yeah. I’d better get my laptop. And the Tylenol.” The stool squeaks a protest against the floor as he moves.

“Thank you,” I murmur as he slips by me.

As his footsteps draw away, his phone vibrates against the marble, but he doesn’t seem to hear it.

I stare at his phone. I shouldn’t look. I’m not the kind of person who snoops. *Ordinarily.* But the second time it chimes is a temptation too much, or maybe it’s more than something whispers I ought to see. Whatever the reason, my heart hammers with the wrongness as I swipe it up.

The screen is already lit; Troy doesn’t use a security code. He doesn’t even bother with a cover.

He has new voice messages from Max.

I press play.

“Well, looks like you were right—the old bastard wasn’t bluffing. I spoke to my contact at the SEC last night, and she confirmed it. There’ve been rumors in the building, though there’s no official word yet. But she says once they pull the plug, we’re probably looking at days before they’re crawling all over the office. He’s leveraging this through the back

channels.” Max gives a huff of an unhappy laugh. “Looks like I’m not the only one with friends in low places.”

There follows a pause, the low murmur of voices nearby. The scuffling of shoe leather as though Max turns from the sound. I’m only half aware of these tiny insights as my mind begins to whir. An investigation by the regulators? I thought . . . I thought our marriage was supposed to be insurance against those risks. Alarm bells begin to ring, my body seeming to intuit what this is before my head does.

“Fucking Forbes,” he grates out, his voice low and harsh.

I roll in my lips to stifle my own curse.

“From a business standpoint, we need to move fast. Eliminate the vulnerability before they formalize things.” A shard of glass pierces my chest. With my dad’s involvement, the only vulnerability could be me. “But Troy? Whichever choice you make, you know it’s gonna—”

I hear Troy’s footsteps. I end the playback and quickly mark the message as unread. I put his phone down and, for a second, I don’t breathe, my body and my brain cycling through a hundred different emotions, a million different thoughts.

I must’ve been a wicked, wicked soul in a past life to deserve a father like this.

He wants to ruin Troy. *Why?* Because I married him. Because I broke away. I spoiled his plans. I was naive to think he wouldn’t use Troy to get to me. He wants to make sure I’m all alone.

And I will be, because Troy will never sacrifice his company. *He shouldn’t have to.*

As my temporary husband enters the kitchen, I pick up my coffee cup with shaking hands and bury my nose in it.

This is classic Edwin Forbes. Stealth ruination where he won’t leave his fingerprints.

Poor Troy. Caught in the middle again as the past repeats itself.

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Chapter 47
CLARA

Past

The party is over.

There are still cars in the driveway and the odd drunken voice drifts through the gardens. But the music has stopped and the air has cooled, the festivities are over for another year. *Thank God.*

Troy has gone home after an evening of trying his best. His best smiles. His best teases. His best effort to persuade me that my dad's behavior didn't mean a thing to him.

Valiant. Troy's efforts were valiant. And for my benefit. But he couldn't have failed to feel hurt. And that cuts me to my very core.

Earlier, at the back door, Troy had pressed his lips to my head and told me once again that I wasn't to worry about my dad. We'd be at college soon. We'd make it work. I watched him cross the gravel between and, when the dark night swallowed his form, I closed the door and fought a wave of red-hot anger. *I hate my dad.*

I'm in the library now, shoes kicked off and feet curled under me on a wingback chair. I'm cradling a cup of Mariam's special tea made in the hopes it'll calm me. I'm hiding, basically. Biting the skin around yesterday's French manicure while my stomach churns.

He's such a lying asshole, saying those things about Troy's father. He would've told me if his dad was a felon.

My mind rotates through all the things my father said. And how I reacted. It's like a treadmill I can't seem to stop. My dad calls me names, and in return, I mouth off like a guttersnipe (one of his insults), providing him with proof that he's right to have such a low opinion of me.

Careless, impulsive, embarrassing, that's so Clara.

"There you are."

So much for hiding. Speak of the devil and he shall appear. They say the devil is vain too. Conceited and full of self-importance. *I bet he's nicer*

to his daughters.

I don't look up, and I don't answer as my father saunters into the room like the cock of the walk, as my grandmother might've said. *But he's just a cock, Grandma. An arrogant, hateful man.*

"Well, you certainly excelled yourself this evening."

"What can I say? When I commit to something, I really do. Though, I will say everything was perfectly fine until you tore into me, telling how I should live my life. Again."

"It's always someone else's fault, isn't it? You're incapable of taking responsibility for your actions." His eyes flick over me coldly. "You're a disgrace."

I give an unhappy huff. *I missed that one from the list.*

"You think that's funny?"

"Nothing about tonight is even mildly amusing, Father."

"Why must you insist on taking my warnings as a challenge? You're a laughingstock, Clara. I'm ashamed to call you my daughter."

"What a coincidence," I begin, sliding my feet out from under me. "Because I'm ashamed of being your daughter."

"Watch yourself."

"No," I say, stepping closer. "I'm tired of pretending everything is fine, like everything you do and say is for the good of the family."

His gaze glitters over me. "You don't give a damn about anyone but yourself, or else you wouldn't have brought that boy tonight to embarrass me."

"Don't talk about him like that." My voice is ice.

"Your mother would be turning in her grave."

Old hurts bubble immediately to the surface. "Don't you dare." My voice is low and hard. "Don't you dare bring her into this."

"Why, when it's true? She would be ashamed of you too."

"You're so low." Angry tears spring in my eyes. "You want to talk about shame. Well, I'm ashamed of *you*. I was just a child!" I yell, throwing out my arm. "But I still remember the wrongness of it all, seeing things I shouldn't have."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"That afternoon in your office, I remember seeing Vanessa, and not knowing quite why my skin was prickling."

"You're being ridiculous."

“You know that song? The Christmas one about Mommy kissing Santa Claus? I’ve always hated it. Maybe because I saw you that day, adjusting your pants and rubbing her lipstick from your mouth. It’s a bit of a gender swap, sure, given Mommy wasn’t the one doing the kissing.”

“Utterly ridiculous,” he adds, turning away. He crosses the room to pour himself a drink.

“My mother lay dying in hospital while you were getting your rocks off with her best friend.”

“That’s enough.” He throws back his scotch.

“You must’ve been worried, because you took me to FAO Schwarz and told me I could pick anything I want. You didn’t try to explain, and you didn’t comfort me. You paid me off. You made me an accessory, made me take a share of the guilt. I will never forgive you for that.”

His glass rings as he puts it down. “You have no idea what I did to keep this family intact.”

“Yeah, I do,” I say, drawing closer. “You gaslit your own daughter.”

“You think you’re the only one who suffered?” He pivots, his blue eyes flashing as I stand in front of him, my hands balled into tight fists.

“You married her within the year.” My volume and distress escalate with each word. “You moved her into my mother’s home, so don’t tell me you fucking suffered!”

The slap comes out of nowhere, a whoosh and sharp crack preceding the explosion of pain across my cheek. My ears ring, and as the room tilts, I stagger backward. Until Dad catches me by the elbow.

“Don’t you *ever* speak to me like that again.” His breathing is hard and his voice frighteningly low.

“You’re hurting me,” I say as pain shoots up my arm.

“You are a constant reminder of everything that went wrong.” His spittle hits my face, his eyes a hateful sweep over me. “You weren’t even enough to keep her alive.”

“Why would you . . .” I shake my head in denial, but my heart hurts as I somehow intuit what he’s about to say.

“She didn’t die of cancer. She killed herself.”

“No.”

“She left *you*.”

“You’re lying.” My answer sounds distant, like it’s come from somewhere else, some other reality. My cheek ceases to hurt and I no longer

feel his grip.

"She wasn't strong enough."

"Why would you say that?" My heart, it breaks. Physically. I hear the snap, feel the echo of it through me. "Why would you say such a terrible thing?" I shake my head, distraught. It's not just his words but the pervading sense that I already know this. That it's true. *No. No!*

"We told you cancer because it was easier. But I think you're old enough to hear the truth. That you weren't enough. You were never enough."

My vision blurs. "I hate you," I whisper as I pull from his grip and stagger from the room.

I'm numb. I can't feel the pain in my cheek. Or my heart. It's like my whole being has been hollowed out. I stumble in the direction of the hallway, words whirring through my head.

Killed herself. You weren't enough. It's all your fault.

I need Troy. I need to hear his voice. Feel his arms. But if I call him now, if I show up like this, I'll only drag him into this mess.

He deserves better than that. He deserves better than me.

Your fault. All of it.

I swipe my keys from the drawer in the kitchen and slip out the back door, the gravel under my bare feet hardly registering. I get into my car with no idea where I'm heading. I only know I can't be here.

The engine roars, and the driveway blurs, my hand shaking as I lift it from the wheel to wipe away my tears. I take a left out of the driveway, ignoring the screech of wheels. I curse, and I rage, and I cry. I drive too fast.

The road is straight but the night is so dark and my vision is blurred by tears. A turn up ahead. I don't slow down. Who cares what happens to me anyway?

I clip the curb. The car swerves, and I overcorrect. I've lost control.

Don't I always?

The world tilts violently, and my head thuds against the side window.

Metal screams.

Glass explodes.

The world goes black.

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Chapter 48
CLARA

Saturday afternoon, and I don't expect to find Troy at home when I get back to the apartment. After a morning spent wandering around on my own, trying to process, trying to find a path through this, there's no way to avoid returning to the space we've shared. No way to avoid what comes next.

I try to rehearse my lines before I walk into the room. It's not the truth, but the version we can both live with, I think.

Troy sits at the head of the dining table, framed by the window, laptop open, coffee cup next to it. He glances up as I set my keys down, but his attention doesn't hold. *As if that doesn't tell me all I need to know.* "You're back early."

"You too."

"It was a more productive day than I'd imagined."

"Right." This makes my stomach hurt, not that he sees as his attention returns to his laptop and he begins typing up a storm.

"Did you have a good day?"

Eliminate the vulnerability. I had the worst day and it's not about to improve. "We need to talk." So goes my opening gambit.

His fingers pause and his shoulders stiffen. I guess we all know no good ever came from those words. He sits back in his seat and studies me. Studies my face. "What about?"

"I'm leaving." Mic drop. Bomb drop. Heart drop. Worse, it's true.

His expression flickers. Is it strange that it doesn't read like relief but suspicion? I didn't expect it. I thought—

"Just like that?" He cants his head very slightly to one side as he studies me.

"Yes." I rub my lips together, sucking in a sharp breath as I cross the space to take a seat at the other end of the table. It feels formal. Like I'm about to conduct his appraisal. *I've brought you here today to discuss your performance. As my real fake husband, I'd like to thank you for all your efforts. It's been . . . more than I ever imagined. But it's time to let you go.* "The reasons we married have been met. I've got my trust fund, and you've

had more than your fair share of publicity. Photos of me dangling from your arm like a fancy purse."

"What makes you say I've had enough?"

My heart skips a beat as it allows my head to misconstrue his meaning, until I process it for what it is. A power move.

"Your share price has stabilized high. We fooled the market and, well, I'm done."

"Why? Why are you done?"

Because I called my dad.

Because I made him a trade.

I'll reenter the fold and he'll leave you alone.

Because I owe you that much and because I love you too much to make you collateral.

I say none of that, obviously. "This feels like a natural end point."

His brows mildly lift, like I've just said I'm going to make a cup of coffee. "That wasn't the agreement."

"I know. Three months." I tip my chin. "I don't want to wait that long. I'm done." I force a small smile that probably looks sad. But I don't feel sad. I feel numb. Heartbreak on hold for later as I add this one ring of truth. Something he can't want or need. "The lines are beginning to blur, and that's not good for either of us."

His gaze sharpens.

"It was always going to be temporary. You have what you need. We're just prolonging the agony at this point." I inhale and press my palm to the table as I stand. "I'm going away for a while. Europe, I think. Paris. Maybe Florence. Or both. It's been a minute since I had a vacation."

"What about your impact fund?"

"It's not going anywhere," I say, folding my fingers around the back of the chair. "I am."

"So it's just a project to you. Not really a calling?"

"Does it matter what it is, provided it improves lives?"

"It matters," he retorts. "It'll matter to Sue Vergara. She won't wait around for a flake."

Good one, Troy. "There'll be another Sue. I'm grateful for your help, but my plans haven't changed. Only the timeline." He visibly bristles. "The original reasons for this marriage no longer exist." I hold his gaze. "There's no strategic advantage to continuing."

“Strategy,” he repeats. His version sounds like a finality. “Not feelings.”

“There will always be feelings,” I answer quietly. “And that’s the problem. I want the best for you.” My sidestepping of the truth feels almost elegant.

“Well, that just gets me in my warm and fuzzies.” He gives a disparaging huff of a laugh as he shakes his head. “If this is what you want.” His jaw flexes, but he says nothing else.

Want. It’s such a tiny word full of complicated meaning. “It’s what makes sense,” I say instead. I won’t allow this moment to undo me. What I want is irrelevant. And no good for him.

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“Did you ask something?” My tone turns spiky. “Look, this doesn’t have to be dramatic. We both knew this had an expiration date.”

“Clara,” he begins, and there’s something in the way he says my name that makes my throat tighten. “If you’re doing this because you think you __”

“It’s over,” I cut in forcefully. “I don’t owe you more explanation than that.”

He watches me for a long moment, but I don’t flinch. Maybe because it feels like my hand has fused to the back of the chair, like I’m part of the furniture. But I can’t be a chair, solid and sturdy. I’m more like a glass vase, because if he asks one more question, I will shatter to a million pieces. Scatter across the floor.

“It’s for the best.” I give a decisive nod and make for the office to get the small case I’d packed earlier. *It’s for the best,* I remind myself. This protects him. I backtrack across the floor.

“Where will you go? Now, I mean.”

“A hotel. The airport.”

“Let me call you a car.”

I shake my head. “No. I’ll . . . send for my other things.” Bumpy and ugly, I don’t mean for the words to sound so hard. I pause, and look back at him, though not long enough for my sadness to be noticeable. It flickers through me anyway. Sadness for what could’ve been. In a different world, a different time, maybe.

The bar I’ve set for future me is certainly high.

I pull his key and elevator fob from my pocket, then grab the handle of my case. The wheels roll unevenly behind me.

He deserves better than a repeat, I tell myself as I round the corner. Into the hallway, and out of sight, everything within me gathered tight so he won't see me break.

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Chapter 49
TROY

Past

I get there in under ten minutes, though I don't remember the drive. Just the way my hands shake on the wheel and the sound of my heart in my ears and her voice in my head saying my name over and over again.

And then I spot it. Clara's car halfway up the curb, the front crushed, and glass everywhere. The car's hazard lights blink like it's stunned—like it can't believe its bad luck.

Clara stands by a tree, her tiny frame hugging the shadows. Her long hair is loose, her face pale, and her eyes like dinner plates as I scramble out of my car, running for her.

She says my name, meeting me halfway, the blinkers giving her stricken face a sickly look.

"I'm sorry." Her voice trembles, her fingers, too, as she reaches for me. "I didn't know who else to call."

"It's okay. I'm here." I don't think I've ever felt relief like this as I envelop her in my arms. "What happened? What are you doing out here?" I cup the back of her head, keeping her close as she makes to pull away.

"I had a fight with my dad. I need . . . I needed to leave." Her voice is so small, and her expression wrecked.

"Your feet are bleeding." I run my hands down her body, checking she's okay everywhere ese. "Why didn't you call me, come to me?"

"I didn't—" Her breath catches. "I was trying not to drag you into this. I thought. . . I thought maybe you wouldn't want to see me again." Her voice breaks on the last word.

"That will *never* be true," I whisper with all that I am, all that I will ever be, pulling her tightly against me again. "You're okay." I whisper the words like a prayer. "That's all that matters right now." I can't, I won't think of this being any other way.

"I'm so sorry."

“I’ve got you.” I cradle her head, feel the bump forming there as her tears soak my shirt. We stand there, my hold on her the reassurance I need right now. Eventually, her breathing begins to even out and her tears slow, leaving behind the occasional wrenching spasm. I take her face in my hands, ducking to bring my gaze to hers. “Let’s get you out of here, yeah?”

She nods, and I carry her to my car. Lowering her inside, I pull the belt over her body when her hands refuse to work. Then I check the Mercedes, secure what I can. And while we don’t speak on the journey back, I do hold her hand.

She drank champagne tonight—not a lot but enough. *And she’s underage,* my mind whispers. I can hardly believe she’d be so reckless. That she’d risk herself—risk others. Clara is impulsive, but she’s not selfish.

“You’re angry,” she whispers. I don’t answer immediately, maybe because I can’t deny it. “Please don’t be mad.”

“I am pissed,” I admit, not taking my eyes off the road. “I might’ve lost you, and I can’t process that right now.”

“I think I wanted to die,” she says, her voice so small that it breaks my heart with a clean snap.

“Don’t say that.” I bring her hand to my mouth, pressing my lips to her knuckles. “Don’t ever say that. Whatever this is, we can fix it.”

“I hate him,” she whispers hotly.

My head is a mess as I turn in to the service road, heading for the back of the house. I’ll take her to Mom’s place. Make sure she’s okay first, then we’ll face her dad together. Get to the bottom of whatever the fuck this is.

What I don’t expect is to find a squad car at the back of the house.

“What’s going on?” I ask, though mostly to myself as Clara slinks back into the seat as though the threadbare cover might camouflage her. I wind down my piece-of-shit window as I pull over, the gravel crunching under the tires. “Can I help you, officer?” I keep my hands glued to the steering wheel and squint as the beam of his flashlight crosses my face.

“Step out of the vehicle, sir.”

“Yeah, sure.” My heart begins to thunder as I undo my seatbelt. “What’s this about?”

“A vehicle has been reported stolen.” His tone is neutral as his attention dips to the passenger seat. “Ma’am, are you okay?”

Clara doesn’t reply. Shock, I guess.

“Stolen?” What the fuck? “You mean the Mercedes?” I glance Clara’s way. She looks even more scared now.

“Step out of the car, ma’am.”

From the back of the house, Clara’s father appears like he’s been waiting for this cue. A plaid dressing gown, navy pajamas, suede slippers, and not one hair out of place. No fucking way I believe he was tucked up in bed.

“That’s him,” he says, pointing at me. “That’s the young man who took my car.”

“Your car? Are you serious right now?” I turn to the police officer. “You just saw me pull up in that heap, right? If I took the Mercedes, why the hell am I driving that piece of shit?”

The other officer looks up from his radio, the dispatcher confirming the plates of a car found by the side of the road.

“I didn’t wreck it.” I glance Clara’s way again. She’ll chime in. Any minute.

“I told you this is what would happen if you continued on this reckless path.” Edwin Forbes is looking right at me as he slides his arm around Clara’s shoulder.

“What the fuck?” Is he talking to me or Clara? “Tell them,” I plead as the officer pulls out his cuffs. “Clara!”

Her gaze drops to the ground.

“My daughter is distressed,” Forbes says. “If we could save the questions for tomorrow, officers, I’d like to take her home.”

“Tell them it’s your car—that you were driving!” My attention snaps to the cop. “She had an accident. She called *me*! Look at my phone—I went to pick her up.”

“That’s not true, Troy.” Her father’s smile is so thin. “You took the car without permission. Without *my* permission. I saw you do it. Why, I wouldn’t be at all surprised to find you’re over the limit.”

“Fuck you,” I growl. And I do something foolish as I lunge at him.

“Did you see—did you see that? I’d like to add menacing to the charges this young man faces.”

The officer looks between us, the cuffs clinking in his hand.

“Clara,” I plead one last time. “Look at me.”

“She’s in shock, clearly. This young man took advantage of her good nature. Of her naivety. I want him removed from my home.”

“Sir, I’m going to need you to come with us.”

“This is so fucking wrong.” I want to fight the whole world right now.

“*Sir.*”

I look to Clara one more time. “I can’t believe you’re letting this happen.”

But she just stands there, her father’s arm around her shoulders. *His perfect Park Avenue princess.* How could I have been so wrong? She doesn’t think I’m someone. I’m trash to her. She’s just like the rest of this town’s entitled fucks.

My heart in my boots and the worst kind of despair swilling though my insides, I allow the police officer to lead me toward the squad car.

Whatever happens next, whatever I lose because of tonight, I’ll carry the knowledge that, when it mattered most, the woman I love didn’t love me enough back.

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Chapter 50
TROY

The apartment is quiet in a way I've never experienced it before. Though not for the want of construction noise but for the want of her. I sit as still as any statue until long after she's gone, palms flat against the tabletop, coffee cold, and my laptop in sleep mode. I just stare at the space she stood as she unhooked her key. It's almost as though I'm just waiting for her to reappear. Maybe then I'd ask her why she's really doing this, instead of just sitting here, trying to absorb the absence of her.

She spoke so calmly. Reasonably, even. She was prepared—had already packed. And she'd rehearsed those words. That much felt true. The rest, though. It felt a little too much like a made-for-TV-moment. Like an actor playing a surgeon amputating a limb.

Clean cut, straight through. Make it look real.

Why the fuck didn't I try to stop her? Why didn't I speak up? Why the fuck didn't I tell her she was wrong about there being nothing else to stay for. Instead, I let her construct a logic like it was a gospel.

It doesn't have to be dramatic.

The reasons for this marriage are no more.

It's for the best.

The world according to Clara.

But she is wrong—and so am I for letting her walk out the door like she hasn't just punched her fist through my ribs to grab at my cold, dead heart. It was fear, not strength, that kept me in my fucking seat.

"*When it comes down to it, Clara will always choose herself.*"

Her father's words might ring in my head, but they don't ring true. The chair legs object loudly as I spring from my seat, unable to sit here staring at this fucking crime scene. But there is no escape from her. There are dark strands of her hair on the sofa back and a bag of half-eaten gummy bears by the coffee machine, and the air carries the scent of her perfume. It's fucking unbearable.

I find myself in the bedroom, the scene here no better. Her charger left on the nightstand. *Her ring.* My heart sinks at the sight of it. My closet is

still filled with plastic crates stacked full of her belongings. The things she didn't unpack because this marriage was only temporary.

I drop to the edge of the bed and press my hands to my face. Rake my fingers through my hair. "Fuck. *Fuck!*" What have I done?

I left her alone last night, but I couldn't explain why. Not yet, at any rate. Max had called a meeting with legal and the outside counsel he'd hired to hash this fucking ultimatum out.

Some choice. The lesser of two evils, or whatever that fucker Forbes called it.

Fucked up is what it is.

But before those experts had filed into the room, I'd already decided. I wouldn't be pushed. I already made my choice. I just needed to find an exit on my own terms.

When I'd gotten home and Clara wasn't in my bed, I told myself that was fair. I was preoccupied—a miserable fuck. I'd communicated poorly. Why the fuck would she want to be near me? While my arms ached to hold her, I forced myself to stay put. Going to her would make me nothing a greedy, using fuck. Like yesterday afternoon when I'd bent her over the desk so she couldn't read the trouble on my face.

I'd reasoned one night of not holding her wouldn't kill me. And then this morning, still in stupid fuckin' CEO-crisis mode, I tried to be engaging, but I couldn't reach for her because I still didn't trust myself. And now I've fucking ruined it.

"Goddamn it!" I jump up from the bed, my skin tight with rage. *I knew she would leave. I fucking said she'd get her trust fund, then bail because she doesn't need me anymore.*

I'm such a fuckhead. I should've told her how I feel. But now she's left, and that's it.

But a fist tightens in my gut because this doesn't ring true. These weeks have been the best. For me. For her. So where do I go from here?

The answer comes to me in an instant. I need to run a threat model to help me get to the bottom of this.

First step. What is she doing?

This is where I start. Not why—that comes later.

I think back to how stoic she seemed. How she left calmly without a scene. Which means she planned it. That she had time to think, then framed

things as transactional. *Trust fund. Publicity.* She reduced our marriage to its originally stated terms. Which also means—

My jaw tightens. It means she's talking shit.

Because we've grown close. Even if she didn't love me, and I think she fuckin' does, there would still be feelings. Emotions she wouldn't have been able to hide during her exit. Not without preparation.

Then my distance last night and my behavior this morning—she just rolled with it. She didn't react or call me out or give me a hard time. *Unlike the Clara I know.* She had a headache, sure, and when I came back into the room with pills, she was pretty pale.

An image flashes in my head. Her stricken expression. The kitchen counter. My phone.

I release a short breath. *Huh.*

Max's voice message. *Eliminate the vulnerability.*

Fuck me. How sickening that must've been to hear.

She didn't leave because there's nothing more to gain. She removed herself before I removed her. *In a reversal of our histories.* Jesus Christ, she thinks I'd survive her loss easier than that of my company. How fucked up—and how I've fucked up. All because I couldn't be honest.

With myself. With her.

I stalk out of the room. I don't need to run a full threat model as I skip *what could go wrong*, and spring straight to *what am I going to do about it?*

That's easy. I'm gonna get my wife.

In the lounge, I come to an abrupt stop as the setting sun bursts through the wall of windows. It's fucking beautiful but it means nothing. This place means nothing. It was never a home, it was a fortress. But what good is any fortress if it costs you the one thing that made it worth defending?

◆ ◆ ◆

Paris. Florence. Maybe both. Possibly even somewhere else on that vast fucking continent.

At my laptop now, I check the flight times for today for both cities before expanding my scope into next week. United. Delta. Air France. BA. KLM. Swiss. ITA. The list of airlines and flight configurations seem endless. I can't camp out at Newark *and* JFK both.

But I doubt she'll leave today. She'll be hurting because preparation only gets you so far. *In her case, out of the door.* And no one wants to fly commercial looking like death. Questions would be asked.

I call her lawyer's answering service and leave a message, citing an emergency. I call the catering crew next and leave a message for her friend, the blonde—Chelsea—to urgently call me back. Next, I call O'Rourke's, where I find myself talking to some woman who sounds like she has a fifty-a-day habit. The advice she gives me is to "cram my urgency up my own hole" for daring to steal her best bartender.

I expect I'll get the same guidance in person when I turn up there later. I grab my keys and my phone and make for the front door before my footsteps begin to slow.

What if she doesn't fly commercial? My stomach pinches tight.

She has the money to charter a private flight. She said it herself, she likes nice things. Pretty surroundings, eating out in fancy restaurants and—

Hotels.

That's it!

◆ ◆ ◆

Kind of.

See, the thing they never tell you in the movies, particularly those within the romance genre, is that hotels aren't keen on giving out their guests' information.

Five hotels in—because she isn't at the Plaza, the place her grandma used to take her for afternoon tea, and because she didn't tell me the name of her favorite Midtown staycation escape—I can feel a vein in my temple beginning to pulse, despite having my pitch down to an art.

"Karmella, I don't need her room number," I say evenly, "but if you could tell Miss Forbes that Chelsea is here." Miss Forbes, my ass. Mrs. Templeton—Ms. Forbes Templeton, maybe. But her days of being "Miss" anything are over.

"Chelsea?" The desk clerk's mouth purses as she looks me up and down.

"It's a family name." I employ a charming smile, though it feels kind of rusty, as I rub my knuckles over the ache in my sternum. At the last hotel I said my parents were expecting a girl.

I've got to be close—*got to be*. Because the number of hotels in Manhattan . . . I can't even contemplate. But the number of hotels with an heiress previously deprived of nice things hiding out there? Not so numerous.

Man, why couldn't I have been a billionaire for a little while longer? There've got to be all kinds of rich-guy work-arounds for getting information out of people. *Maybe I should've tried bribery. Maybe I will at the next place. Wonder how much a desk clerk makes—should I offer one year's wage or two?*

"Sir, as I've said, it goes against company policy."

"I know." I hold up my hands. "Privacy laws. Guest safety. But like *I* said, she's expecting me. I just plumb forgot my phone." Fuck it, I should've changed before leaving the apartment. My watch might cost five times more than a Rolex but it's not a brand everyone knows, and while my sneakers and jeans are designer, I always get better treatment when I'm suited and booted. "I tell you what," I begin again. "I'm gonna go over there and stand by yonder palm tree." I know, I'm laying it on thick, but I read once that Southern accents are associated with trust and warmth. Of course, some would argue stupidness. "And when Miss Forbes says she's expecting me"—please, God—"then she can come down and meet me in the lobby. Or you can send me up. Whichever is her preference."

If lip pursing was an Olympic sport, this woman would win gold.

"I'm really not sure—"

"But if she's forgotten she's expecting me," I bulldoze on, "or if she's booked in under the name of Wilma Flintstone, I will leave without another question asked. There will be no confirmation of her residence, and no rules broken," I say, holding up my hands.

And no need to call security, I hope. So far, that's happened twice. "I won't even look as you make that call," I add, already beginning to step away. When her eyes glide to the desk phone, I pivot and pull my cell from my back pocket by sleight of hand.

A minute later, my heart leaps into my throat as she calls me back over.

"Miss Forbes is in room 806. You can go on up."

"Thank you, Karmella. I appreciate your help." My words are calm as jubilation shoots through my insides. I send a prayer to the heavens and a pump of my fist as the elevator doors glide closed.

The car is quick but not quick enough, and when the doors burst open, I spring sideways from them, then hustle along the hallway, my stomach tightly coiled. I knock lightly on the door, hopefully more like a woman would. No desperate hammering of a husband in need of his mate here.

My mate. My woman. My wife. My love.

Please let it be so.

The door opens with a sharp intake of her breath. But at least she doesn't slam it. *Got my foot there anyway, just in case.*

"Troy." My name is almost a show of resilience. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"They told me you were Chelsea."

"I would've said my name was Bertha to get in through the door. Can I?" I make a gesture. "Please."

She nibbles on the inside of her lip but nods. Tight jeans and a T-shirt. She must be going out. She has makeup on, though underneath, she's pale. I can see she's been crying, and that's a relief. Not that I want to see her cry, but it means that there might be some sense in my calculations. That I'm not fooling myself.

She hesitates but ultimately steps back, allowing me to pass.

"What do you want?"

Once inside I turn to face her as she folds her arms across her body.

"I would've thought that was obvious. You are what I want. I'm not ready to let you go, Clara." Not in three months or six. Not ever.

"It's not your decision to make," she says quietly, carefully.

"Sure, let's talk about that. Shall we . . ." I gesture to the chairs placed either side of an old-fashioned iron fireplace. It's that or tell her she's wrong. "I see why you like the place." I pause to glance out of the window. "Bergdorf's, the Park. Good places to eat."

I watch her slot away those snippets of a past conversation.

"You're thinking that was a miscalculation," I say as I take my seat. Leaning forward, I put my elbows to my knees.

"Excuse me?"

"Or maybe you think it's a fluke that I remember." I link my fingers as though in prayer. "But I pay attention to everything you say and do. I remember every one of our moments together."

"That sounds . . ." Consternation flicks across her face. "Creepy."

I drop my head and give a breath of a laugh. “That is not the vibe I was going for. But I think it’s just what happens when you fall in love. Not that you become creepy,” I add hastily. “But that you catalog every moment. Every word.”

She shakes her head, almost a denial. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“No, what I shouldn’t have done is let you leave without telling you exactly what you mean to me. Without hearing you admit the same.” *Please, God.*

“I’m not doing this.” She crosses her legs and then her arms, her gaze sliding away before coming back sharp. “And I won’t let you do it either.”

“I forgive you for making the wrong choice.”

“I don’t want your forgiveness.” She pushes up from her seat. “I want you to leave.”

“Nope.” I sit back and cross my ankle, then slide my arm across the chair back as though she were sitting next to me. “Not until we’ve hashed this out.”

“There is no hashing this out,” she retorts, glancing at the nightstand. *The phone.* “You’re leaving or I’m calling security.”

“I’d give it all up, Clara, in a heartbeat. If it came down to choosing between you and being the CEO of the company I built with my own fuckin’ hands, I’d shut the door on my office and never think about it again.”

“You’re lying.” Her footsteps falter but she doesn’t turn.

“No, I’m just a little slow on the uptake.” I take a breath and let us both process that. “Please come and sit down.”

But she doesn’t.

“If you want me to leave, you’ve gotta let me say my piece first.” My heart hammers against my ribs as I watch her shoulders rise with a deep breath. Then she turns like her feet are lead weights.

“Say what you need to say.” Arms folded, she lifts her chin.

“I see you better than anyone, Clara. Better than you see yourself.”

She gives a tiny, bitter laugh. “I don’t think you do.”

“I see a woman who was once a girl who couldn’t stand up to her father because he frightened her.” Her brow furrows as I stand. “He was controlling. *Is* controlling.” I take a step closer, then another. “He made her think she was someone less than who she is.” The image of her back then hits me hard. Vivacious and proud, but underneath the veneer, she was

alone in a way no one ever should be. “She’s someone kind and thoughtful, funny and principled. But, back then, she didn’t have the tools she has now. And she couldn’t help the boy she loved because it was all she could do to survive.”

My name is a bare breath as she drops to the edge of the bed. “Please don’t do this to me.”

I lower myself to my knees in front of her. “She grew to be strong. She became a woman who listens, who pays attention to others, who advocates for others. She even risked her own safety by standing up for a stranger in a situation she knew was wrong. She knows when people deserve better, and tries to help them, but she hasn’t yet learned that she deserves better too.”

I reach out and take her hand. I want to pull her to me and squeeze her so hard that my love slips into all the neglected spaces of her. But for now, I bounce her hand a little, relaxing her fingers.

“Don’t do this,” she whispers. “I won’t let my father weaponize me.”

“My mom used to say no good comes from listening at keyholes.” I fight a smile. “I think that rule extends to other people’s phones.”

“You can’t give it all up. I won’t let you.”

“It’s not your decision to make. It’s just a corporation, Clara. A business. It’s not my worth.” Not anymore.

“No, Troy. You deserve better—the best.”

“*You* deserve the best. And guess what? The best is on his knees right in front of you. There’s no one in this world who’ll love you better than me. I promise you that.”

She shakes her head, staccato. “My father will ruin you. Just let me go. Let me protect you this time.” A fat tear slides down her cheek.

“What did you promise him?” But I already know. *Her obedience.* “You sacrificed yourself, didn’t you?” I wipe the tear away with my thumb. “Gave up your freedom for me.”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters. *You* matter. You’re everything to me.”

She says nothing, her bottom lip paling under the force of her teeth. Her eyes flare as I press my thumb to that piece of deliciousness to prize it away from her teeth.

“I’d forgotten I could be jealous of a lip until you crashed back into my life. We have such a lot of time to make up for, Tater Tot.”

“You’ll hate me for it,” she whispers. “Maybe not today, but one day you will.”

“Clara.” I give a breath of a laugh, the sound watery and honest as I cup her face. “Darlin’. Sweetheart. My love. *Habibti*. Don’t you know this marriage isn’t over until I say so?” Her eyes flare, but I barrel on. “That was the agreement—we’re not done until I don’t need you anymore. And I do need you. I need you so bad that, when you walked out of that door, my heart stopped. I’m an idiot for letting you go. A grade A asshole for not telling you any of this before.”

“You don’t know the depths my father will sink to, the things he’ll do to ruin you to get to me.”

“As long as I have you, there’s nothing he can do to hurt me.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispers plaintively.

“Let him involve the regulators, let him sic the SEC on my company. I don’t fucking care.”

“Until the share price plummets and the board ousts you.”

“The share price will recover. I’ll still be rich,” I retort flippantly.

“But *your* company, Troy.” Her fingers fold around mine. “The thing you built with your own hands.”

“It will always be mine whether I’m CEO or not. But I’m not gonna make it easy for him. Let the old bastard shout from the rooftops that I’m no good, because I’ll fight him all the way. I love you, Clara. So fuckin’ much it hurts.”

Her eyes soften. “We were never meant to be real.”

“You’ll get over it. I’m sure the sex will help.”

“Stop trying to be cute,” she says, swiping at the tears that continue to spill.

“Try? It comes natural, darlin’.”

“He tried to ruin you already. You know he’ll try again and again.”

“*Try* being the operative word. I’m thinking I might send the old man a basket of muffins because I’ve realized that man is part of my origin story.”

“He’s the villain. And so was I, you should remember that.”

I watch those big blue eyes widen as I stand, but I’m going nowhere as I scoop her up.

“Troy! What are you—”

I take her place on the edge of the bed, pull her in tight, and drape her legs over mine. “We’re gonna talk about this now. Put it all behind us and

move the fuck on. Tell me. Tell me what I didn't see that night. Put it right, Clara."

"What would be the point?"

"Because you owe it to yourself." I see that hit. "You crashed your car," I prompt softly, rubbing the silky strands of her hair. "I went to get you. Took you home, and the police were there."

"Yes." A tiny whisper.

"Your dad called them. He had me arrested, but you said nothing."

This time, her answer is a tiny sob.

"Tell me why you didn't defend me."

"I couldn't."

"Couldn't, not wouldn't. Because you were scared."

"I froze." Her words are barely above a whisper. I tighten my hold on her as her body begins to shake. "I crashed my car because I think I wanted to die. He said so many things to me that night before he hit me."

My blood turns to ice water in my veins, and though I tighten my hold on her, I keep my thoughts to myself. *Edwin Forbes, I'm coming for you, because a man who hits a woman doesn't get to call himself a man. And a father who raises his hand to his child . . . well, there's a special place in hell for them.*

"He told me that my mom didn't die of cancer when I was small. He said that she . . . that she killed herself. That it was my fault."

"Ah, Clara." My heart hurts so bad for her. "You know that's not true."

"But it is—she killed herself."

"Adult or child, you can't shoulder that blame. Your mother must've been in so much pain to leave you." I pull her close as her body is racked by sobs. "You suffered an unfathomable loss, and you can't turn back the clock. But you can honor your mother by living your own life to the fullest."

We sit there for a while, my arms, my love holding her as she grieves. Eventually, her tears lessen, and she sits straight. "It's been hard not to . . ." She shudders. "But you're right."

I try a reassuring smile.

"That night, when he told me, I wanted to die myself. I felt so wretched and I didn't care as I lost control of the car. But then my head hit the car door, and I knew I wanted to live. I don't remember calling you—it was like you just appeared in front of me, like you knew I needed you."

Crushed. I feel fucking crushed as I tighten my grip on her.

“Then police.” She inhales a deep breath. “My dad. You. Talking and talking, mouths moving, but nothing making sense. I felt like I was underwater. But I didn’t choose him,” she whispers, her watery eyes beseeching as they meet mine. “I just . . . I just couldn’t move. I couldn’t do anything.”

“You were in shock.” She was terrified. *And I didn’t see it,* I think angrily. All these fucking years, my narrative was bullshit.

“That’s why you have to let me do this, Troy. I need to put things right. Let me choose you this time.”

“And make us both sad? Life isn’t a set of scales, Clara. If I let you do this then we’ll both be miserable. I mean, what the fuck? I chose you. Jesus, I’m beginning to sound like a Pokémon.”

She gives a wet, stuttering laugh, though she presses her fingers to it and whispers, “It’s not funny.”

“Sure it is. I’m cute *and* I’m funny.” I press my lips to her head, serious again. “I’m so sorry I didn’t see what was really going on that night. That you were traumatized.”

“You would’ve been frightened yourself,” she whispers. “We were both just kids.”

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll let you protect me, but not this way. Stand by my side, Clara, and I’ll stand by yours. Forever. You and me against the world. What d’you say?”

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Epilogue
CLARA

Two years later

What do you think I said?

My mark is seated at the bar like he's part of the architecture. Broad shoulders, tousled hair, the sleeves of his pale shirt rolled, the color of it stark against his deep tan.

I cross the space with measured steps and an easy confidence. My wrap dress swaying to the tune of my hips as I run my fingers along the neckline that's just the right side of respectable, yet not innocent. By the time I reach the bar, my blood is fizzing.

"¿Está libre este asiento?" Is this seat taken?

His shoulder lifts in answer—*take it or leave it, I don't care.* But I'm not fooled. As I crossed the space, I watched him drink me in through the mirror behind the bar.

I hop onto my seat, glad of my heels getting me that little bit higher as I pull my flowing summer dress aside to flash a little summer-tan thigh. My companion is a ten. Kissable lips and a killer jawline. And he smells divine.

"¿Puedo invitarte a una copa?" I flick my hair a little. "Do you speak English?"

He angles his head my way, his fingers still looped around a glass of something amber. "I speak a little English." His voice low and sort of sultry. But everything sounds sexier with an accent, I think. Lifting the glass, he takes a sip. His strong throat works with a swallow. "You are an American?"

"All the way from Kansas." I rub my lips together, wanting to taste his drink for myself. *From his tongue.*

"Like Dorothy Gale." He glances at my shoes. "But no ruby slippers."

"You're a movie buff," I comment as I watch him watch me trailing my fingers along the neckline of my dress. "I'm a fan of movies myself."

"Which is your favorite?"

I make a show of thinking, my eyes on his as I answer. “*Pretty Woman*.”

He nods as though he understands rather than agrees. “May I buy you a drink, pretty woman?”

“Well, that depends.” I give him a smile that feels predatory. “Are you looking for company?”

“I might be.” His gaze drops over me like a lover’s caress.

“My company is . . . expensive,” I whisper, leaning in. “But worth every penny.”

“I don’t doubt it.” His gaze falls to my exposed thigh and everything inside me pulls tight. He signals the barman, but I’m only thirsty for him.

“Let’s skip the drink and get down to business.” I loop my fingers around his wrist.

“We haven’t discussed terms.” He gives a chuckle as I move from my stool without letting go.

Across the bar and into the hotel reception, he allows me to lead the way.

“I’ve already booked a room.” I shoot the words over my shoulder, not bothering to slow my pace.

“You’re very eager.”

“I’m just keen to get down to business.”

His resultant dark laughter tantalizes my skin.

The carpet feels soft under my feet, the lights glow warm, and the sound of my breathing is a little faster than it ought to be. These are the small things I concentrate on to prevent me from turning and climbing him like a pole.

“It’s this one.” Another glance behind me, and I catch him staring at my ass. A seismic thrill runs through me as I slice the key card against the lock. But the light stays red, the handle unmoving beneath my hand. “Dammit.” I swipe it again. And get the same result.

“Allow me.” He plucks the key card from between my fingers. “I am, how you say, adept at fitting large things in small gaps.”

I turn to face him. “Gaps?” I demand, no doubt pulling a what-the-fuck face.

“Hey, I like movies, but I’m no actor,” he replies, suddenly breaking his role.

I don’t know about that. Two years and Troy and I still have our jam jar of scenarios. Two years and we’re still coming up with ideas.

Behind me, the lock sounds, and the handle moves beneath my palm. I step over the threshold, whip around, and pull on the tie of my dress. The fabric instantly parts, falling to my sides.

“Have you changed your mind?” I purr, keeping my hand on the door.

With a shake of his head, my husband seems to come back to himself, and then he’s on me, his mouth crushed to mine as he backs me deeper into the room. I barely hear the door click closed as he takes my face in his hands, cradling it as we kiss. Pressing me back against the wall.

“How much, *hermosa*?” Beautiful. He calls me that at least ten times a day and shows me such devotion. His eyes. His words. His touch.

“If you have to ask, I’m not sure you can afford me.”

“I would sell my soul to experience you.” Taking my hands, he glides them up the wall.

“I do love a big spender.”

“How much to own your body for an hour,” he rasps, his lips a hot trail down my throat.

“An hour?”

His eyes are wickedly dark over the swell of my breast. “‘How much to fuck you for an indeterminable length of time’ doesn’t sound like a very good business model, Tater.”

“It also doesn’t sound very sexy.”

“How much to fuck you to your satisfaction?” He gives a low hum as he slips his hand between my legs. I practically convulse.

“You can tell what you think I’m worth after,” I pant as he strokes me over the lace of my panties.

“And that sounds like an invitation to be robbed. Wait, didn’t we already do that one—hot woman at the mercy of a home intruder?”

I give the breath of a laugh, loving the way he’s looking at me, feeling the weight of his want like it’s a tactile thing. “Hurry.” My hips tilt with encouragement.

“So we’re done bargaining.” He presses his against me.

“I know you’re good for it.”

“I *am* good for it.” My body jolts as his thumb finds my clit over the fabric. “Satisfaction guaranteed.”

“That’s supposed to be my line,” I whisper, arching into his touch.

“Give me a figure.” The rasp in his tone feels like Pop Rocks between my legs.

“Troy, please. You know I can’t concentrate when you’re touching me. Just—”

“A hundred euros.” His words blow across my heated skin.

I feel myself frown, not sure why we’re still playing this game, even as I find myself asking, “How much is that in real money?”

My Spanish lover, minus the sexy accent, whispers the exchange rate to me.

“Rude! Is that what an intimate moment with your wife is worth to you?”

“A thousand,” he rasps, his forefinger and thumb pinching my nipple over the fabric of my bra.

“Cheapskate,” I moan as I fight to bring our bodies closer.

“Ten thousand.” His touch feels like wildfire against my skin. “A hundred thousand.”

“Yes!”

“A million euros transferred to your bank account if you let me between your legs right now.”

“You’re overplaying it,” I whimper, fighting the inevitable.

“I’m being serious.” He holds me. Squeezes. Licks the salt from my collarbone. *It’s all so good.* “I’ll write that check right now.”

My God, he means it.

A ripple of something runs through me. Excitement. Maybe with a hint of disgrace.

“A million euros, payable to your fund.” Still holding my wrists, Troy hooks his finger into my bra, releasing the pebbled bud of my nipple to his mouth.

“*Oh, God. Yes!*”

My insides clench with need as his hand closes over me. The pressure is divine, the rasp of the silk against my clit a temptation itself. “How fond are you of these panties?”

It must’ve been a rhetorical question as my panties are no longer on my body but in his hand. “My God.” I glance at the fabric, then at his face. “You really did that? Those were La Perla.”

“Tater Tot.” My name sounds like a chastisement. “Are you gonna earn that money or not?”

“What do you think?” I look into his beautiful face, and my heart is fit to burst. Under the humor and the banter and the complaints, that’s my husband. My Troy. It’s hard to believe that, after everything, he’s mine.

I love him so much.

“Baby, remind me, why are we standing in a hotel room when we have a perfectly good yacht moored at the marina and five or six perfectly good bedrooms to fuck in?”

“Six,” I correct. “And it’s a superyacht. For the thrills?” I give a shrug, which is not so easy given my arms are still above my head. I lower them to his shoulders instead. “Keeping it fresh? How about protecting your mother’s poor offended eyeballs?”

“You’re too sensitive,” he says, kissing his way down my body. The rasp of his sandy stubble against my skin feels heavenly. “Wait—that’s one of the many things I love about you. That you’re so, *so* sensitive.” His tongue circles my clit, slow and deliberate, his fingers a delicious breach. He gives a groan like a starving man, the first brush of his tongue between my legs long and lush. “Who makes you come, Clara?”

“You. Only you.”

He laps at the sensitive peak of my clit, my nerve endings singing. “Who owns this pussy?”

Pleasure surges through me as I moan, “You do.”

“Tell me.” The grit in his tone is so very delicious.

“My husband owns me, mind, body, and soul.”

“It’s only fair,” he murmurs. “Considering you own me just the same.” Then he puts his mouth to me like a man who knows no restraint.

The wet velvet of his tongue makes stars bloom and burst behind my eyelids. My climax gathers like a storm, growing and growing until I’m crying out, shuddering, gasping, and anchoring my hands in his hair.

As I slide back into my body, I make a mewling sound as Troy presses his lips to the light freckles on my chest.

“Cold, baby?” he asks as I give into a shiver.

I taste myself from his lips. “I love you,” I whisper. “You make me so happy.”

“Forever and always,” he returns as he lifts, then carries me over to the neglected bed. Pressed heart to heart, I cry out as he anchors us together with that first slow thrust.

“You,” he whispers, rising above me, love pouring from those burnt-caramel eyes. “I will never get enough of you if I live to be a hundred years old.”

And that’s the truth for us both.

———

On the way back to the marina, Troy throws his arm carelessly across my shoulders. “It’s not the first time she’s seen my ass.”

“Who?” I demand as jealousy flares inside me.

“My mom.”

“Oh. That’s okay, then.”

“I love it when you’re jealous.” He presses his lips to my cheek. “But also, you were the one who wanted to bring her on our honeymoon.”

“I love spending time with your mom, and we are not *on* honeymoon,” I add, trying to ignore the way my skin reacts to the brush of his hand. The evening is sultry, the old stones underfoot still seeming to hold some of the earlier day’s temperature. “Unless this is our second honeymoon so far this year.” This year that’s only six months long so far.

“I think everyone should have an annual honeymoon.”

“Or two?” I tsk. “Senility must’ve set in early. Maybe I should consider divorce proceedings.” I find myself spun around in that instant, my hands flat against his chest.

“I told you, wife, this isn’t over until I say it is.” He kisses me on the nose, spins me around, then smacks my butt.

“Hey!”

“Don’t blame me. Blame the Spanish lothario.”

“*Hmph.*” But I’m smiling on the inside. I glance around at the old town, inhaling deeply, relishing the sights and sounds. And the scents. Orange blossoms and food from nearby restaurants. The salty brine of the ocean not so far away.

Arm in arm, we return to our meandering stroll as we make for Puerto Banús marina. *I don’t even have to ask him to slow down for my shorter legs these days.*

“I think our whole marriage is a honeymoon,” my sweet talker says, his lips nuzzling my neck.

This man. My man . . . is good with his mouth. So good, in fact, that he's still the CEO of Table, his company.

It seems just like yesterday we'd spent the remains of that weekend ensconced in my favorite staycation Manhattan hotel. *Making up and making love.* Troy swore our love was worth the risk. He said he'd give up ten companies to keep me in his life. *To keep me safe.*

He also promised he had a couple of tricks up his sleeve.

Monday morning, bright and early, Max and Troy issued a press release announcing an independent external review for the company. I doubt the SEC had even finished their first cup of coffee that day. The action immediately changed the speculation—the narrative—as in the eyes of the world, Table went from "being under investigation" to "this crew has nothing to hide." It was a genius move, getting ahead of the problem before it truly became one. Super genius because it also neutralized my dad's power.

Of course, it helped that I recorded my last conversation with him, the one where I promised I'd leave Troy, that I'd toe the line in exchange for him calling off his regulatory dogs. Lucky for us, but not so much for him, he boasted how far his reach was and even mentioned the name of his SEC contact.

Like a good daughter, I sent him a copy of the recording. He got what I was putting down, which saved us a dramatic confrontation. Safe to say we're still estranged two years later.

I don't cry over that.

I'm so happy these days. I have a home with Troy, a relationship with his sweet mother, and I exist in a place where I'm loved and adored. Somewhere I'm valued and listened to . . . even if I sometimes need to make sure I haven't hypnotized my husband with my boobs. *Apparently, they have a tendency to make his ears turn off.*

We finished decorating the rest of the apartment together, which basically meant Troy just said yes to everything I showed him. *Happy wife, happy life, right?* And I am happy. So very happy. We've laughed and fought (mostly over the validity of wallpaper) and christened every single one of the rooms. Even the outdoor shower. My life is the very essence of wedded bliss.

On the work front, my fund launched three months ago to the pops of champagne corks and bottle caps at the party we threw for our friends. It's

hard to believe some days that what began as a conversation in our fake marital bed now supports two community-backed housing initiatives, and three women-led fintech ventures in their early stages. We're a young fund, but we're exciting, and we have many plans. I couldn't be prouder of our work.

"You're smiling."

"Is that a problem?" I ask, angling my attention his way.

"I high-key love it."

"You've been hanging out with Chelsea too much."

A Ferrari purrs at a set of traffic lights, the soft strains of a classical guitar floating from a nearby bar. The pavements are filled with tan women in silky dresses and men in pale-colored linen as conversations in Spanish, French, Italian float in the air around us.

"So when are you going to wear that bikini I bought?" Troy pulls me tighter to his side.

"I am *not* wearing dental floss and two Band-Aids in front of your mom."

"I'd settle for the bedroom. Wear the red lipstick and stripper shoes with the red sole."

"The Louboutins? I'm pretty sure you have a shoe fetish." *A fetish for me wearing heels, that is.* And while I might sound like I'm grumbling, I am in fact, all of a quiver. Again. He just does it for me. For my heart and my head and my body and my soul.

Troy Templeton makes me feel whole. And somewhere between all that pretending and then breaking, I learned that loving him was never the risk. Walking away from him was. We're not perfect and sometimes we tread on old hurts, but we won't ever make the same mistakes again. Not because we've changed or because we're different people, but because neither of us is willing to pay the price twice.

"You're just easier to fuck on your feet when you're six inches taller, Tater."

"Rude!" I harrumph and dig an elbow into his ribs.

"I'm getting old—I've got an ailing back. And I just love the visual."

"Pervert."

"Only for you, my love."

"I'll wear the bikini when you grab a spanner and slap on the plumber's 'stache."

“Fine. But you’ve got to wear one, too, you little freak.”

“Hey!” I turn to face him in the busy street and tighten my fist in his shirt. *God, I want to kiss him.* “You’re not allowed to yuck my yum!”

“Am I allowed to lick your yum?” he asks, making a passing tourist squeak.

“You’ll get us arrested,” I say, but I’m laughing.

“Knowing you, it’d be a setup.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I protest, despite intuiting what he’s about to say.

“I’m not going gay for pay, Clara, no matter how much you love gay porn.”

“I never said I love it.”

“Yet I keep finding the suggestion in the jar.”

“I can’t think how,” I reply, all innocence. “Anyway, I wore pointy ears for you when *screwing a woodland fairy* came out of the jar.”

“I didn’t say Puck, I said f—”

On my tiptoes, I slap my hand over his mouth. His fingers loop my wrist as he lifts it away.

“Just don’t waste your money hiring a couple of fake cops to frisk me.”

“You’re no fun.” I give a heavy-sounding sigh when he tugs me closer and kisses me thoroughly, right there on the street. I give a soft sigh as he pulls away. “Okay, you’re a little fun.”

“That’s what I thought,” he says, his eyes shining like twin golden flames.

“I love you.” The sentiment just bursts out of me. I mean, it often does.

“I know.”

I frown. “That’s not the reply I was hoping for.”

“You know I worship you. In fact, I don’t think my life could get any better than it is right now.”

“I bet it could,” I say on a chuckle.

He cants his head, almost in admonishment. “Tater Tot, how many times do I need to tell you blow jobs in public are frowned upon?”

“I can top that,” I say, my eyes filling with tears. “And if you mention anal, I’m telling your mom.”

His expression changes in that instance, his smile dissolving. I see a tentative excitement. Hope. Maybe a little fear. A dash of disbelief. His

expression really does run the full gamut.

Meanwhile, joy and light bursts from my mouth. “We’re getting a puppy!”

“A what?”

“A puppy! When we get back to New York, we’re picking up a beagle puppy!”

“Something that chews the furniture and pees on your sheets?”

“Yep, and we’re picking her up next week.”

“Great.” He gives a roll of his eyes, kind of *what next*.

So I tell him. “A puppy will be good practice because I’m pretty sure I’m pregnant.”

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To the Lambs, thanks for your patience and support.

To my family. The ogre who lives at the top of the house has left and I have returned. In body if not mind. Love you loads, my lovely weirdos.

To Mike, thanks for everything.

And to the person holding this love story in their hand. I hope it allowed you an escape, brought you some laughs, and maybe pulled on your heartstrings a little. Thanks for reading and for giving me the best job in the world.

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TURN THE PAGE TO SEE A PREVIEW OF DONNA ALAM'S BOOK, *TO HAVE & HATE*!

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I’d always expected to get married in my grandmother’s garden. During spring probably, if I’d given it any real thought at all. The garden would be fragrant with bluebells and tulips, the scene like something out of a Monet painting, with color and fragrance bursting all around our guests. We’d exchange our vows at the edge of the lake as the sun set before spending the evening dancing under fairy lights that would mirror the stars.

It’s funny that I would consider these details now, when a few days ago, I was no closer to finding a husband than I was to sprouting wings. Yet here I am, alone in a hotel, about to marry a man whose first name I don’t even know.

There have been no invites to send, no cakes to taste, and no videographers to vet. I’m not even wearing a wedding dress.

They say your wedding day is supposed to be the happiest day of your life, but I’d have to disagree. That’s not to say I’m unhappy, though. I’m more resigned to my fate. Today won’t be the pinnacle of my existence, and not for the lack of champagne or the absence of friends flitting around me like butterflies in the room, but more for the fact of who I’m marrying.

Why I’m marrying can wait for another time.

“Are you ready?”

As my husband-to-be enters the room, his eyes fall over me in a cool sort of appraisal. If only I could share his detachment, because how I feel about him is anything but cool.

Oh, Beckett. Let me count the ways I loathe you.

You’re the bane of my existence.

A thorn in my side.

And I’m pretty sure you’re the devil in disguise.

Remind me again why I’m about to become your wife?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestseller Donna is a writer of love stories with heart, humor, and heat. When not bashing away at her keyboard, she can often be found hiding from her responsibilities with a book in her hand and a mop of a dog at her feet.

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