



Baby Mommas

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Description: When a baby is dropped on Faye Erwin's doorstep, she has three questions: Why's it here? Where'd it come from? And how does she get rid of it? The English professor's worked hard to distance herself from her trashy family, and she's got enough going on without taking on her irresponsible sister's problems. To make matters even worse, an airheaded student is there to witness the embarrassing event.

Jaz Neeson has never seen her calm, contemptuous thesis supervisor thrown so far off-balance. Faye's dazzling intelligence - not to mention her iridescent beauty - have always intimidated the masters candidate. Since Jaz adores kids, she offers to nanny the chubby-cheeked little girl. Winning Faye's approval is a potential bonus.

Faye's sense of duty means she's stuck with the infant for the moment. As she learns to change diapers and heat up formula, she also begins to appreciate Jaz's intelligence and tenderness. Forced to spend time more together, the two women realize they care for each other - and for Gretchen. But as the three start to feel like a family, Faye and Jaz's custody comes into question.

With outsiders trying to take their baby away from them, will Faye and Jaz be torn apart too? Or will they manage to give Gretchen a loving home?

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Jaz

Let me tell you, a special place in hell is reserved for women who want to fuck their thesis supervisors.

It's about the most shameful thought a person could have, isn't it? To sit across from someone with the most brilliant mind you could imagine, a person more incredibly accomplished at her young age than most could hope to be in a lifetime, a woman people pay tens of thousands of dollars to listen to...

And to only be able to think about easing the frameless glasses off her Grecian nose, sweeping a hand through the neatly combed brown locks, and taking off the tailored blouse one button at a time...

It was a crime.

“Jaz? Any thoughts on what I just said?”

My back straightened, and I placed both hands on the desk that—unfortunately—separated us. In the cramped confines of her office, we would've been practically on top of each other without it.

I exhaled, willing my subconscious to remember what she'd been asking about. But now all I could think of was us on top of each other.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Erwin. I lost track of myself for a second. Would you mind repeating that?” I squirmed subtly in my seat.

The sympathetic smile the professor gave me softened her eyes and rounded her cheeks, somehow making her look even more attractive. “Again, please call me Faye. We’re going to be working together quite a bit. It’ll be much more pleasant if we’re on a first-name basis.”

Faye. The woman whose presence had dominated an entire lecture hall in my sophomore year wanted me to call her Faye.

Not Dr. Erwin. Not even Faye Charlotte Erwin—yes, I may have stalked her a little—but Faye.

“In any case,” she went on, “I was asking whether you might want to include the works of Nikki Giovanni in your research.”

“Ah...” Giovanni was an important Black American poet of the sixties and seventies, and one I hadn’t considered. I already had five poets to analyze. “Don’t you think it would be taking on a lot?”

Faye shuffled through her papers, silent for a long moment—too long. “You have Emily Dickinson, Margaret Atwood, Dorothy Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Kathy Acker here,” she said at last. “Do you see the problem?”

“I’m not sure.”

Her tongue emerged to wet her lips, and as she leaned forward, the slightest hint of cleavage revealed itself at the collar of her teal blouse. Cleavage! I gulped, my mind racing off in a thoroughly inappropriate direction.

You cannot reach over and undo those buttons. No, not even the top one! Stop thinking with your cooch and keep your mind on the conversation, would you?

The problem was that in all my research, I hadn't come up with a single piece of evidence that Dr. Faye Charlotte Erwin was anything other than straight.

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And that kind of thing tended to come up when you stalked hard enough.

I cleared my throat, hoping I could come up with a response when I had no idea what the woman had said. No way was I going to ask her to repeat herself again. If she started to think I was some kind of moron, she'd regret agreeing to supervise my thesis. She might even hand me off to another professor.

It wasn't fair. A discussion about this topic usually would've set my soul alight. Especially with someone so fucking intelligent. Faye just had those big brown eyes under her glasses, and that graceful neck that made me want to wrap my arms around it as I slid my tongue into her mouth. Sitting this close to her, I could even smell her perfume.

Mother... fucking... lavender.

I shrugged off my denim jacket, wishing I could fan my face.

"Jaz?" she asked again. "What do you think?"

"I'm so sorry, uh, Faye. My mind's not quite here today. I just... could you...?"

She blinked a few times, but repeated herself without comment. "I said the five poets you've chosen come from a similar perspective. Adding Giovanni would give your analysis more diversity." She examined the list again. "In fact, you may want to remove one or two of the others to allow her more space."

I managed to keep myself in check long enough to get out a "Right, of course." Faye

specialized in postcolonial literature, while up to now I'd focused more on feminist poetry. I'd chosen her in part because I wanted more of the postimperial perspective in my thesis.

...And in part because I wanted to find out what was under that tweed jacket she always wore.

No, Jaz! Not going to happen, so stop it already!

This conversation would've been so much easier if we could do it over email. Maybe she'd be willing to conduct all our correspondence online. It wouldn't be so bad—she was a busy woman, she had other things to do, this could only make it easier for her.

I opened my mouth, ready to blurt out the half-baked idea, when I noticed the concern that had grown in those glimmering brown eyes.

“Are you doing all right?” she asked. “You seem... distracted. Is something going on in your life?”

“Well...” Tell her you have a family emergency and you have to fly to Timbuktu! “I'm all right. Didn't sleep so well last night, is all.”

She tipped her chair backward. “Up late studying?”

“Nothing that exciting. I was marking pop quizzes until one in the morning.” I shook my head, recalling how I'd assumed I'd be able to get them done in an hour. “And these were one-page quizzes, not even essays. I don't know how you all do it.”

As a teaching assistant, I didn't have to do any actual teaching this semester. However, I did get to grade whatever Dr. O'Neill felt like dumping on me. That left my schedule open to do things when I wanted... but they did have to get done

sometime.

“First time TAing, right?” Faye asked. “I doubt O’Neill will make you grade essays. He likes a little more control when it comes to the major assignments.”

“Oh yes, I’ve already noticed his iron fist.”

Were we chatting now? Was I going to have a personal relationship with Faye, too?

Not that kind of personal, of course. As much as I might fantasize, I refused to seriously entertain the idea for a second.

We smiled at each other, and as Faye stood up, she extended a hand. The touch sent a surge rushing through me, powerful enough to make me stop and close my eyes. Ducking my head to cover the effect she’d had, I put my jacket back on and

brushed a stray hair back over the shaved side of my head.

“Go home and get some sleep,” Faye said. “And then think about what I said today.”

“All right.” I dropped my hand to my side. “Sorry about that.”

“Email me anytime,” she said. “Let’s meet again in a week, okay? You can start doing some preliminary research and update me on your progress when we see each other.”

She grabbed the doorknob, and I stared harder at her. If I wasn’t going to set my eyes on those perfect features for a full week, I could at least memorize them in the meantime. Lord knew I’d be revisiting the mental image once or twice before the week was up.

Hell, now that she was extra forbidden, she might just become my biggest fantasy.

She swung open the door—and stopped short.

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A baby was hanging from the doorframe.

Not hanging in the sense of rope and nooses and tiny infant faces turning an unfortunate shade of purple. No, and I'm sorry to put that image in your head in the first place.

This particular baby was swaddled up in such a way that he—she—it swung loosely through the air.

From what I could tell through the pink cloth wrapping it up, it couldn't have been more than a few days old.

“What the fuck?”

I clapped my hand over my mouth, conscious of having sworn in front of my thesis supervisor.

But as Dr. Erwin circled the hanging child, her lips parted and the words she said were just barely audible. “What... the... fuck.”

“It's a baby.” Sounding smarter and smarter there, Jaz.

Faye's brow furrowed ever so slightly as she inspected the bundle. “Yes.” She lifted a tiny arm and turned the hand up and down as if making sure it was real, her lips pursing.

“Whose is it? Why's it here?” Great question! If she knew, she'd already have said

something!

But she had to know. Babies didn't just materialize out of the ether.

She shook her head, taking the ends of the cloth down so she could let the baby down, holding it in front of her so its head began to roll back.

"Let me get that!" I grabbed the kid out of her hands and cradled it, supporting the head on the palm of my hand. As I shifted it in my arms, it began to fuss.

And as it did, I heard the crinkle of paper.

"There's a note." I pulled it out and reluctantly handed it to Faye.

There were several paragraphs to it, but she scanned them with the speed only an English professor could have.

"Ah." She sounded calm now, as if the note explained everything and there were no more problems with the situation at all. "Her name's Gretchen. She's a gift from my sister."

2

Faye

"Did you see a woman come through here? About this tall, looks a little like me but blonde and kind of... trashy?"

Pauline shook her head regretfully. As the alumni affairs secretary, her office was closest to the humanities building entrance, but she was often too wrapped up in her own work to notice much else going on.

“Thanks anyway.”

I’d asked everyone now, and no one had seen Amanda come through. It didn’t matter much, anyway. She wasn’t answering her cell phone, and although I wasn’t sure at what point during my meeting she’d been here, I was positive she’d be long gone by now.

Which meant the baby was still in my office with my student, who’d offered to watch her for a few minutes while I figured things out.

Not that I was anywhere closer to doing that.

I walked back, keeping my steps as natural as I could. Continuing to present a calm appearance was important, considering that I was in a professional setting. Internally, I was freaking the fuck out.

Remembering who the kid was with, I walked a little faster. I half-expected Jaz to have taken off and left her behind. She was flaky, that one, always daydreaming during our meetings. If I’d known she’d be like that, I might not have taken her on. She’d sounded so articulate in her email introducing herself and the topic she wanted to study.

Apparently she’d taken my 201 class a few years ago and loved my approach. That was my first year teaching here at Beasley, and amid all the craziness of a new position, I had no memory of her. My records showed she’d gotten a 91, a rare grade for me to give out, so I concluded she was bright enough for me to supervise.

I pushed open the office door and Jaz sat up, jiggling the baby on her lap. “How did it go, Professor?”

“Faye,” I told her for the millionth time.

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I still believed there was a clever mind behind the flakiness... even if her looks did nothing to support that belief. She had a guileless grin that she flashed around at every opportunity. The indiscriminate way she gave it out made her appear sincere... and perhaps a touch simple-minded. Her hair didn't help. Both sides were shaved and the strands she did have were dyed pink.

Not only that, but she had the kind of wide, innocent eyes that made her look younger than her age. I was shocked when I pulled her academic records and found out she was twenty-five. There were only four years between us!

Part of the issue was that she appeared to be one of those people who was wildly intimidated by professors. The ones who thought we were some sort of different species.

We weren't, and Jaz needed to learn that soon—because if that sophomore-year grade and the quality of her emails were any indication, she could very well be on a path to being one of us.

But I would have to think about Jaz's issues later, because again, she was sitting in my office with a baby on her lap.

A baby that, apparently, I was now responsible for.

"Did you figure anything out?" Jaz asked.

"Not a thing." I took Gretchen from her and held her up to examine her—except Jaz made a small noise and grabbed her back again. "What are you doing?"

“If you don’t mind me telling you what to do, you have to hold newborns like this so their heads won’t fall back. See?” She showed me the way she’d held her earlier. “Their necks aren’t strong enough to support their heads yet.”

“Oh.” I took the child a second time, and although her eyes opened briefly, she fell asleep again as soon as I cradled her properly. “How do you know that?”

“I have a lot of younger cousins,” she said. “Once they were born, my sisters and I were the obvious choice for babysitters. Neither of them was interested, so I gave it a try.” She gave a wry grin. “Not exactly the best way to become the cool kid on the block, but I saved a little money and learned a lot about little kids.”

“Hmm.” I was still staring at the baby.

“Sorry, I’m sure you don’t want my life story right now.”

Or ever, really... but I kept my mouth shut.

“What are you going to do about Gretchen?”

She passed me back the note I’d accidentally given her when I ran out to see who’d seen Amanda. I winced as I realized she must’ve read all of it. How Amanda got knocked up and decided to keep the baby, but now that Gretchen was here she’d realized she couldn’t handle actually being a mother. How I was the most responsible person she knew and I’d be the best choice to raise the little girl. How she was already certain I’d love Gretchen as my own, but she herself just couldn’t do it.

I hadn’t even been aware my sister was pregnant.

“I’ll handle it.” I went to grab my jacket, jostling the baby so she let out a wail.

“It sounds like your sister may have postpartum depression,” Jaz said, reaching for Gretchen. “You need me to hold her again?”

“No, that’s fine. I’m leaving.” I winced as the kid’s cries grew louder. Jaz may have been onto something about the depression. Then again, this was actually kind of typical for my sister.

“You’re taking her home?” Her eyes widened, and she moved as if to block the door. “Do you have a car seat or anything?”

“It’s fine. I’m going to do this th

e old-fashioned way.” I took the two pink strips of cloth and looped them around the back of my neck, forming a makeshift baby carrier. “Thank you for your help today... and your, uh, understanding. I’ll see you next week. Please come prepared.”

“I will.” Jaz buttoned her denim jacket, still looking at me as if I was a ticking time bomb. “And if you need a babysitter, you know who to call.”

Ha. Funny.

I was getting rid of this baby as soon as humanly possible.

* * *

I pressed the phone to my ear, my free hand balancing Gretchen on my lap. “What do you mean, you don’t have an address for Amanda?”

There was a long pause before my mother deigned to respond. “You know she stopped speaking to me,” she said. “How would I have her address?”

“You two stopped speaking to each other. That fight was as much your fault as hers—at least, from what little either of you has told me about it.”

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I could hear the shrug in her voice. “That girl does what she wants, just like she always has.”

Talking to her was impossible. This whole thing was like a nightmare turned to reality. “Ma, you have to have some way to find her.”

“She wants nothing to do with me.”

“It’s been months since that fight, Ma. No, years. How long are you planning to hold a grudge?”

“If you’d heard the things she called me... She can apologize to me whenever she feels ready.”

“What could be so bad?” I asked, then stopped myself. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. I just can’t believe you don’t want to forgive and forget.”

“That hussy can come to me if she wants forgiveness. I have no intentions of getting in touch with her.”

“You’re talking about your own daughter.”

“So? Clearly you haven’t been in contact. She’s your sister, too.”

We were getting sidetracked talking about this never-ending feud they were having. “Can you at least tell me if you have a more recent phone number than this?” I asked, and read out the one I’d been calling.

Ma hesitated, and for a moment I thought I might actually be getting somewhere. “That’s not the one I have,” she finally said. “It was five-two-one-something.”

I let out a sigh. As annoying as it was that she hadn’t bothered to get me the full number, it didn’t matter. I remembered that number as the one Amanda had before her current one.

I’d called both sets of digits today—many times. All I got was a robotic voice announcing the first was out of service, and a similar voice saying the mailbox was full at the second one.

My hope had been that Amanda had been unable to afford her phone plan and had gotten a new number. I couldn’t imagine her being unreachable by phone. She spent about twenty-three hours a day texting and calling. Not overly mature for a twenty-three-year-old, but that was how it was. When she wasn’t gossiping or creating drama, she was squeezing into too-small dresses so she could go out and have what she considered fun with her equally useless friends.

“I already had that number,” I told Ma. “Don’t you know anything else? People she was hanging out with? Anything at all?”

“Last I heard, she was living with that black man in Johnston.”

My mother would never refer to Wesley by his name. And she wonders why Amanda doesn’t want to be in touch with her. Not that I blamed Ma for not wanting to, either—Amanda had more than enough flaws of her own.

Wesley’d actually been good for Amanda. For a while, it seemed like he’d put her on a better path. She’d drank less from what I could tell. Stayed home more. Even got a part-time job for a little while.

They'd split up ages ago. I didn't know why, just that Amanda had gone back to her old ways. I doubted Amanda was still living anywhere near Wesley. Last I heard, she was in our hometown of Sargasso, but she could've been anywhere in the country now.

Gretchen let out a wail, which by this point was sounding more like a squawk. She hadn't shut up once during our car ride home. I'd had to turn the radio up to the maximum, making me feel like I was about to get arrested for disturbing the peace—and Gretchen was still louder. I'd plugged my ears one-handed as best as I could, then shoved bits of paper in them to block the sound... and still her screams pierced through.

Who would've thought an infant who weighed less than some of the textbooks I used could make a sound so damn large?

I gritted my teeth. "You have to help me," I told Ma. "You hear that, don't you? I'm about to start banging my head against the wall."

"I would, but I haven't heard a word from her in a very long time."

Gretchen quieted enough for me to hear voices in the background. Soap operas. My mother is having this conversation while she's watching soap operas.

At least Ma wasn't watching Springer. Now that would've been ironic.

"That's all I know," she said.

How did she manage to sound so damn bored? "Don't you even care that you have a grandchild?" I asked. "Aren't you at least mildly curious?"

"Of course I am," she said without changing her tone. "You asked if I knew where

Amanda is, and I said no.”

“Fine.” More gritting. My teeth were going to be gone in about a day if this kept up.

“Since you care so much, I’ll bring this kid up to your place and you can take care of her while you look for Amanda.”

“I can’t take a baby.” At last I heard some emotion in her voice, a note of panic coming into it. “I’m busy. I have a life.”

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“And I don’t?” When she let a moment pass without responding, I went on. “I never asked for this kid, and I have no responsibility for her. None. If I can’t find Amanda, I’m sending her to CPS.”

“You’ll find Amanda, Faye. She’s the mom, and mothers love their babies too much to give them up.”

I snorted. That gave me zero hope, considering who I was talking to. “Just tell me if you hear from Amanda.”

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

I slid an arm under Gretchen’s cloth, holding her closer to me. “Nobody wants you, kid. Nobody.”

Her little face squinched up tight, everything but the downy hairs on her head turning a brighter shade of red than they’d been so far. Her mouth opened again, and I braced myself for yet another yell.

And then the scent drifted up to my nose.

How the hell was I supposed to change a diaper?

I wasn't planning to bother Dr. Erwin again. I'd done enough of that yesterday.

But I was dying to know what'd happened with the adorable baby I'd held, and her office was only five minutes out of the way as I walked to the library—okay, ten minutes if you count the round trip.

It wasn't stalking to stroll by and see if anything was going on. I mean, a tiny bit, but I was doing it out of... concern. For the baby's welfare. Right, we'd call it that.

Nothing to do with the way I'd been utterly fascinated with Dr. Erwin ever since taking her 201 course three years ago. The solemn professor with the magnetic presence, the one who wrote brilliant analyses of the novels I'd loved for years, the one who'd introduced me to even more literature that had now burned its way into the deepest parts of my soul—she didn't intrigue me in the slightest.

I definitely wasn't dying to know what she was like when she wasn't behind the podium in a five-hundred-person lecture hall. Even over our past couple of meetings, I'd pretty much only seen the same serious, intimidatingly intellectual persona. But that couldn't be all there was to her.

Did I crave any further peeks into the realities of her life? Nope. Not at all.

So I honestly wasn't planning to bother Dr. Erwin... but as soon as I took my first step into the humanities building, I heard Gretchen screaming her little head off.

I ran through the halls, not even bothering to look before the hairpin turns. I nearly slammed into a student or two before arriving, panting, at Faye's door.

"It's-just-my-niece-she'll-be-out-of-here-soon-I-promise!" she said in one breath.

Gretchen was still in the pink cloth she'd come in, swaddled up so as to suspend her

against Faye's chest. She only looking more pissed as she looked up from her papers and saw it was me. "Jaz Neeson. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to check in on you," I said, hovering in the doorway. "Make sure everything was okay."

"It's not." She threw her pen down, and Gretchen squealed at the top of her lungs.

"Hey, whoa. Want to give her to me for a second?"

Her face darkened, but she undid the knot around her neck. "Sure. If you think you can shut her up, have at it. Don't think you're the first, though. Every woman in this building's already tried and failed. Half of them claim to have special mommy magic, but guess what? It doesn't exist."

"They don't know her like I do." I circled my arms around Gretchen, sliding into a chair to make her feel safer. "Hey there, gorgeous. You missed your auntie Jaz, huh? I missed you, too, but I'm here now."

"Auntie Jaz," Faye scoffed—but she was quiet as I kept whispering to Gretchen until she calmed down. "What's your secret?"

"I don't know," I said. "Been told I'm a natural with kids."

"Hmph." She tipped her chair back, rubbing a hand over her face as she let out a long exhale. "I apologize if I'm crabby today. Now it's me who didn't sleep. She had me up half the night."

"You said you were going to handle it. I thought you meant you were going to get in touch with her mother."

“I was.” Faye pursed her lips. “Easier said than done.”

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I held Gretchen close, still marveling at her tiny perfection. “How so?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you about this.” She massaged her neck. She was wearing the same shirt as yesterday, I noticed—which might’ve been a turn-off, if it wasn’t still showing that hint of cleavage. Lean a little further...

“It’s

all right,” I said. “If you want to talk about it, or not talk about it... I’m here.”

Tell me everything. Make me your confidant. I want to know every part of your history... not to mention every part of your body.

“My family is... not traditional,” Faye said after a pause. “My mom barely knew my dad. Or my sister’s dad, for that matter. She moved us around a lot when we were kids. Other than my first twelve years in Sargasso, we never stayed in one place long enough to finish a lease. I guess it rubbed off, because Amanda isn’t exactly the kind of person to have a fixed address. And since she’s not picking up her phone...”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say. None of this had shown up on her faculty page.

“It’s all right. I have a plan. I intend to contact her friends. Surely she had some sort of help during her pregnancy and the birth. One of them will be able to lead me to her.”

She was going to be like a private investigator. “She seems like your complete opposite.”

“I don’t exactly know how I turned out so different from my family,” she said thoughtfully. “As a child, somehow I realized that an escape was to bury myself in books. My grades were good enough to get me a full scholarship. I’m the only one in my family to graduate high school, never mind getting a doctorate.”

“Wow.”

To think yesterday I’d thought some small talk about other professors was such a big deal! Now Faye was opening up to me for real... to an uncomfortable extent, really.

Catching sight of my face, she gave a faint smile. Even that tiny bit of pleasantness made my knees go weak, and I was glad I was seated.

Leaning over her desk to tap Gretchen on the nose, Faye continued. “All that goes to say, I couldn’t get ahold of my sister last night, and my mother wants nothing to do with Gretchen. I plan to keep looking for Amanda, but she’ll stay with me until then.”

“With you?” I looked again at the helpless infant, then at the woman who seemed to have no idea what to do with her. “Have you been feeding her?”

Faye let out a grim laugh. “Told you I was up half the night, didn’t I? I know how to Google. It took a few attempts, but I managed to get some formula into her. Even changed her diaper.” Her nose wrinkled. “Three damn times.”

Maybe Gretchen would be all right with her after all. Still... “The babysitting offer stands.” Out of concern for her welfare, and that was all. “No charge.”

Her first urge was to say no, but I saw her suppress it. She bit her lip, looking at how Gretchen lay quietly in my lap. “Seriously?”

“Of course. She’s a darling... and I know kids... and you need help.” I fluffed up

Gretchen's little bit of hair. "If or when things get a little more under control, you can start paying me if you still want to. But let me start this off as a favor."

I could practically see the thoughts running through her mind. She was supervising my thesis... and she'd be a member of the committee when I defended it. Some people might've said there was a conflict of interest. That she'd give me preferential treatment because I was doing something nice for her.

The baby opened her mouth again and I popped my thumb inside. She began to suckle it like a soother, and Faye stared at me in amazement.

I could practically see the "conflict of interest" evaporating from her mind.

"You're hired."

* * *

Since Faye had professor stuff to do, I agreed to take Gretchen for the rest of the day. Piling all the baby stuff into my hands, she said goodbye with an expression of utter relief.

Considering that she'd had her for less than twenty-four hours, that baby had a lot of stuff.

I balanced everything in my arms and headed for the library. I got a few funny looks along the way, but at least Gretchen was quiet.

Supposedly, Beasley was a family-friendly campus. The administration didn't want to discourage young single parents from coming to school here. Given that the school was Ivy League, not many people actually had kids and there was no need for anything like a day care. But the policy meant I could take Gretchen wherever I

wanted. She was generally a good baby, only crying when she needed something. That helped—but even if she squawked at top volume all day, according to the school's code of conduct, no one could complain.

Once I found the most private study carrel I could, I set her down and went through what Faye had bought. Gretchen had a few bottles of formula now, as well as diapers and a couple more outfits. There was an actual baby sling too, the tags still on—I guessed Faye hadn't had a peaceful moment to unpack it.

Gretchen burbled, and I wiped the drool off her chin. I probably wasn't going to get much work done on my thesis today... but how cute of a distraction was she?

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I put her in the sling so I could hunt down a few books I wanted for my research. She seemed to enjoy the movement, and she made happy little sounds as I walked around the stacks.

This kid was really too cute for words. I pinched her cheek as I finished putting the books in my backpack. It was a real crime that her mom didn't seem to want her. These first few days of her life were so important, and this Amanda person wasn't even attempting to love or care for her. I wished there was something more I could do.

To think I'd been thinking about getting a pet soon! I'd been halfway tempted to at least get a little ferret or something. Well, that plan was going to be on hold indefinitely. Gretchen would fill the "small, needy things you have to take care of"-shaped void in my life.

As I got in my car, I remembered the baby store at the mall. I'd been in a couple of times for gifts. All right, occasionally I glanced in as I walked by. Baby clothes were cute, all right? I had a soft spot for kids—probably because I was just a big one myself.

Fuck it. I'd take Gretchen to the baby store. She needed a couple more things, like a car seat. Even if Faye didn't keep her for long, her mom could use the seat later.

When I got to the store, I deliberated between choices for what felt like an hour. There seemed to be an infinite variety of car seats—different ones for different ages, weights, and heights. After all of my looking, I wouldn't have been surprised if they made different ones for every personality type and zodiac sign.

At last I made my choice, a rear-facing car seat that could be used from birth up to a year. It looked easy enough to install, and it would fit in a standard back seat.

I moved toward the cash register... then saw a rack of sparkly soothers. I popped one into my cart in case Gretchen started crying when I wasn't around to give her my thumb.

All right, one more circuit around the store to be sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

Those tiny shoes were pretty adorable. Poor kid was going to need to keep her feet warm. She might as well do it in a miniature pair of Converse.

And she'd need some cute little socks to go with the shoes. Those frilly pink ones would be a nice contrast with the black and white.

What about a pink hat to match? It was going to get cold pretty soon.

And she'd need a blanket... and pajamas...

By the time I got to the front of the store, the cart was overflowing. Literally. I almost dropped Gretchen out of her sling as I bent over to pick up the things that'd fallen out.

The man ahead of me in line was startled when my head bumped into his ass, but she gave me a sympathetic look as I straightened up. "New baby? How old is she?" With the gift set he was holding, he appeared to be a grandfather.

"She's not mine, so I'm not sure. I've only had her for a few hours." Great, that sounded like I'd kidnapped the kid. "It's complicated."

The grandpa gave me a confused smile and moved forward in line.

When the cashier rang me up, I took a deep breath. The total was more than a teaching assistant made in a month... or several. But Gretchen needed the Mario Brothers T-shirt in five colors.

I handed over my credit card.

* * *

&n

bsp; When I met Faye at her office at the end of the day, she looked overwhelmed by the mere sight of Gretchen, as if by having her out of sight, she'd managed to suppress the fact that the baby existed.

She pushed her glasses to her forehead to massage her temples. "How'd it go with her?"

"Not bad. She slept most of the day, really." I smiled, hoping to cheer her up.

"Which means she'll be up half the night, no doubt." She dipped her head to massage further back. "I suppose I'll bring her home with me. I still haven't been able to get in touch with her mother."

"Do you need any help?" I set Gretchen on the desk and stretched. As light as she was, carrying her around for so long was hard on my back. "I got her some more stuff, but I just realized I forgot it in the car."

Faye steepled her fingers and rested her chin on top. "You've been shopping? Did you get much research done today?"

"Not exactly." I cringed to admit it. "I took out a few books, but I haven't had a

chance to look at them.”

“All right. Go get some food—I assume you haven’t eaten either—and go to the library. Get some work done and bring Gretchen’s things in the morning.”

But I wanted to see more of her now. Plus... “One of the things I got was a car seat,” I said. “I don’t think it’s safe for you to drive without one.”

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“Hmm.” She peered at me. Without her glasses, her eyes were even more lustrous, and my stomach flipped over a few times before she spoke again. “I’ll get it from your car now.”

“It’s already set up in mine. Why don’t I take Gretchen and follow you to your place?”

4

Faye

I got out of my car a moment before Jaz pulled into the driveway. I wasn’t sure how exactly she’d managed to invite herself over here. Yeah, she’d ingratiated herself to me with the free babysitting, and sure, her skills with kids meant maybe she wasn’t as empty-headed as I’d feared. None of that meant I wanted her seeing my private residence.

We were going to have to move the car seat from her car to mine eventually, anyway. It would’ve been just as easy to do it in Beasley’s parking lot as here. But Jaz was here now, and as she emerged and I caught sight of the wide grin on her face, I almost didn’t regret letting her come over.

While my Honda’s tires were nearly worn down to the rims, her Camry was practically more rust than metal. With a few snaps and buckles, we’d released the car seat from her car, and by reversing the process, we got it firmly installed in mine.

“You know, we’re both probably going to be driving her,” she said, grabbing a few

large shopping bags from the backseat. “We’ll need to get another one.”

I raised an eyebrow. Jaz was acting like Gretchen was somehow her responsibility. And like she was going to be with me for more than a day or two.

“Don’t forget she’s going back to her mother as soon as possible.” I grabbed the bags from her and went up the steps to the door. “This is far from a permanent arrangement.”

Jaz climbed after me, Gretchen in her arms. “Nice place you got here, Prof.”

Both eyebrows went up, until I realized Jaz had only seen the outside. The building looked like a nice Victorian home—three levels high, with a gorgeous façade worthy of a Bronte novel.

I pushed open the door. “Hope you’re ready for a work-out.”

We passed the dim, dusty entrance hallway with the doorways leading to the ground-floor apartments. At the end of a dark corridor, I nodded to the staircase. The two that led up to my floor were steep and rickety, as if the builder had wanted to punish residents for daring to venture inside. Even after three years of living here, I felt as if I might put my foot through a floorboard at any second.

By the top, I was huffing and puffing with the extra weight of the shopping bags. As I should’ve expected, Jaz pretty much skipped the whole way, even carrying Gretchen. She didn’t seem fazed by the eerie gothic atmosphere, either.

“I guess that’s it,” she said.

Yet she made no move to leave, looking around as if she planned to come inside. I gritted my teeth. Politeness would dictate that I offer her a drink, or something along

those lines. She had kind of saved my ass today. And if I wanted her to continue providing childcare, it was only right that I try to be... friends.

“You want to come in?”

Her face lit up. “I’d love to.” Inside, she peered around at my ancient “vintage” furnishings and my wonderful view of the parking lot. Her surprise was visible, but she kept quiet about it. Instead, she said, “Gretchen will need a high chair, won’t she? And does she have a crib?”

I let out a sigh as I grabbed two beers out of the fridge. “She’s not staying. She slept in bed with me last night. According to the Internet, that’s called co-sleeping and it can actually be healthier for the child. As for eating, she can do it on my lap.”

Passing a beer to Jaz, I sank into an armchair. This was technically my living area, but with the size of my kitchen—and my normal lack of company—I usually ate here as well. I kicked a few crumbs under the chair legs, unsure why I even cared what my student thought.

“That works,” she said hesitantly. “I just want the best for her. She’s such a sweet little girl. Aren’t you, gorgeous?” She brushed her cheek with the tip of her finger, an affectionate gesture that made me feel oddly empty.

“Sure, when she’s not screeching her head off.” I tipped back my beer, draining half of it in a gulp.

“She’s a baby, Faye. She’ll grow out of it.”

“I hope she’ll be long gone by the time that happens.” Realizing how bad that sounded, I hurried to explain. “Nothing against her, but I didn’t ask for a baby. And I didn’t play any part in making her, either. She just showed up, and I seem to be stuck

with her.”

Jaz nodded, adjusting her denim jacket around her shoulders. She wasn’t bad-looking when she went serious like this. There was a certain appeal to her youthful features and her slender frame... although I still objected to the “half-shaved head” thing.

Too bad about the personality. Although to be fair, she hadn’t gone all daydreamy and unfocused when Gretchen was around. It seemed she could pull herself together when it mattered.

“You wouldn’t give her to... somebody?” she asked. “The government, or something?”

I sighed. “The way I understand it, my only option is CPS. I may not have any lost love for this child—” Gretchen’s face twisted up as if she knew what I was saying “—but she’s my blood, and she’s not going into the foster system while I’m here to stop it.”

“So if you can’t get her back to your sister...”

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“That’s not a possibility,” I said, more firmly than I’d intended. “She’s going back to Amanda, whether that girl likes it or not.”

Jaz petted Gretchen’s head, and the baby gurgled contentedly. “But...” she started. “Well... even if you don’t want Gretchen, it doesn’t exactly sound like Amanda is the most stable person. I don’t even mean you not being able to find her. I’m talking about her dropping this kid at your door before the umbilical cord’s even fallen off.”

My back straightened, and I set my beer down on the coffee table. “So what?”

“I’m just saying, she may not be the most fit to be a mother.” She grimaced, clearly implying I should keep the infant I’d never wanted. “It’s a shame the baby’s father isn’t in the picture.”

“When I get in touch with her, I’ll find out who he is. He should be paying child support at the very least.” I softened into the armchair, letting its soft plush hug me. “Really, it’s amazing Amanda got this far without this happening.”

Having said all there was to say on the matter, I glanced at my watch. It was six now, which probably meant Gretchen should eat. She seemed to do that constantly.

I got up. “I’ll heat up some formula.”

“I’ll change her diaper.”

Jaz followed me into the kitchen and laid a towel on the table without asking. Not that there was much of anywhere else to do it, but it didn’t seem the most hygienic.

With a sigh, I decided to wipe it down later. Disinfectant—one more thing for the neverending new-baby-owner shopping list.

Although we were both occupied with our tasks, Jaz didn't take the opportunity to shut up. "You know, I've never used a baby-changing station before," she said, sanitizing her hands. "It was pretty easy to figure out, though."

"Doesn't seem too hard," I snorted. "I'm sure I'd handle it fine if I ever need to."

"And I'm sure you will need to, considering..."

I slammed the microwave door shut. "Not my baby."

"I know, I know. Sorry."

She had her hands full with Gretchen, and I reminded myself again of what a favor she was doing me. Even my own mother, this kid's grandmother, wouldn't do this much for the baby.

My friends would help me, if I ever got over my pride enough to ask for assistance. But I doubted they'd offer more than a few hours of babysitting here and there. Jaz's immediate readiness to take on a full-day commitment was something completely different.

I leaned against the wall while I waited for the microwave to do its work. "So how'd Gretchen deal with the mall?"

She fastened the clean diaper around Gretchen's bottom. "I think the noise frightened her a little."

She was about to go on when a knock came at the door. My brow furrowed, and I

tensed.

“Are you expecting someone?” Jaz asked.

I forced a smile. “No. Let’s ignore it.”

“Why? It doesn’t have to be some Mormon missionary just because you don’t know who it is. Can you really not think of anyone who might be at your door right now?”

I could, but I wasn’t about to tell her that. Even if we’d almost been having a nice chat, my personal life was absolutely none of her business, especially when it came to who I assumed was at the door

.

“It might be Amanda,” she said. “Let’s go see.” When I only glared in response, she grabbed Gretchen off the table. “If you don’t want to open it, I will.”

I gritted my teeth. This fucking busybody... “Leave it alone, Jaz. It’s fine.”

She didn’t seem to be listening, so I raced after her... just not fast enough to keep her from opening the door.

The welcoming smile on her face disappeared as she saw the visitor was neither my sister nor a white-shirted missionary. I hung behind her, bracing myself for the shitshow that was about to happen.

“Who are you?” Jaz asked the woman who stood in the doorway.

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The woman was pleasant-looking this time, if a little short for my taste. Her face was weather-beaten, her hair greying—I couldn't judge, it wouldn't be long until I was there myself.

Jaz's eyes widened, and I followed her gaze to the handle of a paddle sticking out of the stranger's purse.

"I'm Christine, from Craigslist. And that's the sub I'm supposed to be dominating tonight." The stranger pointed to me. "A better question is, who are you?"

5

Jaz

Clutching Gretchen to my chest, I took a step back. That bumped me into Faye, and I jumped forward as if I'd been burned by a hot stove.

My head was spinning. Faye was a lesbian? So I had a chance... except apparently she was going to sleep with a woman from the Internet tonight, and not me. Could it have been me if I'd happened to put up a Craigslist ad?

"I'm so sorry," I muttered. "I'll get out of your way. I'll take Gretchen, and you can—I mean, I guess she should stay here, so I don't know how you were planning to—"

"Stop, Jaz." Faye silenced me with those two syllables. "You need to leave," she told Christine.

“What? But we had so many plans. I was really looking forward to the part with the whipped cream.”

“I don’t have any, so leave.”

Faye sounded serious, but I spoke softly to her anyway. “Seriously, you don’t have to cancel this because of me. At least give her a chance. She came all the way up those stairs...”

Christine looked from me to Faye, her expression alternating between confusion and hopefulness. Her hand hovered over her handbag as if she was about to pull out some whipped cream now.

“You don’t understand,” Faye told me. Turning to Christine, she said, “You didn’t talk to me on there. In fact, report the person that told you to come here. It’s a fake.”

If she was serious, she’d been pretty quick at figuring out what’d happened. What if she was planning to have sex with this woman, but got embarrassed and lied?

Whether it was with me or not, I liked the mental image of her covered in whipped cream...

“I drove an hour to meet you,” Christine said. “You’re honestly telling me I should turn around and go home?”

“It’s okay,” I whispered to Faye. “If you want her to come in, I understand. We’re all adults here—I understand everyone has needs. Don’t let me get in your way.”

“You’re not in my way!” Faye’s exasperation was written all over her face. “You, leave. You, get back inside and stop thinking I have any desire for this person to be here.”

Christine sulked some more, but after another vehement rejection, she backed away and left. Slamming the door behind her, Faye cursed softly.

Funny, only a day ago I'd never thought I'd hear her swear. Now she seemed to do it all the time.

"You seem to have a knack for catching me at embarrassing moments," she said wearily, taking Gretchen from me as she collapsed onto the sofa. "You're probably wondering what all that was about."

"Just a little."

She snorted, apparently able to see I was actually burning up with curiosity. "It's my ex," she said. "We broke up a few months ago, and it wasn't exactly amicable. In fact, it was downright nasty. Think Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, but without driving each other to suicide."

I frowned, not seeing the connection. "So your ex..."

"Thinks it's some kind of hilarious revenge to send horny women from Craigslist to my door."

My arms felt empty without Gretchen in them. I folded my hands awkwardly as I sat in the armchair Faye had vacated earlier.

Faye's tone made it clear she was telling the truth. So much for my tiny shred of hope. Actually, the entire queer female population had lost out tonight. Even if Faye would never look at me twice like that, I'd sure liked the idea that she could be batting for the same team.

"So it's a prank? Your ex thinks it's funny to imply that you'd be gay?"

Now Faye gave me a funny look. “Well, no. That wouldn’t be much of a joke.”

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“Because being LGBT isn’t funny?” At least Faye wasn’t homophobic.

“No, because my ex is a woman. I am gay.”

“Oh-h-h-h.” I probably sounded a little too excited about that. And it didn’t help when my traitorous mouth decided to open up and say, “Me too.”

All Faye said in return was, “How lovely for you.”

But—and I swear on my grandmother’s grave that I wasn’t imagining it—she looked at me differently after that.

* * *

On Friday night, my friends weren’t too amused when I told them I might have to miss the open mic night to babysit.

“The fuck?” Andrew asked over the phone. He was already at the bar with Sven and Farrah, and I could hear them complaining in the background. “You always come. How much are these people paying you to skip it?”

“No pay,” I said, moving the phone from my ear to check if a text had come in.

“It’s a family thing, then?”

“No...” I drew the word out for the time it took me to cross my bedroom from one end to the other. “It’s just a thing.”

“And you really can’t get out of it?”

I checked for texts again. Nothing from Faye... yet. What if she texted at ten needing me to take care of Gretchen? “I haven’t actually been asked to do it yet, but I want to be available.”

“What the fuck!” Andrew’s volume dropped, and I realized he was holding the phone away from his mouth as he told our other friends, “Jaz’s on standby in case she gets a babysitting call.”

“Look, I’ll explain,” I said.

“Over some drinks when you get here?”

One final check for a new text. “Yeah, fine. I’ll be there in twenty.” I could always leave if Faye needed me.

“Make it ten,” Andrew said threateningly.

I got to the bar exactly eighteen minutes later. I wasn’t going to let anybody push me around.

The first group of amateur poets was only halfway through, so I slid into a seat next to my friends and listened. The poetry wasn’t bad this time. You never knew what you’d get. Some nights, there was some pretty cringe-worthy stuff.

The final guest finished reading a long, emotional poem about his dad’s mental health issues, and the crowd erupted in cheers.

I stood up to head to the bar when Andrew’s arm blocked my path. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell us what was going on earlier.”

That reminded me to glance at my phone again. “Nothing.” And there were no new messages, either.

Sven and Farrah circled around me, crossing their arms. “Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“All right, fine.”

These friends were all masters’ students, too. They’d understand wanting to impress a thesis supervisor. Keeping the explanation as brief as possible, I filled them in on what was going on.

Except they weren’t as understanding as I’d expected. After glancing at the others, Farrah took the lead. “This doesn’t sound terribly good for you,” she said carefully. “Dr. Erwin’s in a bad spot, but expecting you to babysit without pay? Seems to me like she’s taking advantage of you.”

“No, no. I offered.” I thought for sure that’d clear

up my friends’ objections... but it didn’t.

Sven had a less diplomatic approach than his girlfriend. “Are you fucking stupid?” he yelled, his accent coming out stronger than usual. “You don’t work for free. Only a stupid person does that.”

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My face heated, and I wished I'd managed to get that drink. "I was only trying to help. I told her from the start I'd charge her eventually."

Farrah gave an encouraging nod. "Yes, I think this would be a good time to start."

"And what is this bullshit about waiting for her to text you?" Sven barreled on. "She needs to tell you in advance if she wants you, not text you at the last minute. This is basic workers' rights, my friend."

With no beer to fall back on, I coughed a few times instead. "She's never texted me at the last minute," I said. "Not so far. But she might!"

Andrew looked at me quizzically. "So what, you want her to ask you to work for free on a Friday night?"

"Well, no... but is it so bad if I want to hear from her?"

The three of them went silent, and I knew I'd said too much. They looked at one another as if wordlessly electing a spokesperson. Please let it be Farrah.

It was Farrah. "You're saying you like her?" she asked, peering closely at me. "Like her, like her?"

I barely inclined my head, but apparently that was enough for the three of them to start shouting. I pulled back, unwilling to hear what they were saying.

Farrah shushed them with a wave of her hand. "Jaz, this doesn't sound healthy. Not

when it comes to your thesis supervisor.”

A woman ascended to the stage, a sheaf of papers in her hand.

“Let’s talk about this later,” I said. “The next poet’s coming on.”

I didn’t see how this situation was so unhealthy. And I hadn’t had time to tell them she was into women. Did that make a difference? It meant I was only a little out of my mind to think I might have a shot.

I sat back in my seat, my thoughts whirling.

The worst of it was, I still hadn’t managed to get a damn drink.

6

Faye

Some lesbians were interested in straight women. A small, strange minority even fetishized the idea.

For whatever reason, they liked fantasizing about someone they could never have. Forbidden fruit was always sweeter, wasn’t it? Or perhaps some internalized homophobia stopped them from seeking out a real, healthy relationship. If they were only into straight girls, they’d never find an actual partner.

In any case, there was little point to me psychoanalyzing those types of women. Fact was, I’d never been one of them.

When it came to romance, I looked past heterosexuals as if they weren’t even there. Why waste my time? Sure, there’d been a few schoolgirl crushes in my younger days,

but I'd grown out of those as soon as I got to college and began meeting other out-and-proud women like me.

Not that I met them all that often... but I dated here and there. I'd gotten myself into that relationship with Brenda, ill-fated as it was. No, I hadn't been on a date in the months since. The way it'd ended had soured me on relationships in general.

But as I was saying, lesbians and bisexual women were around. Absent any evidence to the contrary, I assumed any woman I met was not one of them.

There were all types of hints, if you knew what to watch for. A masculine way of dressing. An avoidance of pronouns when talking about their past. A rainbow flag pinned to a backpack.

Jaz Neeson had exhibited none of those signs, so she'd never been on my radar. I'd never seen her as anything but a student—and a flaky, maybe-not-too-smart one at that.

Now that I knew she was playing for my team, though?

All bets were off.

Which was why I didn't call her for the entire weekend. I could've used the babysitting, since I still didn't have the gift of shutting Gretchen up and the two-hour car ride to Sargasso was hell with an infant caterwauling the entire way. It even would've been nice to have some company when, after covering every inch of my hometown and interrogating everyone I could find, there was still no sign of Amanda.

My best lead came from the waitress at the diner where I'd stopped for lunch. She'd been in my sister's grade in high school, and she'd heard some rumors about Amanda moving to the other end of the state. My best guess was that she was talking about

Johnston, where Amanda had lived with her ex. I intended to go there next weekend and see what I could dig up.

Meanwhile, one of Amanda's old friends had a toddler and was vehement that she was never going through that again. Against my protests that I wasn't keeping Gretchen, she'd loaded a few boxes of baby stuff into my car. That was nice, I supposed, just thoroughly unnecessary.

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In any case, I'd been thinking of Jaz in a whole new way over the past couple days, and that really wasn't a good thing while I was a professor and she was a student. Especially when I was supervising her thesis. And the whole free babysitting thing didn't exactly make things any less complicated.

Which was why on Monday morning, when she arrived at my office to pick Gretchen up, I folded my hands on my desk and said, "We need to talk."

"What is it?"

I took a moment to respond, in which time she squirmed adorably in her seat. Her blue eyes looked bigger than usual. More innocent. And as I stared into them, I wondered why they kept drifting down to my lips.

"I can't be your thesis supervisor anymore."

Jaz's face fell. I mean, it literally looked like she was about to start blubbering. "Have I not been working hard enough? I know I didn't get a lot done before our last meeting, but—" was that a sniff? "—I did prepare some stuff for today." She patted her backpack.

Way to sound like the world's biggest jerk, Faye. "That's not it. And I wouldn't blame you if you hadn't gotten anything done this week. You've been busy."

"I have, but I still want to work on my thesis." She cleared her throat. "With you."

I pulled Gretchen's knit hat a little farther over her ears. "All things considered, I

think it would be a better idea for you to work with someone else. I've already spoken to Dr. O'Neill. He already has a few masters' students this year, but he likes the sound of your research, and of course he knows you from your TA duties. He's willing to take you on."

"I..." Jaz bit a pink lip. "I guess I can work with him instead."

"Great. I've already set up a meeting for you two. Visit his office today at three." I pushed a slip of paper with his office number across the table.

Although Jaz blinked a few times, she took it. "All right. I guess I—I'll take Gretchen now."

Instead of handing her over, I hugged her to me. "That's another thing. The babysitting..."

"Am I not doing well enough?" Jaz asked anxiously. "I've never had a complaint before. Of course newborns take a lot of specialized care, and if you'd rather go to a professional, I understand completely. I—"

I cut her off. "You're doing great. I'm just not comfortable with the situation."

"So you found somebody else?"

"No, Jaz, you're not listening to me."

My harshness made her recoil, and even Gretchen gave a little groan as if she'd caught the sudden shift in the room's mood. My heart immediately went out to Jaz. She was too sweet for me to snap at her like that.

"Sorry," I murmured. "What I'm trying to say is, I'd like to pay you."

“To pay me!” She threw her head back and laughed. “I guess I can live with that. As much as I adore Gretchen, I can only do so much as a favor.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Gretchen’s squinty eyes opened and closed, and I tapped her nose absent-mindedly as I spoke. “How does twenty an hour sound?”

Jaz’s jaw dropped open. “That’s way too much, unless you’re talking about twenty cents! You know I’m happy to hang out with her for free. I was thinking about getting a pet anyway.”

I gave her an odd look. “Twenty an hour is too much for you?”

“I couldn’t take it,” she said. “Twenty a day would be more likely.”

“Twenty a day? Not a chance. I’ve got you looking after her for hours on end. Favors are one thing, but I won’t have you working at slave-labor prices.” I bounced Gretchen on my knee. “Eighteen an hour, and that’s my final offer.”

“She’s not even your kid,” Jaz said. “You don’t actually want her. You can’t afford that.”

“Don’t tell me what I can afford.”

She snorted. “I’ve seen your car. And your place. There’s no way you can spare...” She counted on her fingers. “Three hundred-something bucks a week. Nope. Twenty-five a day, and that’s my final offer.”

I glared at her. “Fifty an hour.”

“Sold!”

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I pushed my glasses up to rub my temples. Was Jaz fucking with my mind the whole time, trying to make me give her more? Had I fallen straight into her trap? I definitely couldn't afford fifty an—

"I'm messing with you," Jaz said, leaning over to give me a shove on the shoulder—a touch that left me slightly breathless. "Can we go with minimum wage? That way I won't be ripping you off, but it won't be slave labor either."

I let out a breath. "That would work." Passing Gretchen to her, I added, "But I can also supplement that wage with unofficial advice on your thesis... if you want it."

It was weird, I'd seen them together a hundred times before... but today the sight of Jaz cradling Gretchen made me melt a little. When she brushed an eyelash off that baby's chubby cheek, I thought I might actually coo out loud.

"That sounds great," she said, hooking the baby sling around her neck. "Maybe over a beer, if it's unofficial."

She wasn't asking me on a date. I didn't want it to be a date.

"Let's say Friday night," I said. "I'm buying."

* * *

I tried my best to focus on Gretchen instead of Jaz that week. Not hard considering she demanded a lot of attention. This whole baby thing was a lot of work, to say the least.

Bye-bye to full nights of sleep. Farewell to clothes without spit-up on them. Toodles to having any approximation of a social life.

Gretchen was always there. Crying, screaming, eating, needing.

When I could hand her off to Jaz, it was like taking a weight off my shoulders. I didn't know what I would've done without her.

She did more than just carting her off while I worked. She stuck around after, holding my hand—figuratively—as I figured out just how I was supposed to keep this tiny human alive and in good spirits.

There didn't seem to be an infant care instruction manual. Google helped, but not enough.

With the Internet, I'd managed to get food into Gretchen... but half the formula had ended up on the floor. Jaz showed me how to get a majority of it into her stomach.

Bathing? If it were me alone, she'd've gone without a bath for a solid month before I thought of it. When I ran to Jaz in a panic, asking if babies too little to sweat still needed to bathe, she laughed at me and said she'd been giving Gretchen baths. Then she took me to the restroom sink and taught me I could, too.

As for soothing, Jaz still had me beat there. As far as I could tell, her ability to calm that kid down was nothing short of magic.

But I was getting better. I learned to change a diaper without decorating the walls with baby poop. I figured out how to get things done while Gretchen was napping. My sleep schedule was even adjusting to waking up five times a night.

Slowly, I was getting used to having Gretchen in my life.

Sometimes I still thought I'd go crazy. Sometimes I still threw up my hands and asked why this had happened to me.

But slowly, surely, I was figuring out how to handle this.

* * *

“What the fuck is the matter with her?” I asked on Thursday night.

Through the baby's screams, I could barely hear Jaz's voice over the phone. “What's going on, Faye?”

“I'd tell you if I had a goddamn idea.” I hit the speaker button and threw the phone on the couch. It bounced, landing under the cushion. I pulled it out and threw it down again. “This fucking demon from hell won't shut the fuck up, and that's about all I know.”

So much for handling this. I spoke far too soon. A saint couldn't handle this. Hell, Jesus Himself couldn't.

“Whoa, chill,” Jaz said. “I've never heard you this worked up.”

Did she not hear the ear-splitting sounds that I'd been enduring? How could she tell me to chill?

“You don't understand,” I growled. “She's been going on like this for a goddamn hour.” I readjusted Gretchen in my arms, glaring down at her. “She's fed. She's clothed. She's changed. I'm giving her more than enough attention. What the fuck else could she possibly want?”

“Okay, just breathe. This happens to everyone.”

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“I don’t care who it happens to! Just tell me how to shut her up.” I bounced Gretchen in my arms. If she didn’t quiet the hell down soon, I didn’t know what I’d do.

Jaz’s voice drifted up from the phone speakers, infuriatingly calm. “Look, at this point you’re probably making her more upset. She can sense what kind of mood you’re in.”

“I was in a good mood before she started hollering her head off for no goddamn reason.”

“Be that as it may... just try talking to her in a soft, soothing voice.”

Fuck. Was that even possible? This fucking infant had frayed my nerves to the point where soothing her was the last thing I wanted to do.

And if I sounded like a jerk, well, I was past the point of giving a fuck.

“Quiet down, stupid child,” I said in a singsong tone.

“Faye... it might help if you didn’t call her stupid.”

“She is fucking stupid!” I exploded.

Jaz laughed. She actually laughed. “Do you need me to come over?”

For about a millisecond, I considered lashing out at her for implying I couldn’t do this on my own.

Then I remembered, no—I couldn't.

"If you don't mind," I said wearily. "I would be so fucking thankful."

Fifteen minutes of vociferous screams later, Jaz arrived at my door. She was in pajama pants and a well-worn T-shirt. I looked at my watch. Was it really half past midnight?

"I'm so sorry," I told her through the piercing cries Gretchen still emitted from my arms. "I didn't know I was pulling you out of bed."

"Not a problem." She suppressed a yawn. "You needed me, and I'm here for you."

"Let's see if you'll cut that out for Jaz, kid."

I handed Gretchen to her, and she gave her a quick inspection. I was oddly proud to see she didn't immediately quiet down and that there was nothing obviously wrong with her. This wasn't me being a clueless caretaker, it was her being a brat of a baby.

"Where's her soother?" Jaz asked.

"She spat it out. About ten times."

I would've felt even more satisfied... but I was too tired for that.

"Hey there, gorgeous," Jaz murmured, jiggling the baby in her arms. "What's going on, huh? It's way too early for you to be teething."

"Oh, fuck." I'd forgotten that was a thing. "When's that going to happen?"

"When she's around six months, maybe a little earlier. I hope you're ready for a lot

more sleepless nights.”

“We’ll see.” Theoretically she’d be long gone by then.

Jaz shot me an odd glance. Bringing Gretchen to the couch, she swayed her back and forth and began to sing. “Rock-a-bye baby, in the treetop...”

Her voice was clear and low, and I found my own eyes closing at the sound of it. As she went on, Gretchen’s cries slowed until finally they stopped entirely.

I crept up beside Jaz and pushed the soother into Gretchen’s mouth. She latched onto it and sucked, although her tiny brow was still furrowed.

Jaz came to the end of the song and looked at me. “You’re a miracle worker,” I told her.

“I just have practice. That’s all it is.”

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She went to hand Gretchen back to me, but as soon as they broke contact, the soother popped out and Gretchen started up again. As soon as she pulled her back, she went silent.

“I swear you’re magic. You can go open up my wallet and take whatever’s there. Take my credit cards, too. You deserve it.” Shaking my head, I yawned. Now that Gretchen was somewhat dealt with, exhaustion was hitting me, too. “I wouldn’t be able to talk you into staying over, would I?”

Jaz’s eyes twinkled. “Asking me to spend the night before we’ve even been on a date? That’s daring... but I’ll take it.”

My mind raced. Was she joking? Did she think our Friday night beer was actually supposed to be a date? More importantly, did she want it to be one?

No answers were forthcoming, and my need for sleep overwhelmed me.

“You and Gretchen take the bed.” I flopped down where I was. “I’ll take the couch.”

7

Jaz

I stuck my hands under the tap and used the water to slick back my hair. The pink strands were usually pretty good about staying out of my face, but the sides were growing out. I needed to get them shaved again soon.

Maybe combing it would fix the problem. After hoisting Gretchen a little more comfortably against my chest, I took a miniature comb out of my purse to start again.

A stall door clanged shut behind me, and an undergrad who looked about sixteen stared openly at me as she came up to wash her hands.

All right, the Beasley library bathroom wasn't the ideal place to prepare for a non-date. Especially not with a baby bouncing against my chest. But what choice did I have? I'd been

working on my thesis notes all afternoon, and no way was I going to meet the woman of my dreams looking less than perfect.

I frowned at my reflection. My lip gloss had been licked off and my eyeliner had faded. I reapplied gloss and reached for the eyeliner pencil, nearly jabbing myself in the eye with my attempt to freshen it. Tears came into my eyes as I finished defining my waterline.

The undergrad stared at me openly as she left the bathroom. Who cares? She's not the one getting a beer with Dr. Faye Erwin tonight. I waggled my eyebrows at myself... and squinted at my eyeliner again. I'd missed a spot.

Rolling my eyes, I tapped Gretchen on the forehead. "Doesn't matter, right, kid? Faye sees me all the time. She already knows what I look like."

I turned to leave... except another undergrad came out of the second stall just in time to see the weirdo who'd been talking to herself.

Oops.

Well, again, who cared? Only Faye's opinion counted tonight.

We hadn't called it a date, but let's be real. Two single lesbians meeting for drinks? We'd even spent the night together. And yeah, I was way too excited about being able to say that, considering we'd slept in two separate rooms.

Still, this was something—especially when we were no longer professionally connected in any capacity.

Oh, I'd done my research. I'd pored through the university code of conduct and, if I was interpreting the legalese correctly, there was nothing stopping me and Faye from engaging in a relationship at this point. Would it be frowned upon? Sure... but we were both adults, and there was no power differential now that she wasn't affecting my grades. Plenty of professors dated students.

As I walked toward the on-campus pub, I told myself not to get my hopes up. The potential for dating didn't mean there was any actual interest on Faye's side. As far as I knew, she still only saw me as the dimwitted chick who went all dreamy-eyed whenever she spoke to me.

But as much as I tried to convince myself, I already knew it was too late. My hopes were sky-high now, and nothing short of actually being turned down by Faye was going to kill them completely.

When I got in the door of King's Tooth, the bar was already crowded with students—and Faye, waiting at a table near the back. My heart sped up and my face got a little hot. Faye was waiting there. For me. And she was wearing a nicer jacket than the tweed one she usually had on. Did that mean anything? Or was it just that the weather was getting colder?

My eyes were still on her when a security guard stopped me in my tracks. "You can't come in here."

“Excuse me?” I fumbled for my ID.

“I’m sure you’re legal, miss, but your friend there isn’t.” He gestured at Gretchen.

Shit. I hadn’t thought twice about bringing a baby into a bar. I made a face at Faye, hoping it got across the message come over here and help me out. She squinted to look at us closer, then stood up, leaving a nearly-full pint glass on the table.

“She won’t be any trouble.” I stuck Gretchen’s soother in her mouth. “She’s really quiet, especially when she’s got this thing.”

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The guard glared at her with unconcealed distaste. “No under-twenty-ones.”

When Faye reached us, she barely glanced at the guard. I’d expected her to persuade the guy to let us in, but instead she grabbed my arm. “I wasn’t thinking when I invited you here. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Shivering from the contact with her hand, I would’ve agreed to anything she suggested. “Where do you want to go?”

* * *

Sitting in a parking lot drinking juice boxes wasn’t exactly the most romantic first-non-date activity I could think of.

But with Gretchen sleeping peacefully in her car seat in the back, Faye and I could have a grown-up discussion uninterrupted in the front. And for me at least, Faye’s presence was the most important part.

Since we couldn’t get our hands on any more adult drinks, she’d shyly pulled the juice boxes out of her trunk. Apparently she kept them on hand for days when she didn’t have time to eat, to keep her blood sugar from dropping too low.

“So I’ve been developing the outline for my thesis.” I paused to take a pull on the straw. “Dr. O’Neill’s been helping quite a bit... although he doesn’t bring the postcolonial perspective I was hoping you would.”

Faye stared forward, her profile silhouetted in the quickly darkening night. Even the

outline of her was sexy as fuck as she replied, “That’s why we’ve met tonight.” Just break my heart, why don’t you?

“I’ve been considering a lot of the concepts you taught in that 201 class. Exoticism, metanarrative...”

“Right, you did take that class.” She gave a small smile. “Nice to know I got through to someone. Sometimes it feels like the students are only thinking about what kegger they’re going to that night.”

“I kept every note I took,” I said.

“Did you decide to include Giovanni in your analysis?”

“No, I actually decided to take it in another direction.” I’d been able to focus much better now that my head wasn’t clouded by Faye’s beauty. “I’m comparing Adrienne Rich with Audre Lorde in their approach to identity, sexuality, and politics.”

“Narrowing it down is good.” Faye turned to face me, the shadows playing on her face in a way that made my stomach flop over. “What kind of comparison, though?”

“I haven’t exactly gotten that far.” And I wasn’t going to while I was this close to Faye. Fuck, the longer she looked at me, the harder it was to breathe. “I’ve just been reading and rereading the poems, waiting for something to jump out at me.”

“Any favorite lines?”

I gulped. “You’re really going to put me on the spot?”

Faye laughed softly. “I’m not asking you to recite an entire poem, but if anything jumped out to you enough to stick in your mind, that could be a good starting point.”

“Well...” I’d been buried in poetry books for most of the week. “Whatever happens with us,” I blurted, “your body will haunt mine.” Faye was silent, and I grimaced in immediate realization of what I’d just said to her. “That’s Adrienne Rich. The unnumbered poem from Twenty-One Love Poems. Not, you know, you. Your body.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t think you were talking about my body.”

I hung my head. Could I humiliate myself any more? If I opened my mouth again, I was pretty sure I’d manage it.

“Do you remember any more after that?”

“Umm... tender, delicate your lovemaking...” I clapped my hand over my mouth.

“I see.” Although she was trying to sound professional, she was clearly restraining another laugh. “So what does that mean to you? Whatever happens with us, your body...”

“It means I need to start over because I am not writing about that.”

Faye’s lips twitched. “Fair enough.”

Things had almost been looking okay for me a few minutes ago, and now they couldn’t get any worse. “Could we talk about something else, maybe? Or definitely?”

Faye let out a chuckle now. “All right. How’d you get into studying English?”

Now, there was a more neutral topic. “I was always into books,” I said. “I loved them as a kid. Got made fun of a bit when I was a little older, so I stopped reading during my early teens. I started reading again when I was babysitting those younger cousins of mine. I’d claim to have the books out for them, but fact is I was more interested

than they were.

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“One day I read a kids’ book to my cousin until she fell asleep, and I didn’t want to put the book down. I stayed up reading it until way past her bedtime. My aunt and uncle got home and found me still there, reading that stupid book with a flashlight.

“They laughed at me, and... nothing happened. The world didn’t end because I got teased a little. I realized I’d been denying myself one of my biggest pleasures in life because I was worried about what people thought. And I decided not to do that anymore.”

All right, I was still working on that. But at least I’d grown the ovaries to read whenever and whatever I wanted.

“So you came to Beasley and decided to study poetry.” A gentle smile tugged at Faye’s lips.

I rolled my head back against the seat. “You’re laughing at me again.”

“Thought you didn’t mind that.”

Ugh... “Could I ask for another change of subject, or would that be too much?”

“Sure,” Faye said. “Like what?”

“I’m curious about your ex.” I had to stop myself from covering my mouth. I really had to work on not blurting shit out like that!

Luckily Faye wasn’t freaking out on me. “What would you like to know?”

Everything, really. “How’d you know it was her who sent that lady?”

“Because she’d texted me a few days earlier and I never answered. This wasn’t the first time this happened. She doesn’t take rejection well, to put it lightly. When I used to tell her to go pound sand, she’d get back at me in even worse ways.”

“So it was the timing.” Made sense. “Why’d you break up?”

I was probably getting way too personal, but Faye appeared to be an open book tonight. “She’s crazy, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“She’d have to be if she left you.” Oh, I needed to cut the tongue out of my mouth to save myself some dignity! I could’ve cried from my shame over what I’d just said.

Faye was polite enough to overlook my idiocy. “I left her,” she said. “We were only dating, not living together, so it was a matter of a phone call rather than any actual leaving.”

“But why?”

“I came across her chat logs. Turns out she was of the opinion that English professors are ‘soft-bellied word nerds’ who get into this profession because they’re not fit for real jobs.”

“Uh, what?”

Faye nodded. “When I confronted her, she claimed she was just trying to sound cool to her friend and didn’t believe that at all. But at that point, a lot of other stuff started to make sense... like how she’d always refused to come to a facu

lty dinner, and how she never mentioned my job when she introduced me to her

friends.”

“That’s so bizarre.” I was even offended on a personal level. I could call myself a word nerd if I wanted, but I wasn’t about to let anyone use it as an actual insult.

“What did she do, if she was such a prize?”

“She’s an actor,” Faye groaned. “And not a very successful one, either. I don’t think she got paid more than a hundred bucks for a gig in the whole time we were together.” She shook her head. “My place was a mansion compared to hers.”

“Must’ve been jealous.”

“Oh, I think so. Insecure about her own life, so she tore her own girlfriend down to make herself feel better.”

“She’d freak out if she ever went to my hometown. I grew up near an actual movie star. My sister and her were good friends.”

“Who?”

“Callie Hinderbrook.”

Faye’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Wow, she’s amazing.”

“I know. She’s really great in real life, too.”

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A quiet whining sound came from the back, and both of us turned instantly to check on Gretchen. We were close enough that I could feel the heat emanating from her head as we peered into the car seat.

Gretchen was fine, but I wasn't. As we turned to the front again, I couldn't stop myself from staring at Faye. Her features were so distinguished, yet there was a softness to them I hadn't seen when we first met. She wasn't only the super-intelligent deconstructor of postcolonial literature who'd intimidated me so much in the 201 lecture. She was... relatable.

And I liked her.

My hand landed on her, grabbing it off the gearshift. I stared at it, knowing my initial impulse to bring it to my lips was completely inappropriate, but unsure of what else to do with it. With her looking at me in confusion, I squeezed that hand, unwilling to let it go.

For such an innocent gesture, it was sure doing a lot. Heat rushed through me, growing with every passing second that our hands touched. The longer the touch went on, the more exhilarated I felt. I wanted Faye. Needed her. And it seemed like maybe, maybe, I had a chance with her.

"Your ex was a fucking moron," I said hoarsely.

Gently, she extricated her hand from mine. "We should go home."

Faye

So the woman I'd spent the past week dreaming about was into me, too. So what?

Did it really matter if our first official non-thesis-or-baby-related hang-out had gone better than I could've hoped? If her annoying ditziness was actually cute when I let myself see it that way? If she was able to recite beautiful verses of feminist poetry off the top of her head?

If she was adorably shy about her crush on me?

No, I told myself as I spun the wheel to bring my car into the driveway. She wasn't for me.

I had to stop visualizing the two of us reading great works of literature to each other by a fireplace. Get rid of the idea of her getting her Ph.D. and co-authoring groundbreaking essays with me.

At the very least, it couldn't happen now.

As soon as I shut the apartment door behind me, I picked up the phone.

Jaz answered on the first ring. "Faye? Is something wrong with Gretchen?"

"No, she's here with me. I'm about to change her diaper and feed her." I marveled for the millionth time at how quickly this had become normal to me. Things I had never imagined a few weeks ago were just everyday routine.

"So what's up?"

I balanced Gretchen on my hip for the moment, wanting to give this conversation my

full attention. “Jaz... I’ve been thinking about professors and students, and the relationships they can have with each other. If a student were to be interested in a professor...” She attempted to say something, but I shushed her. “Just listen for now.”

“Okay,” she squeaked.

“It’s fine if it happens. Similar interests, perhaps a shared sexuality, it’s only natural that it would cross a person’s mind.” Like it had mine. “Thing is, professors are busy people, and sometimes they have other things going on in their lives. They might not be in a place for any kind of relationship. As wonderful as the student may be, it simply isn’t always possible.”

Jaz’s voice got even smaller. “Oh.”

“You understand, don’t you?”

“I do.” She swallowed. “But are you saying if that professor, hypothetically, didn’t have all these outside obligations...”

The baby wriggled in my arm, and I remembered the urgency of changing the diaper she was wearing. “I can’t answer that right now.” I grabbed the towel Jaz had allocated for this purpose and laid Gretchen down on it. “You’re okay though, right? You’ll still keep babysitting and everything?”

“Of course.” Disappointment hung over Jaz’s voice, but she made an effort to sound like she wasn’t bothered. “You know I adore that kid. Even if she moved out to her mom’s, I’d probably drive two hours to go babysit her.”

“Right.” Why was it so strange for Jaz to imagine Gretchen living with my sister? That was my goal here. That was why I was spending so much time hunting for

Amanda. Just... hearing it from someone else felt funny.

“So... see you Monday?” Jaz asked.

“Monday morning, bright and early.”

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We said our goodbyes, and I hung up before realizing what was wrong with the end of that call.

I'd been doing the pretending-to-be-cheerful thing, too.

* * *

The drive out to Johnston was peaceful, at least by the new standards I'd formed since Gretchen came into my life. She only spent about twenty minutes screaming, and didn't even throw up once.

When I arrived, I tucked her into her sling. I had a vague memory that Wesley worked at a community center. That gave me a place to start, even if I might have to try a couple of them. There was also the chance that he might not be working today. On the bright side, the town was only a little bigger than Sargasso.

The first community center I tried had no idea who I was talking about. At the second, the woman at the front desk said he used to work there but left a while ago.

"Is he still in town?" I asked. "Do you have any way to reach him?"

The woman examined me. "What do you want with Wesley?"

"Just to talk to him. He used to date my sister."

"Hmm." Apparently that was enough of a reason. "You're in luck—he works just down the street. And if he's not in today, I can give you his number."

Ten minutes later, I was at the entrance of Wesley's community center. Although we'd only met a few times, and they'd been together at least a year and a half ago, I instantly recognized his shaved head and the gleaming smile that contrasted so nicely with his dark skin. People flowed around us as I tried to talk to him.

"You're in town?" he asked, looking at me quizzically.

"I came looking for you, actually. I thought you might have some way to find my sister."

Wesley paused as he slid a clipboard to a guest, who wrote down her name. "What do you mean, find Amanda? She's missing?"

"Not missing," I said quickly. "I just can't find her."

He pulled the clipboard back, blinking at me. "How long has it been? Have you gone to the cops?"

"No, no. It's not like that. She just doesn't want to be found." I gave her a quick rundown of the situation. His eyes popped when I said she'd had a baby. And by the end of my story, his concern was still as strong.

"So she could be lying dead in an alley somewhere," he said. "She needs help, not guilt trips."

I crossed my arms. "The cops aren't going to give a damn if a grown woman isn't answering her phone. Besides, I'm trying to keep this baby out of the foster system. I'm doing my level best to find Amanda in the meantime. Am I right to think you can't help me with that?"

"I'm sorry," Wesley said. "I haven't heard

from her in a long time.” His eyes were downcast. “Maybe whatever man she left me for would have a better idea.”

“She left you for someone else?”

Wesley shrugged. “That’s my best guess, anyway. She just disappeared, stopped answering my texts, blocked me on social media.”

“I never knew why you two split up,” I said slowly. “Always thought she did something to make you leave. It seemed like a shame. You were good for her.”

“Thank you. Let me know if I can do anything else for you, okay?”

“I will,” I said. “I know you care.”

“More than care.” Wesley’s eyes were pained. “I loved that woman. It just wasn’t good enough for her.”

* * *

That night, Gretchen gurgled as I placed her in the bassinet I’d reluctantly bought a few days earlier. Despite myself, I smiled and bent to place a kiss on her forehead. With her big eyes staring up at me, she flailed helpless limbs in my direction.

“What, you want a hug?” I picked her up and held her for a second, then put her back. “That’s all you’re getting. It’s bedtime... even if I know you’re going to wake me up wanting formula in about an hour.”

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She giggled, and I tucked the blanket around her.

I put the baby monitor in the crib, switched off the bedroom light, and headed for the shower. I'd initially been nervous about leaving Gretchen alone for even five minutes, but Jaz said it was okay for a very short time if she was sleeping.

Jaz seemed to be on my mind a lot these days, I thought as I tested the water. It was... strange, to say the least. Usually I could keep myself in check better than that.

Even yesterday, I hadn't thought about her as much as I was doing tonight. Of course, yesterday was before she'd taken my hand and held it like that. The sparks that'd leapt between us showed there was some kind of connection there. Some kind of chemistry.

In that moment in my car, I'd almost, almost let myself go and let her in.

Shaking my head, I dropped my pants and stepped into the shower. It was still too cold, but clearly I needed the icy blast to clear my head. Goosebumps rose on my skin as the water poured over my chest.

I couldn't date Jaz. She wasn't my type... despite those gorgeous eyes, the long eyelashes, the slender frame... Yeah, not my type at all.

She was too young for me. Four years younger.

My student. Not anymore.

Too immature. Except she's practically raised a bunch of kids and you're struggling to deal with one.

Either way, what I'd told her on the phone was true. This wasn't the time to be starting any kind of relationship. I had a newborn to care for, and a sister who'd seemingly vanished into thin air to track down. If this was meant to be, it could wait until I was at a better time in my life.

The chilly shower was starting to heat up, and Jaz's face was still front and center in my mind. I'm a goner now...

Turning to let the warming water hit my back, I grabbed the soap from its dish. I was just going to shower, nothing else. So what if I was alone without Gretchen for the first time in what felt like a month? Getting off wasn't exactly at the top of my priority list these days. Masturbating would mean leaving the baby alone for a few minutes longer than necessary. Bad enough I was leaving her this long.

I soaped myself up, trying not to imagine that it was Jaz's hands on me instead of my own. Get a grip, Faye. You can live without one little orgasm.

Except if it really was one little orgasm, then it really wasn't such a big deal, right? My sudsed-up hands paused at my waist, and I swallowed hard as Jaz's dark hair and denim jacket floated through my mind. Not now. I forced my hands to move past my aching mound. Not thinking about her.

I soaped up my thighs and calves, almost proud of myself for resisting the temptation.

When I straightened up, though, the region I'd skipped still needed to be washed. And when my hand brushed over it, I couldn't ignore the thrills that coursed through me.

“Oh, fuck it,” I said out loud, and slid a finger between my legs.

The baby monitor hadn’t made a sound. I could make this quick. Crank one out fast, just to relieve the built-up tension. I wasn’t going to stand here and linger.

A few quick rubs had me panting for breath, and my gut tightened with the sudden sensations. Putting one hand on the shower wall, I leaned in and closed my eyes. With the warm water spraying over me, it was easy to imagine I was in a whole other world apart from the trials and tribulations of reality.

With my hand moving rapidly, Jaz’s face popped, unwanted, into my mind. I could see every detail of it clearly, as if she was in front of me. Those big eyes darkening with lust... those pink lips parting to let me in...

My hips jerked forward on their own as I pictured myself thrusting against Jaz’s tongue. I was close to the edge by the time I managed to pull back from the fantasy.

Think of someone else, Faye. Anyone else!

Fucking who? I tried to picture my usual go-to, Michelle Rodriguez—but after less than a second, her pointed jaw morphed to Jaz’s more rounded one, followed in quick succession by the rest of her features. As much as I tried to force her back to her movie-star good looks, she insisted on being Jaz.

My hand paused on its mission, and I strained to think of someone else who could replace her. An ex, maybe? Brenda? I brought her image into my head, but my arousal waned at the thought of being with her. That woman couldn’t turn me on now that I knew what a complete psycho she was.

Luckily enough, Jaz was still there in the back of my mind, and she nudged Brenda out of the way. “I’ll take over from here,” she told me with a grin. Oh, hell... why am

I bothering to fight this?

One more flick of my fingers and I was over the edge, exploding on the tip of Jaz's enthusiastic tongue.

I pushed myself up weakly and splashed water on the wall. As I climbed out of the shower, I was physically satisfied... just mentally completely ashamed of myself.

My lips pinched together as I dried off. I supposed what I'd just done wasn't the worst thing in the world, but still, surely I could've restrained myself from fantasizing about a student.

A now-familiar sound pierced the air. Wrapping the towel around my waist, I went to peek into the bassinet. Gretchen's face was scrunched-up and red, and her fists clenched uselessly in the air.

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“Got hungry ahead of schedule, did you?” I asked, smoothing down a flyaway hair. “I’ll go get you some formula.”

I filled a bottle with water and scooped some formula powder inside.

I hadn’t asked for Gretchen to be in my life... but I was getting used to her being here. Whether I’d sought this child out or not, she was here for the time being. And so was Jaz.

Maybe this wasn’t a great time to start a relationship. But who’d even said anything about a relationship? Jaz had tried to touch me, not asked me to marry her.

So maybe we wouldn’t be girlfriends.

What if we just had casual sex instead?

9

Jaz

“I got her a new bottle,” Faye said. “The other one was leaking.”

She handed over Gretchen and her bag. At this point, she had a gym-sized duffel bag that went along with her everywhere. Babies sure needed a ton of stuff! Other than a bunch of diapers, she had bottles and towels and layers of clothing. Faye and I’d each stuck an extra shirt of ours in, too. You could never be too careful. There was always the chance of a messy emergency.

Taking everything, I smiled at her. “Cool. So, I’ll see you around five.”

“Whenever’s good for you.”

It sounded like the end of the conversation, and I should’ve moved for the door... but she was still looking at me in a way that suggested I wasn’t quite dismissed.

I licked my lips and took a step back. “Around five. Cool.”

Her eyes lingered on mine. Fuck, if she kept doing that I was going to soak through my panties right here in her office. Why was she staring so hard?

It seemed like she’d been looking at me more—or deeper, or longer, or something—over the past few days. Well, actually... I could trace it back to the night we’d drank the juice boxes in her car.

She cleared her throat. “Got any special plans tonight?”

“Uh... I might go to a DJ night with some friends.”

Her eyes crinkled. “Good for you. You work too much, between the TAing and your thesis and Gretchen. Get out and do some fun things once in a while.”

“I try.”

She was still looking at me, so I adjusted the bag’s strap on my shoulder instead of heading for the door. “Why? What are you up to?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“Did you want to... I don’t have to go to the DJ night.”

“No, no, that’s fine. Have a good time with your friends.”

Now I was dismissed. I walked out, unsure if I’d just missed my chance to spend more time with the woman of my dreams.

I definitely had some ideas about why she might’ve been looking at me more. With the timing, it was hard to not get my hopes up about what might be going on in her head.

And even though I knew I shouldn’t be thinking about Faye that way, a frisson of excitement still ran through me when Andrew texted to let me know our group had decided to go to jazz night at another bar instead.

>JAZ: Know it’s ironic, but I’m not really into jazz. Rain check?

>ANDREW: All right, see you next time.

It wasn’t a lie or anything. Jazz wasn’t my favorite, and I might’ve skipped this if Faye hadn’t hinted at doing something tonight.

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I dropped Faye a quick line to let her know I'd be free if she felt like having another chat over orange juice. Then I jammed my phone as far into my pocket as I could and tried my best to focus on studying.

Naturally, my resolve to not look at my phone lasted all of thirty seconds. Luckily for me, Faye had already replie

d.

>FAYE: All right, great. Bring Gretchen to my office as usual and we'll go from there.

The day dragged endlessly after that. Trying to focus on intricate, metaphor-laden verse was basically impossible when I had Faye to think about. After a while of not getting anywhere, I turned my attention to the undergrads' quizzes. My eyes fuzzed over as soon as I tried to evaluate their theories about Shakespeare's subconscious messages about capitalism.

"I give up," I told Gretchen, who lay swaddled up at the back of the study carrel. "You want to go to story hour?"

The public library a few streets away held a story hour on Wednesdays at one pm. I hadn't taken Gretchen yet because I usually managed to focus on the myriad other things I had to get done. Today, though? A children's book sounded like the only thing I might actually be able to follow.

I took Gretchen's hiccup as a yes, and we arrived at the other library a few minutes

later. I balanced her and her bag as I searched for the right room. The librarian was already opening a picture book as we walked in.

“Just in time.” She pointed us to an empty seat. “We were about to read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.”

“My favorite.” I smiled at her and settled in, Gretchen on my knee.

The room was full of other kids, from babies up to five or six. As I glanced around, I found myself examining their parents. Most were a bit older than me, but some seemed about my age. Faye would’ve fit in fine here if she ever had a day off work to bring Gretchen in.

My eyes nearly popped out when I saw there was even a lesbian couple in attendance. Two women in their early thirties had their hands linked under the table. Their little girl was looking at the front of the room, already rapt—but their two boys were bouncing on their chairs and poking each other.

The scene made me wish Faye could’ve been here with me and Gretchen. Then again, we wouldn’t be holding hands. Maybe once she was a little older... I couldn’t even let myself imagine it. Faye had been so evasive about whether she could imagine dating me in the future. And avoiding the question seemed pretty close to a no.

I was about to let out a sigh, but the librarian started reading, and that perked me up a bit. I propped Gretchen up so we could both look at her. I’d read this book to my cousins a hundred times when I was in my teens, and I found myself mouthing the words silently as the story went on.

Coming here was the right decision for today. Gretchen needed to go to places like this. Sometimes it seemed like Faye and I were so busy just keeping her fed and changed, we didn’t take the time to stimulate her intellectually.

Granted she was less than a month old, but you had to start exposing kids to stuff early. We should've been playing classical music for her. Apparently that could influence a fetus while it was still in the womb, and from what I knew about Gretchen's mom, I highly doubted she'd done anything like that.

Irritated at the thought of Amanda, I hugged Gretchen closer to me. Maybe it was mean, but I hoped Gretchen would never have to go back to her. I didn't want her to grow up without her mother, but how shitty did a mom have to be to leave her baby like that?

I had my own selfish reasons, too. I'd miss Gretchen a lot when I had to let go of her. But she wasn't mine, even if I sometimes felt like I was playing the role of a parent.

The librarian closed the book and I stood up, refreshed and relaxed by the reading.

I'd have my own kids one day. If anything, this time with Gretchen was making it clear how much I wanted to have one—or several.

But all of that was in the future. Gretchen was like a practice run. A rough draft.

I couldn't get too attached to her. And that should've been easy. She was only a couple weeks old. She didn't have a personality yet. There was nothing there to grow fond of.

And yet as I cradled her to my heart, I knew somewhere deep inside me that we'd bonded.

And I felt just as surely that I'd break a little the day I had to give her up.

* * *

At five on the dot, I arrived at Faye's office. The door was open, so I walked in—but I stopped short when I saw she already had someone inside.

The gray-haired woman was seated in the chair I usually took. I wheeled around, ready to kill some time and drop Gretchen off later.

Before I could go, Faye called out to me. "Jaz, there you are. Do you know Pauline? She's the secretary of alumni affairs."

"Oh... no. We've might've emailed before, if you're the one who handles the grad rings."

"I am," she said with a smile.

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I shook her hand, although I was confused. I glanced at Faye, silently asking what is she doing here?

“This must be little Gretchen. It’s so wonderful to finally meet you properly,” Pauline said to the baby, then looked at me. “I came to see who was crying when she first got here, but Faye kicked all of us out pretty quick.” Back to Gretchen. “We’re going to have such a good time together!”

Okay... I was still missing something. I looked at Faye, hoping for an explanation.

“Pauline’s going to babysit Gretchen tonight,” she told me.

What? But I babysat Gretchen. Had I messed up somehow? Why would she need a sitter other than me?

Seeing the look on my face, Faye explained further. “I figured if someone else was looking after Gretchen, you and I could relax for once.”

Oh. I guessed that was okay.

Still, I felt a little funny as I handed Gretchen’s bag to Pauline. “She’s the world’s sweetest baby,” I told her. “Make sure she eats enough, because she doesn’t always cry when she’s hungry. If she starts fussing, that means she’s probably ready for her bottle. All her stuff is in here, I doubt you’ll need anything that isn’t there. And let me give you my number in case anything does come up.”

Pauline blinked at me, then laughed. “It’s all right. I already have Faye’s.”

I saw no other way to procrastinate on handing the baby over. I undid the sling and helped Pauline get it around her neck.

“I’ll see you later, Gretchen. Be good for Pauline.” I gave her a kiss on the forehead.

I felt a little empty as Faye and I walked out of the office. How could I be so jealous? I left Gretchen with Faye all the time. Usually at this hour, too.

But that was different. She was her caregiver, not to mention her aunt. Pauline was some stranger. Of course I was going to worry about her.

“She’ll be fine without us,” Faye said. She was walking awfully close to me, and she nudged me in the ribs as we approached the building exit.

Suddenly I remembered that I was alone with Faye for the night. “What were your plans, anyway?”

“I thought maybe we could get that drink I owe you.”

Right, she’d said she was going to buy me a drink. She was just sticking to her word. Nothing romantic about this.

We made small talk as we crossed the campus and entered King’s Tooth. Somehow I felt like there was something Faye wanted to say, something she was holding back.

You’re just trying to convince yourself there’s something to this that there isn’t. She already told you how she feels. She’s being nice, and that’s all.

Once we were sitting down with some beers, Faye asked about my day. I told her about my inability to focus, which seemed to make her unhappy. But she listened with evident pleasure when I told her about taking Gretchen to story hour.

“I never knew there was one,” she said. “How did you hear about it?”

My face heated up. “I did some googling about events for babies in the Rosebridge area. They have kid-friendly afternoon movies at the theater on Peach Street once a week, too.”

“Let me know if you want to go. I’ll pay your admission.”

“I’d pay.” I inched my chair closer to the table. “It’s not an issue, Faye. Every second I spend with Gretchen is a joy.”

Her lips twitched. “You miss her now, don’t you?”

“A ridiculous amount.”

We talked about Gretchen some more, then about my thesis, and then about poetry in general. Faye didn’t ask me to quote any more lines, thank fuck!

But by the time the bill came at the end, I got the feeling Faye was still keeping quiet about something.

Okay, fine, I’ll admit it. I thought—hoped—she hadn’t told me the real reason she’d invited me out.

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As we walked out to our cars, she did seem more reticent than usual. She barely spoke until we arrived in front of my Honda.

At that point, she pressed her lips together. She looked me in the eye, then darted her gaze away. “Listen, Jaz...” she said, looking at the ground.

“Yeah?”

My heart beat faster. Something romantic. Something romantic.

“When I called you last time... when we talked about my suspicions...”

Her long pauses were driving me up the fucking wall. I had half a mind to grab her and shake the words out of her. “Yeah?”

“I... I didn’t really let you have a chance to speak.” She caught my eye for half a second, then looked at the pavement again. “I was talking about students who had hopes of dating their professors. I thought it might be, uh, relevant to your life.”

I opened my mouth to yell “It was!”—but Faye wasn’t done.

“It didn’t occur to me at the time, and it did happen to cross my mind since, that sometimes interest might be more... of a carnal variety.”

I blinked. Then blinked again.

I blinked so many times I was probably mid-blink when Faye looked up and met my

eyes again. “With everything that’s going on for me, I still don’t think it’s the right time for me to begin any official entanglements. But...”

“But...?”

She cringed, visibly uncomfortable with having to speak the words out loud. “But a physical one, I... I mean... maybe I could manage.”

My throat went dry. Dr. Faye Charlotte Erwin wanted to be fuck buddies.

My inner nympho was leaping for joy. Oh, my inner nympho was more than happy about this new development.

My heart, though? It sat heavily in my chest, lamenting that I was right after all.

There was nothing romantic about this.

10

Faye

It took a long moment for Jaz to speak. A moment longer than I’d anticipated. Much longer.

That moment was long enough for me to start questioning whether I’d just made a terrible mistake. Was it possible that I’d misread everything? That Jaz had never had a crush on me at all, and had only let me believe she did because she was too scared to say she didn’t?

Was it possible that I’d just propositioned a former student who wasn’t even interested in me?

At last she spoke and quelled my fears. “That, um, yeah.” She fingered the collar of her jean jacket, gazing up at me shyly. “Maybe we could do that.”

“All right. Ah... Gretchen’s with Pauline for the night, so...”

“Your place?”

“Yes. Um, if that’s okay with you.”

Jaz nodded.

“You can follow me there.”

“I know the way.”

“Right.”

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I dropped into the driver's seat of my car, my palms suddenly clammy. Jaz hadn't rejected me, but I still had new doubts that this was a good idea.

My hands shook slightly as I turned the steering wheel. What would people say if they knew about this? It may have been within the letter of the law—yes, I'd checked the university code of conduct—but what about the spirit of it? I could just imagine how the faculty would gossip if they caught wind of what Jaz and I were about to do.

On a more practical level, what exactly were we about to do? We hadn't even kissed yet. What if there was no chemistry between us? What if, with those deep eyes and slender frame of hers, she realized she didn't actually want to be with a myopic older woman who hadn't seen the inside of a gym since the second Bush administration?

Stop it. We'd held hands once, and the sizzle of electricity that had occurred was a pretty damn good indicator of chemistry. If Jaz decided she didn't want me, that was her own problem.

And if anyone heard about this... well... it was only casual sex. How would anyone ever hear about it?

I pulled into my driveway, my heart drumming unsteadily in my chest when I saw Jaz's car was ahead of mine. I joined her on the doorstep and reached for her shoulder, but my nerves got the better of me and I pulled my hand back.

She rose onto her tiptoes and fell, doing a little dance to warm herself in the chilly air. "So..." she said.

“Yes, well.” I opened the door and let her in.

At the top of the stairs, once we got in my apartment, we stood stiffly and looked at each other. I was the older one here, the mature one, not to mention the one who’d initiated this whole thing. And yet I hadn’t the slightest idea of how to proceed.

Of all the professors who’d seduced their students in the history of mankind, had any of them ever been so damn awkward?

“Do you have drinks?” Jaz asked.

“Ah. Yes.” That could help.

I grabbed us each a beer out of the fridge, hoping liquid courage would do something to decrease my ineptitude. “Here you go.”

We each took a sip. I finished first and looked at Jaz. When she swallowed, she looked back at me. My face went hot and I took another swig. By the time that was done, she was sipping from hers again. This went on for far longer than it should’ve.

What was I supposed to do? What did people say in situations like this? I searched my mind for some trace of suaveness. Surely I had some capacity at getting the women I wanted into my bed. I’d had sex before. How had I managed it then?

Jaz finished her beer and set the bottle on the counter. “Come here,” she said.

And I went there, dumbfounded that it could just be that simple. Come here. Why hadn’t I thought of that?

She shoved her hands as far as they’d go into her pockets, but nudged me when I was in front of her. I nudged her back, and she grinned. Her teeth were straight except for

one crooked one on the bottom, and somehow that tiny imperfection made me like her even more.

Instead of elbowing me again, she grabbed my shoulder and pulled me close. For a moment she kept me an inch away, staring into my eyes. The heat from her hand burned through my blouse, and more warmth radiated from her body. My pulse raced, spiking higher with every second. My lips tingled with the anticipation of kissing her. Why wasn't she kissing me already?

"Why aren't you kissing me already?"

Her hoarse voice took me by surprise, and I almost laughed at my own idiocy. "I can do that," I murmured, and pulled her in.

My lips met her nose first. "Sorry," I said, then overcorrected and pressed them to her chin instead.

My face went hot and I wondered if she'd just leave my place and tell stories forevermore of the professor who'd tried to seduce her but couldn't even manage to get our lips to touch. As little as I wanted to go down in history as such, I would've actually been relieved if my humiliation could've ended then and there.

But instead of calling it a night, Jaz laughed and said, "Let's try that again."

The kiss was as fumbling and nervous as the last one, but at least our mouths connected. We stood motionless, only meshing our lips together. For my part, it was because I feared even the slightest other movement would somehow manage to ruin things.

But whatever the reason that we stayed there, as the kiss went on and on, my heartbeat began to come down from its previous red alert.

And as Jaz's tongue flicked at the seam of my lips, the rest of my body began to realize what was happening.

Heat flowed between us, waves of it rolling off her body to mine and then back. Her breasts were inches from mine, her waist the same distance, the tips of her toes pressed lightly against mine.

A low groan came from the back of her throat and she leaned in closer, her feet parting so she could pull me between them, her entire body now pressed against the length of mine. Her tongue invaded my mouth and I let mine rise up to meet it. Even if we both tasted of the same beer, I wanted to drink every drop I could from her.

Eventually we drew apart, and I fought to breathe properly as I looked at Jaz. Her lips were even more tantalizing now that I'd sampled them. Slightly swollen from what I'd done to them, they called to me in a whole new way. Even her cheeks held new fascination now that I knew she'd let me caress them. In fact, I wanted to get my hands on them as soon as possible. And on every other part of her.

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“That was a good second try,” I said. “What do you think the third’ll be like?”

She smiled. “Probably even better.”

As I leaned in, I wondered briefly if she wasn’t a bit less enthusiastic than I would’ve expected. She was generally so free with her breathtaking grins, so open with her excitement about poetry or about Gretchen. Why was she giving me that small smile and not a huge one?

I lost my train of thought as her arms snaked around my neck. My kisses growing more urgent, I reached for her face, her nape, her back—touching every part of her I could reach without going too far.

Jaz grabbed my hand and dragged it to her heat. The message was clear: no need to stop myself. She had no worries about me going too far.

I backed her against the counter, one hand reaching to palm her ass, the other cupping her where she wanted me to. Her hips bucked when I made contact there, and she stroked my arm before shrugging off her jacket. Yes, keep going, take everything off. I wanted all of her, here and now and all at once—anything and everything that she might be willing to give me.

For the moment she failed to read my thoughts, though, keeping the rest of her clothes on. I pushed my palm against her over her jeans, grinding against her thigh at the same time. Being so close to the realization of my fantasies, I couldn’t have prevented the unconscious movement even if I’d wanted to.

I threw myself into kissing her again, driving against her—but a

s much as I wanted to keep going, I still needed to figure out what exactly she wanted.

Reluctantly, I pulled away enough to catch my breath. “What would you like to do?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Her eyes had an odd glint to them. “I’m your sex toy for the night, aren’t I?”

How could I tell her I was completely and utterly at her mercy? “Are you more into giving first?” I squeezed her ass again, savoring the ripe firmness of it. “Or taking?”

“Whatever you’d like... Dr. Erwin.” There was that look again, the one telling me something wasn’t quite right.

I took half a step back, peering at her. “Everything’s okay, Jaz?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be okay?” She forced a smile. Not a grin.

And she said everything was okay. If she was really on the same page as me, wouldn’t she have said everything was amazing?

My arousal waned as I tried to figure out the problem. I wouldn’t go any further with this until I had a better sense of what was going on in Jaz’s head.

Before I could question her any further, my phone went off with Beethoven’s fifth.

Jaz jumped at the sound. “You want to get that?”

“Not really. I’d rather to get back to where we just were. Can we do that?”

“It might be something important.”

“It can wait.” I caressed her ass. “You seem like you’re kind of on the fence here, or am I imagining that?”

“All in your head.” She trailed a finger down my arm. “I’m a hundred and ten percent into this. But I do think you should pick that up.”

“Why?” Was she trying to get out of this? She kept saying she was into what we were doing—but in that case, why was she so concerned about my phone?

“You never know who it could be,” she said.

“Fine.” I moved to the other end of the kitchen and yanked my phone out of my pocket, nearly throwing it across the room with the violence of the movement. I had every intention of just looking at the caller ID and putting the phone away. No one and nothing was important enough to take me away from what I was doing now.

I got the phone in my hand, the caller ID on the screen... and my stomach dropped.

My face must’ve shown my dismay, because Jaz instantly became concerned. “What, Faye? Who is it?”

My voice was small, even scared. “It’s Amanda.”

* * *

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My hands were shaking so much that I actually hung up instead of accepting the call. I cursed, and Jaz grabbed the phone away from me. “Just call her back.”

“As if she’ll pick up. She never did before.”

“She never called you before either, so...” She held the phone out to me. “It’s ringing.”

I pressed it to my ear just as Amanda said, “Hello?”

Jaz backed away, making a kind of see you later gesture. I had half a mind to grab her and keep her next to me. I had a feeling I’d need some kind of emotional support for this conversation. But I smiled weakly and waved as she left.

“Hi, Amanda.” Now that I’d gotten in touch with her, I could hardly think of what I’d wanted to say. “I’ve been trying to reach you,” I finally said dumbly.

“I know.” She sounded like she was chewing gum. “I’ve seen the missed calls, big sis. You didn’t have to look up everyone I’ve ever met and try to get to me through them.”

“I didn’t know if you were getting my calls. I thought maybe you changed your number.”

“Nope, same one.”

“And you finally decided to call me back.”

“Yep.”

Impatience was clear in her voice, and I felt the need to cut to the chase before I lost her. “Where are you now?”

“Why do you care?”

Now I was losing patience. “Because you dumped a baby on me,” I spat. “You came out of nowhere, dropped her in my office, and then disappeared off the face of the earth for three weeks. That’s why.”

“God, you make it sound so awful,” she said. “I thought you’d be happy. You like babies.”

“I might’ve liked some warning before getting saddled with one I never asked for.” Breathe, Faye. Don’t put her on the defensive. She’ll just hang up, and you’ll be back to square one. “But it isn’t important. Are you in Rosebridge?”

“No.”

“Nearby?”

“Not especially.”

I sighed. “Can you meet me? We’ll get coffee and talk about this baby thing.”

Amanda’s voice hardened. “I don’t want to see her.”

She was never going to take Gretchen back. And she shouldn’t have. What kind of mother could abandon her child so coldly?

Still—she was the mother. I had to give her a chance.

“I’ll leave her with someone else,” I told her. “It’ll just be you and me.”

“Why do you have to see me so bad?”

“Really, Mandy?”

I hadn’t called her Mandy in years. She’d forbidden the nickname as soon as she turned eighteen, insisting that she was a grown-up now and needed to be addressed by a grown-up name.

I was betting that hearing the nickname would bring her back to the days when I let her tag along and play in the streets with my friends. When we broke into our mom’s make-up stash and put on a play for an audience of none. The days when we were closer.

It was a dangerous bet, but after a long pause, I knew I’d made the right one.

“Fine,” she said. “Next weekend.”

11

Jaz

Farrah cornered me as soon as I stepped into the grad students' lounge. "So?"

"So, what?" I took a seat on one of the old, comfy couches and put down my thermos of coffee. "So you want to hold the baby?"

"I do." She reached for Gretchen as soon as I took off the sling. After taking a moment to coo over her, she turned back to me. "So what happened with Dr. Erwin?"

"Jesus, want to say that a little louder?" I cast my eyes around the room to make sure no one had overheard.

"No one knows what I'm asking about," she said in a fierce whisper. "As far as they know, I'm wondering what kind of advice she gave you about your thesis."

"All right, all right." I rolled my eyes. "Dr. Erwin gave me some very interesting advice, actually."

The murmur of noise around us made Farrah lean a little closer. "Uh-huh?"

"She said she didn't have time right now to do a lot of serious thinking about my thesis." I paused, letting that sink in. "But she said my thesis could be more... physical."

Her eyes bugged out. “Say what?”

I nodded. “She took me over to her place so we could... talk about my thesis.”

“Jaz, you didn’t!”

“I did go over.” I measured my words carefully. “I was really looking forward to our talk, but no, we didn’t have a big discussion. Just a little one.”

“Okay, stop right there.” She grabbed her phone, and I peered over her shoulder. She was writing a text. To me.

>FARRAH: Are you saying you went to Dr. Erwin’s place and her boobs were too little to continue?!?!?!?

I burst out laughing in the middle of the lounge. If we’d been discreet before—which was debatable—people were definitely looking at us now. I grabbed Farrah’s phone.

>ME: No! Jesus fucking Christ, not at all! How shallow do you think I am?

I wiped away the tears that were forming in my eyes and took a long sip of coffee, waiting for the room to go back to normal.

>FARRAH: So what were you saying??

>ME: That only a little actually happened.

Farrah tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Talking to you is like pulling teeth. Expand, Jaz, explain your answer! Why didn’t you... talk about your thesis?”

“Okay, okay.” I’d give it to her straight... to the extent that I even understood the

situation. “First, I wasn’t completely into the conversation.

I kind of wanted a more serious discussion.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, Jaz...”

“And second, the whole thing got interrupted by a phone call.” Before she could ask, I gestured to the baby. “Gretchen’s mother finally called.”

The implications were clear. “Shit,” Farrah whispered.

I gave her an edited version of the rest—Amanda’s disinterest in Gretchen but her eventual acceptance of getting coffee with Faye.

“Do me a favor and bring Andrew and Sven up to date so I don’t have to say all this twice,” I told her. “Just don’t let it go any further. I’m sure Faye doesn’t want her business spread all over campus.”

“It’ll stay between us.”

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“And you’ll tell them I might not make it to open mic night tonight? Keep them from harassing me like last time?”

Farrah toyed with the end of Gretchen’s soother. “Or you could just come.”

“But I have other things on my mind.”

“I don’t see how any of what you said would keep you from making it to open mic night.” Passing Gretchen back to me, she grabbed her backpack and began to stand up. “And I’m not just saying that because Andrew and Sven go into full bro mode when you’re not there. You need to get out and do fun stuff... not just work two jobs and write a thesis.”

“I do fun stuff.” Even if the last fun thing I’d done was story hour with Gretchen.

“If you say so.” Farrah slung her backpack over her shoulder. “Think about coming, all right? Don’t let the baby and the professor crush turn into your whole life.”

I slumped into the couch, covering my face. The professor crush. “Say that a little louder...”

* * *

When I brought Gretchen back at the end of the day, Faye was slouched over her desk, fast asleep.

I coughed a few times to wake her up—first softly, then louder. She stayed there,

unmoving. She'd balled her tweed jacket up for a pillow. With her arms supporting her head, her shoulders stretched out the fabric of her silky blue blouse.

I took a few steps closer. Part of me wanted to go away longer and let her get the sleep she clearly needed.

After our intimacy the other night, another part of me wanted to lift her head and cradle it in my arms. To stroke her forehead until the lines disappeared, maybe even bring a smile to the lips I'd finally kissed.

But that wasn't a very casual thing to do.

Stop being a moron. You're already getting more than you could've asked for. Are you really going to sulk because you're not getting even more?

Sinking into the chair opposite her, I stared at the back of her head. I knew I was being unrealistic, but I did want more. Way more. Like, absolutely fucking everything type of more.

But for the moment, I had to settle for what she could give me... or else have nothing at all.

Her head turned to the side, and her eyes blearily fixed on me. "Jaz? What time is it?"

"Just past five," I said. "You fell asleep."

"Ugh... my office hours must've come and gone. I hope no students came by." She stretched from side to side. "I'm so stiff."

The devil on one shoulder told me to offer her a massage.

The angel said to give the baby back and go home.

“That sucks.” I gave the baby back, but didn’t go home. “She have you up last night?”

“Not really. I mean, no more than usual.” She gave me an exhausted smile. “I’ve just been stressing about this whole Amanda thing.”

“It’s weird that she won’t meet you any earlier. Leaves you to stew about it for a whole week.”

“Exactly,” she sighed. “But anyway... you busy?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Now?”

“Or whenever.” She yawned... adorably. “Probably should be another night if I’m this tired, but... I do want to pick up where we left off.”

Now my heart pounded. Throbbled, actually. And I could feel the pulsations vibrating directly to my core.

“Uh...”

“Sorry, it figures you’d have plans. I should’ve asked earlier. Never mind.” She stood with Gretchen and her bag.

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I stared at her dumbly. I'll go with you! I wanted to holler—but my lips couldn't seem to form the words.

“Another time?” she asked.

Mute, I nodded.

12

Faye

The week went by... although it took its sweet goddamn time to do it.

I planned lessons, taught classes, marked papers... but my mind was far from the postcolonial literature I was lecturing about.

The meeting with Amanda weighed heavily on me, and I practiced what I wanted to say a hundred times a day. It would've been easier if I had a clue of where she was coming from. Even researching PPD didn't give me much to go on. The idea of conceiving a child, nurturing it for nine months, and then throwing it to the wolves was completely foreign to me.

Not that I was a wolf—I was probably a sheep compared to her—but...

I set goals for the meeting. Find out why she's so opposed to taking Gretchen. Whether she knows who the father is. If she can get child support.

I even called Ma and filled her in. If things went badly enough, I told myself, I could always call her and have her speak to Amanda. That was a last resort, though. I doubted Amanda would even listen.

Sometimes late at night, with Gretchen crying for the umpteenth time and no one but me to get up and feed her, I wondered why all this had been dumped on me. Why me, when I hadn't done anything to deserve it? I would've helped Amanda with the baby out of sisterly obligation if she was a halfway decent mother. But no, all the responsibility came down on me. And my own mother—why did I have to be born to a woman who didn't even care to meet her own grandchild?

But I fed Gretchen and went back to sleep, because that was all I could do.

There was no use in whining or moping. Keep going, keep moving forward. Like it or not, this was my new reality.

I didn't know what I would've done without Jaz helping me. There were other babysitters, but not like her. Working for the lowest possible price, taking the best possible care of the baby, always ready with a grin and a helping hand. I never once took Jaz for granted.

In fact, every moment I wasn't thinking of Amanda and Gretchen, I thought about Jaz.

I found myself reminiscing constantly about her soft lips and seductive smile. I savored the time I spent with her... the whole five minutes a day, anyway.

At this point, I was pretty sure she saw me as the creepy old woman who'd tried to get in her pants. I'd decided to leave the ball in her court, let her decide when we were going to do anything else. And up to now, she hadn't initiated a thing.

So I cut our meetings shorter, kept them as professional as I could. If she wanted to just be my babysitter, that was okay with me. Even if I got this odd pain in my chest every time I had to look at her.

The week went by. Slowly but surely, it went by.

And on Saturday at one p.m., I met Amanda.

* * *

“You look like shit” was the first thing my sister said as she slipped into the seat across from me.

“Thanks.”

For her part, she looked about the same as always, other than a slight thickness to her belly that hinted at the changes it’d recently gone through. She wore the same fall coat she’d had for years, and she shivered under her thin floral scarf, as impractical as every other one she owned. Deep hollows had formed under her eyes. Yet from her casual demeanor, I would’ve never guessed anything had changed.

“Seriously,” she said, “I had to double-check that I was going over to the right person. For a moment I thought you were a forty-year-old who’d stolen my sister’s jacket and glasses.” She wrinkled her nose. “When are you going to get some glasses with actual frames?”

“I like these.”

As for the rest of it, I wasn’t going to point out that I may have looked less rested than usual because of the baby—the actual miniature human being—she’d unceremoniously dumped on me without a word of warning.

I wasn't even going to think about it. Definitely not.

“Anyway...” Amanda twisted a tendril of hair. “I’m here, like you wanted.”

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And I did appreciate that small gesture, considering everything I'd gone through because of her. "How far did you have to come to be here?" I asked.

She kept on with her hair. "A little ways. Is it important?"

"I'd like to know, Amanda. Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"Because you want to judge me for everything," she said, setting her coffee on the table.

"No, because you're my sister and I haven't seen you in six or eight months." Leaving aside the whole Gretchen thing...

"I've been around," she said petulantly.

"Where?"

"Here and there."

"I see." The stubborn part of me wanted to keep interrogating, ask her what type of work she'd been doing. But that would've pushed her away further, and she'd already slipped so far.

It wasn't just about Gretchen. I'd only thought of the baby when I'd spent all that time searching for Amanda. Now that she was sitting here in front of me, I realized there were two people I needed to worry about.

“I was thinking,” I said, sharply changing the subject. “Do you remember Old Man Harvey?”

Amanda’s head tilted quizzically. “The angry old guy who lived down the street in Sargasso? Sure, what about him?”

“Remember that time we knocked on his door at Halloween?”

With our age difference, it’d been one of the only years we’d trick-or-treated together. When I was thirteen, I declared myself too grown-up to go anymore. And by the time I realized Halloween could be a way for an adult to bond with the baby sister she had little in common with, Amanda had reached the same point of “maturity.”

The question was a gamble, and as Amand

a stared at me, I began thinking I’d lost that gamble. After a long moment, Amanda laughed, the sound tinkling through the small shop. “That man must’ve been eighty, and he tore into the streets after us yelling about his shotgun.” She laughed harder. “I nearly shit myself!”

“And I grabbed you up and piggy-backed you away.”

“He probably chased us for half a mile,” Amanda said. “I don’t know why he was so upset. Do you think we were the first trick-or-treaters he ever got?”

“We probably were. None of the other kids were foolhardy enough to try it.”

We smiled at each other. It was working. We were bonding.

“Been a long time since I’ve thought about those days,” Amanda said.

“They were the good old days.” I sipped my coffee. “You must think of them sometimes, if you thought of me when Gretchen was born.”

She stiffened. “No.”

“Then why me?” I set my elbows on the table, leaning in. “What made you leave her with me, and not somebody else?”

“Who else is there?”

She didn’t ask sarcastically. Not even rhetorically. In fact, it sounded like if I had a better idea of who to drop the baby with, she’d take her straight there.

And for the life of me, I couldn’t answer it. “Ma?” I asked, already knowing the reasons it wouldn’t work even before Amanda began to shake her head.

“She’d never do it,” she said. “She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you any more than you hate her.” I watched Amanda closely, but her eyes didn’t flicker. “You two fought, that’s all. You’re still mother and daughter.”

“She wouldn’t take her. She’s too busy doing her own thing. And if by some miracle she did, she wouldn’t give Gretchen a good life. She’d pay her even less attention than she did to us.”

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“Christ, Amanda, you make her sound terrible. She was never that bad.”

Amanda folded her hands around her paper cup. “Maybe not to her firstborn. By the time I ended up in the world, she was over being a mother.”

“No, Amanda. If you’d just talk to her sometime...”

A cloud formed over Amanda’s face, and she jerked her cup off the table as if she was about to get up and run out.

Ease off, Faye. Remember what you came here for. “Never mind. I’m not here to psychoanalyze you. Isn’t there anyone else who might have an interest in the baby?” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Her father, possibly?”

“If I had a clue who he was, maybe he’d care.”

My eyes widened, but I tried to keep my shock in check. “There’s more than one or two contenders?”

“There’s a few.” Something flickered across Amanda’s face. Not the shame I might’ve expected, but... something else. “And I’d have no way to contact most of them.”

“You don’t have their phone numbers?”

“Or some of their names.”

My stomach churned. What had driven my baby sister to end up like this? As soon as we got this Gretchen situation figured out, I vowed to not lose touch with Amanda again. She needed a big sister in her life, and I'd clearly let her down.

"So of everyone you know..." I said.

"You're the most responsible. Like I told you in the note." She stared at me defiantly, as if daring me to challenge the assertion.

"Fine. Fine." I dug my fingers into the nape of my neck, hoping to ease out some of the tension. Not happening. "Look, Gretchen is great. I want her to have a chance, not to get lost in the cracks of the foster system. Did you ever think about putting her up for adoption?"

"Give her to some stranger?" Amanda glared now. "Why would I do that?"

"Because the adoption system has rigorous standards." I'd looked into it a time or two years ago, daydreaming about future plans with a nonexistent partner. "They only let the most committed people adopt children. They have to be responsible, too. Gretchen would go to someone who'd really love and care about her."

Amanda's face tightened. "You really don't want her?"

"I want her in my life. I just... I want to be her aunt." I set my hands down in frustration, wishing Amanda could even try to understand. "She's supposed to be with her mother, not with me. She's a wonderful kid, Amanda. Do you not even want to know her?"

"Look me in the eye and tell me I'd do a better job of raising her than you would."

Biting my lip, I dropped my gaze to the table. "Fine. So where do we go from here?"

“If you really want her gone, I can look into adoption,” Amanda said.

The idea of Gretchen being gone forever, taken in by complete strangers, made my heart flip over. But there had to be some other option. I couldn’t raise a baby all on my own as a single mom.

“Don’t you want to come see her sometime?” I asked. “Get to know your daughter a little?”

I still had hope that this would somehow turn out the way it was supposed to. That Amanda would magically transform into a mother who would give Gretchen the kind of parenting she deserved.

“I guess... maybe... it couldn’t hurt.”

She sounded unsure, but I jumped on the “maybe” like the lifeline to a solution that could work for us all. “Great! Want to go now? She’s with her babysitter. You’d love her, too. She’s taking such good care of her.”

“Not now,” Amanda said. Her knuckles were white around her cup of coffee. “Later.”

“When? Tonight?”

“No. Maybe... next weekend.”

A full week to wait? It was going to feel so long. And I just knew the second Amanda saw Gretchen again, she’d fall in love and never want to let her go.

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Don't push too hard. Don't scare her off. Do this on her schedule.

"Next weekend sounds great." I forced a smile.

13

Jaz

"Peek-a-boo," I said, holding my hands in front of Gretchen's face and taking them away. "Peek-a-boo!"

She wriggled and squealed. She was in her softest pink plush onesie, a matching pink hat pulled over her fuzzy head.

I glanced at the time on my phone, wishing a new message would arrive. Faye's meeting with her sister had already gone on for an hour, and I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

Then again, I couldn't quite decide what I wanted her to get out of the meeting.

I waved my hands over Gretchen's face again, my heart clenching as I realized this could be our last time playing together. If this Amanda person was as spontaneous as she seemed, maybe she'd change her mind and whisk Gretchen away with her.

And while that might—or might not—have been best for Gretchen, I wasn't ready to let this gorgeous baby out of my life. I was already dying to know what she'd be like at five, or ten, or twenty. Hell, where would she be when she was my age? Would she

be into poetry? Would she be working on her masters, too?

Giving Gretchen a tap on the nose, I laughed at myself. The kid couldn't even talk, and I was planning an entire career for her.

I just wanted so much for her. She might be getting a strange start on life, but I was sure she was going to do great despite all of that. And I'd do everything I could to help her get there.

My phone rang, and I picked up with a racing heart. "Hello?"

"Are you at home? I can come by in ten minutes to pick up Gretchen."

"Okay. What happened?"

Faye sounded strained. "I'll tell you when I get there."

I wanted to whine and yell—I was dying from the suspense—but I hung up without a word of complaint. Faye had no obligation to tell me a thing. This was her life, her family. I had no horse in the race... except my concern for Gretchen.

When Faye got there, I was waiting at the door with Gretchen and her bag all packed up. The exhausted look on Faye's face told me not to ask questions. Happily, she ignored the bag and came inside.

She'd been over to my place a few t

imes now. It was about the same size as hers, except I shared it with two roommates who were also grad students. They were out at the moment, it being a Saturday afternoon, so Faye and I sat down on the couch.

“So?” I asked quietly.

She filled me in—Amanda’s recalcitrance, the new details on Gretchen’s parentage, the possibility of adoption, and the agreement that Amanda would come visit Gretchen.

“But not until next week,” she finished.

“Why not? Did she say?”

“No. She seems almost scared. Maybe she needs time to prepare herself.”

“I guess it would be a big deal for her.”

Faye sighed and slumped sideways until her head was on my shoulder. Startled, I stiffened—then put my arm around her. “Hey, it’s okay.” My pulse was racing at the physical contact, the first we’d had in some time. Did this mean something? Did she want something between us after all?

“I know it’s okay,” she said into my shoulder. “It’s just a lot to take.”

I rubbed her back. If she was only doing this for comfort, I could give her comfort.

Despite the growing situation taking place between my legs. A situation that was completely inappropriate considering that there was a month-old baby lying on the table a foot away from us.

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“It’s just a lot to take.” Faye sat up again, but didn’t seem to mind that I left my arm around her. “This adoption thing... I don’t know what to think.”

“It’s not like it’s for sure. I bet Amanda will decide she wants Gretchen after all.”

“And what then?” She looked at me, eyes pained, and I realized she wanted her gone about as much as I did.

“Hey... hey... hey.” I leaned in closer, searching her eyes.

And seeing an invitation there, I closed the distance between us.

The kiss was soft but intense, as a kiss can only be when you’ve been waiting so long for it. My spine tingled and my heart did flip after flip. I clung to the embrace as if by kissing hard enough, I’d make it so it’d never have to end.

Finally Faye pulled back and laughed. “I’ve been waiting a while for you to do that.”

“Waiting? Why?” Did she not know she could’ve stuck her tongue down my throat in the middle of the humanities building if she wanted to? Hell, she could’ve stripped me naked in the campus cafeteria. I would’ve just been happy she wanted me.

“I wasn’t sure how you felt before,” she said. “Things seemed... off.”

“Oh, things are on.” I grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. “Things are definitely on.”

An unexpected grin came over her face, but it rapidly disappeared as she gestured at Gretchen. “And what about her?”

* * *

If my roommate hadn’t walked through the door at that precise moment, I don’t know what we would’ve done. As it stood, I ran at Clara with an urgency exclusively known to those going through a protracted dry spell who were about to finally get some.

“Want to make a quick twenty bucks? Take this baby and get the hell out of here!”

Clara opened her mouth to ask a question, but seeing Faye behind me, seemed to understand. “Make it thirty,” she said. “And an extra five to put a sock on the door.”

“A sock?” I had my own socks, but did I really want to interrupt the mood to do it? Clara’s business savvy was impressive. “Fine, thirty-five and it’s a deal.”

With her and Gretchen gone, I took Faye in my arms and embraced her again. “My room is that way.”

“I’d like to check it out.”

I shut the door behind us. Our mouths met again and I shuddered at the sensation of her tongue melting against mine. I grabbed her shoulders, directing her toward the bed. We tumbled onto it together, our limbs entwining in a messy heap. I tore at her clothes, needing to feel her skin against my hands.

“So what do you think of the room?” I asked, panting.

“It’s great,” she said, “but I feel like I’m missing something.” She pulled at the hem

of my shirt. “I think I need to see everything in it.”

“That’s your best line, huh?” I laughed, although my voice caught when she took off my bra and caressed my breasts. “Thought you were an English professor. Shouldn’t you have some smooth, seductive thing to say?”

“Something like whatever happens with us, your body will haunt mine?” She closed her fingers around one nipple, making me gasp even as I cringed.

“Not fair. No making fun of me now.”

“Do I sound like I’m making fun of you?” She pushed me lightly onto my back.

“So you’re saying my body will actually always haunt yours?”

She stared down at me, taking me in from head to toe. “I think it might.” Her lips closed over a nipple, and any inclination I’d had to argue or banter was gone.

My body shook as she sucked my breasts. For minutes on end, all I could feel was the caress of her tongue. All I could hear was my own ragged breathing.

The incredible sensation came to an end as Faye eased off me, giving me a hungry look. She glanced at my waist, then back to my face. I gave her a hurried nod, and without a word, she stripped off my jeans and panties.

It took about a millisecond for me to get as worked-up and flustered as I’d been a minute before. My back arched against the bed as she placed her hand between my thighs. My face twisted in ecstasy. Every time I managed to open my eyes enough to look at her, I had to squeeze them shut again.

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Was this a dream? Or some other plane of reality? It couldn't be possible that the woman I'd wanted for years was honest-to-goodness fingering me.

The moment went on and on, until my sense of time turned to mush and all I knew was the sensual embrace surrounding me. I no longer knew what Faye was doing to me. I had no words for the things that were happening. My world had narrowed to the pinpoints behind my eyelids and the skilful caress sweeping over my nub.

I seized up and yelled out, the climax possessing me as Faye continued to rub me hard.

When she spoke again, I had no idea what she was talking about. "Oh yeah, it definitely will."

"Huh?" I struggled for air.

"Your body. Haunt mine." She set an affectionate hand on my mound—as drained as I was, the touch made me twitch for more.

"I'll haunt you right now."

With a sly grin, she rolled onto her back and pulled off her shirt. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

I positioned myself between her legs, determined to send her to the same heights of ecstasy I'd just reached. "You'll find out, Professor."

Faye

So I'd failed at leaving the ball in Jaz's court. It seemed to have worked out well enough in the end.

She'd never offered a proper explanation for why she hadn't made a move on me, but she seemed more than willing to go along with what I'd started.

Who knew why she'd been reluctant that first time? Maybe she'd had other things on her mind. Or maybe it'd all been in my head. That was kind of known to happen from time to time.

In any case, our relationship shifted not-so-subtly in the week leading up to Amanda and Gretchen's visit. To the world, we were the same as always. But behind my office doors, we exchanged kisses... and gropes. We visited each other's apartments. One time, we even appropriated an empty classroom for our purposes.

I had the physical relationship I'd craved with the hot younger woman I'd gone after. I should've been walking on the clouds.

But something nagged at some deep place in my heart. Was it my concern over Gretchen? Because there was plenty of that. Every time I thought about not having her anymore, my stomach churned and my limbs went weak.

I could identify that concern, though—could deconstruct it, parse it, comprehend it.

I suspected there was more to this odd feeling. That it was something to do with Jaz.

It's a funny thing, that physical stuff. You think you can keep it casual only. No

problem. That you can separate lust from love, and that you'd never get caught up in feelings when all you're trying to do is find release.

But sometimes it sneaks up on you.

Sometimes you catch yourself thinking about them when they're not around. Not just once, but all the time. And not just dirty thoughts, either.

Sometimes the flash of a grin makes your knees go unsteady, and you realize you'd do anything to see her smile again.

Sometimes you're kissing someone and you wonder when she last kissed anyone else. And the thought makes you anxious, and you can't explain why.

And your heart clenches up, and you don't want her to kiss anyone but you ever again.

* * *

"It's still 12:27," Jaz said. "You can leave in twenty minutes."

I twisted my watch around to the other side of my wrist. Of course she'd caught me peeking at it. "Am I that obvious?"

Jaz swung her legs from my lap down to the foot of the couch. "You're nervous. It's understandable."

I guessed it was. This meeting with Amanda had been weighing on my mind more than I cared to admit. I'd spent most of the past week wishing I could just skip the anxiety and fast-forward to the point when it would be over. However the coffee date would end up, I just wanted to know, already.

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I rolled over to glance into Gretchen's bassinet. She was sound asleep, as she had been for the past hour. The baby monitor hung in the corner, ready to alert us to any problems no matter where in the apartment we happened to be.

"Is it time to get dressed yet?" I asked, gesturing at my bare limbs. We'd fooled around in the kitchen... and the shower... before ending up naked on the couch.

"I don't know," Jaz said, running her fingers down my stomach. "Is it going to take you twenty minutes to throw some clothes on?"

"If I comb my hair for fifteen of those minutes." I jiggled my foot, wanting to be somehow in motion.

Jaz snaked her arms around me, landing on top of me so I couldn't get away. "I can think of some better things to do for fifteen minutes."

The closeness of her body sent sparks racing through my veins. Despite the climaxes I'd just had, Jaz was making me want more. She had a way of doing that.

"I don't think I can manage another round," I groaned.

She brought herself over me, breast to breast, her breath brushing against my lips. "Can you manage to kiss me?"

I smiled. "I could probably handle that."

One long, lingering kiss later, and she settled against my chest. "Think you could do

that fourteen more times?”

“Did that really take a minute?” I checked my watch. She was right. “Hmm... fourteen more kisses like that might have me ready to go again, but I’ll take the chance.”

The time flew by... to the point where I only had three minutes to get dressed. I grabbed my clothes from the heap on the floor where I’d left them, throwing them on in record time. “I don’t even have time to comb my hair,” I said, racing for the door.

Jaz was right behind me, and she ran her fingers through it before attaching Gretchen’s sling around my neck. Pinching Gretchen’s chubby cheek, she looked into my eyes. “You’ll be all right,” she told me. “No matter what happens, it’ll be all right.”

My heart swelled. What would I even do without her here to support me? Leaning as close as I could with Gretchen suspended between us, I stroked her jaw. “Thank you.”

I opened the door, glancing once more at my watch. 12:49. I might actually be two minutes late for this meeting I’d been so anxious about. I’d never normally speed, but this might be a good time to start.

“Good luck,” Jaz said.

I stepped through, and my phone vibrated.

“Someone’s texting you?” Jaz asked, a step behind me.

A lump had suddenly formed in my throat. “They’ll have to wait,” I said.

But as we looked at each other, I knew we both knew who was texting.

Slowly, reluctantly, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. The message was exactly what I'd expected. Exactly what I should've anticipated all along.

>AMANDA: Can't make it today. Some other time!

No explanation. No apology. No attempt to reschedule.

My heart was a dull weight in my chest as I slumped into Jaz's arms. "She doesn't want to see Gretchen," I whispered. "She doesn't even care."

Jaz pulled me close, letting me rest my head on her shoulder. "I'm here for you."

* * *

I called Amanda a few times. Texted, too. But when I got no response, I was completely unsurprised.

It was all right. I was kind of used to having Gretchen around now. I'd learned so much about how to take care of her, and more of my friends and colleagues were offering to help out when I needed it. The infrastructure was in place, in a way that it hadn't been when Amanda first dropped her off. She was less of a hassle. More of a joy.

Besides, she'd brought Jaz and I closer, and having her around made life a lot more interesting. After our thwarted first attempts at sleeping together, we'd planned a night in. Without Gretchen.

Jaz arrived at my door at eight on the dot, a bottle of wine in her hand.

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“You didn’t need to liquor me up,” I said, taking it from her.

She came inside, slipping off her shoes. “Maybe I wanted to.”

After giving her a kiss, I examined the label. “A twelve-dollar bottle. Fancy.”

“They were out of the six-dollar ones,” she said with a grin.

I poured each of us a glass, my hands slightly shaking at the thought of what was going to happen next. Even if I’d become fairly confident Jaz was attracted to me, being with her like this still made me all kinds of nervous. The things we’d done the other times were great, and I was more than satisfied afterward, but we’d stuck to heavy petting and fingering. And I got painfully aroused every time I thought about actually going down on Jaz... or vice versa.

In fact, as I set the bottle of wine down on the counter, I found it’d happened again.

I caught my breath as I passing her the glass. The heat of her body was sending pulsations straight to my core. I took a long sip of my wine, not wanting her to see just how easily she could turn me on.

“What’s up?” she asked, looking at me oddly. “Oh... I see how it is.”

My face flushed, and wine splashed against the sides of the glass. “What do you see?”

“I see my body’s been haunting yours.”

As I was in the middle of a sip, her words sent me into a coughing fit. By the time my lungs finished spasming, Jaz had pressed up against me, her breath hot on my neck. “The feeling is mutual, if you didn’t notice.”

I took short, ragged breaths. This woman was going to give me a coronary.

“Liquored up yet?” she asked.

Another long sip, and my glass was empty. “As much as I’m going to be.” I set both hands on her waist. “Why? Was there something you wanted?”

“Only this.” She tugged up the hem of my shirt. “And this.” She took her own off.

I paused, running a finger over the ink just above her right bra cup. “Unless?”

“It’s from a Dr. Seuss book,” she said. “To remind me that ‘unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it’s not.’”

“A literary tattoo.” A smile curled up my lips. “I’m not surprised that you have one.”

“Then why do you look so amused?” she asked defensively.

My smile got bigger. “You don’t get one of Rich or Lorde... not Dickinson, not Atwood, not Parker, not Plath... but Dr. Seuss. His words are the ones you’ve gotten permanently memorialized on your body.”

“What?” she snapped. “I like kids’ books. That book inspires me. And I’m hoping to read it to my own kids one day.”

Pressing a kiss to the tattoo, I murmured, “There’s nothing wrong with it at all. I think it’s fantastic.”

“All right, then. Where were we?”

“I believe I was about to explore your body.” I cupped her bra, watching her face for a reaction. Once, twice, nothing... until the third time, when her head tipped back and she gasped. “Unless you have a problem with that,” I added.

“No problem at all.”

I ventured further, running my hands down her stomach, her hips, touching and caressing every inch of her slender frame I could reach, paying extra attention to those spots where her breathing got short. My lips and tongue soon followed my fingers. She was even more sensitive when licked and kissed.

Jaz swallowed, looking up at me with half-lidded eyes. “This moment right now makes me want to write a poem.”

“Forget poems.” I grabbed her ass with both hands. “I’m going to make you sing.”

As one, we moved for the bedroom. There was a quick scramble—me undressing her, her undressing me, both of us tearing our own clothes at once—and the rest of our clothes were on the floor.

We kissed then, a hungry, urgent type of kiss that left both of us breathless and needy.

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She pushed me toward the bed. Apparently it was my turn first—I wasn't going to argue.

So with a soft cough, as if the sound would somehow preserve my modesty, I got on the bed and spread my legs.

15

Jaz

If this body was going to haunt me, it'd be the sexiest damn ghost in the history of the planet.

“Oh, fuck.” I caressed each thigh. As desperate as I was to taste her, they were begging to be appreciated. All soft and creamy, the perfect backdrop for the intricate folds between. I stroked and squeezed those thighs, bending to trail my tongue in the direction of her core.

Dr. Faye Charlotte Erwin was completely at my mercy.

Her flesh quivered. “Jaz...” Her hips shuddered forward and backward in an unconscious imitation of a thrust.

Parting her legs, I set my tongue on her. The velvety folds were soaked with her arousal. She squirmed at the first brush of contact, and her reaction only grew as

I trailed my tongue upward. Her hips bucked, and I could tell she was trying to

restrain herself... but by the time I reached her clit, she was wriggling helplessly under me.

I swirled my tongue around her bud, enjoying my view of her sexy stomach and quivering breasts. Faye moaned and reached for the back of my head, holding me in. In response, I gripped her waist as if to tell her I wasn't going anywhere. Until she reached her peak, I belonged exclusively to her and her pleasure.

Every woman was different, and I intended to learn the exact touch Faye would enjoy. I planned to memorize her patterns of arousal and release. Forget poetry—her body would be my ultimate subject. I'd study her, hypothesize about her desire, observe her reactions. I'd compose an erotic thesis about giving her pleasure.

Bobbing my head, I tested out different rhythms, trying to find one she'd like. I added my hand to the mix, slipping a single finger inside her. Moving it in time with my tongue, I peeked at her face to see how she was doing. I couldn't get a clear view of her, but I glimpsed how her teeth were firmly set in her bottom lip. She thrashed from side to side as if she was already trying not to come.

Interesting... She definitely liked this, then. I climbed to my knees so I could finger her harder, noticing as I did that I could touch myself as well in this position. I slipped a hand between my legs.

Faye sat halfway up, taking in what I was doing. Her frenzied eyes met mine, and she let out an "Oh..."

So that turned her on, seeing me masturbate? I pulled back from her, fingering both of us so she could get a good view. Her gaze fixed on one hand, then the other.

"Oh, fuck," she hissed, her body seizing up, her hips rising. The last syllable caught in her throat, turning midway into an incoherent groan. I watched her face with self-

satisfaction.

The woman of words had lost her words.

* * *

The routine over the next few months was much the same as usual.

Gretchen slept at Faye's place. Several nights a week, I did, too. When I was there, I'd take her with me in the morning. When I wasn't, I picked her up at Faye's office first thing in the morning.

I took her with me to the university library, or to the grad student lounge. On days when she got especially fussy, I checked out the books I needed and worked at Faye's apartment. Sometimes we went to the story hour at the public library. As she got a little bigger, sometimes we went to the playground. Even if she just crawled around in the grass, she enjoyed the fresh air and change of scenery.

At five, I brought her back to Faye. We exchanged a few kisses and talked about our days. Often we had dinner together. Often that led to going back to her place.

The sex was unbelievable, and the pillow talk was almost as good. We stayed up half the night reading poetry to each other and talking about the social context behind what we'd read. She introduced me to postcolonial writers, and I made her read some of the classics she'd always found too dull to try. Turned out nothing was too dull when I had my own special ways of rewarding her for listening.

Sometimes I was still awed when I took a step back and thought about who I was sleeping with. More and more, though, Faye was just Faye—smart, fun, and incredibly sexy. I felt lucky to have found a woman like her, and her title and credentials were only a bonus. I wished we could've had an official relationship, but I

knew that would be asking for too much.

She and I were closer than ever. That warmed my heart, even as it confused me.

When it came to Gretchen, the difference was that there was a certain sense of resolution that had never been there before. A certain settledness.

It felt less and less like this was a temporary situation, more like Gretchen was going to be a permanent fixture in our lives. Our talk of her going back to Amanda had diminished to nothing. In fact, as time went on and Faye didn't bring her up, I was a little afraid for her sister's name to even cross my lips.

We didn't know where Amanda was or what she was up to. Faye hadn't heard from her since she'd backed out of meeting Gretchen, or if she had, she wasn't telling me.

Gretchen had a high chair at Faye's apartment now, and a second car seat to go in my car. Where did all this money come from? I didn't know how, but between the two of us, we scrounged it up.

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Thanksgiving passed... then Christmas. Since Faye didn't have much of a family, I invited her to celebrate with mine. Maybe it was a little non-traditional to bring my friend with benefits and her niece-daughter to Christmas dinner—but at this point, no part of my life was traditional.

I'd worried a little about how Faye would get along with everyone. With her single-minded focus on literature, I wasn't sure how much she could relate to non-academics. As it turned out, she had a lot to talk about with my sister, Stephanie. She was fascinated when she found out Stephanie was working on a movie screenplay.

Next, she charmed the entire family with her compliments to my mom and interest in my sisters' lives. Plus, bringing an adorable baby along scored her major points.

Gretchen sat in a high chair and bubbled as my mom served up her famous turkey with homemade stuffing. My sister Gillian pretended not to care about the baby, but I caught her holding her when no one was looking. Stephanie, on the other hand, was vocal about how adorable she thought Gretchen was.

Mom caught me alone after, full of questions about Faye and Gretchen. I kept my answers vague. How could I give her a good explanation of how exactly they fit into my life? I didn't know, myself. All I did know was how much I wished my dad could've been there to meet Faye, too. He and Mom were such perfect counterparts, and I missed him all the time.

Faye and I spent New Year's in her car, Gretchen in the back seat. We drank champagne this time as we watched the stars, listening to the countdown on the radio. When the clock reached zero, we were already kissing each other. I hoped to spend

the whole year kissing nobody but her.

January came, then February. March.

We were well into spring by the time Faye heard from Amanda again.

* * *

I knocked on Faye's office door at five. Gretchen's carriage was a great relief for my back, but a bit unwieldy when it came to little things like, oh, getting through doors. Luckily these things only came up about fifty times a day.

"Hey," I said, giving Faye a quick kiss when she let me in. "What's that?"

She had a small piece of paper in her hand. From the way it was crinkled, I guessed she'd been folding and refolding it for a while. "Oh... nothing."

The frown on her face betrayed her. "Doesn't look like nothing," I said. "Hand it over."

Yeah, I was ordering Dr. Faye Charlotte Erwin around these days. What's more, she actually listened to me.

"You might as well see it," she muttered.

The paper was a check from Amanda Erwin. The amount wasn't huge... but I wouldn't have called it small, either. I bit my lip as I looked from the name to the number, then back again.

"She's sending you money? Why?"

“There’s no note,” she said. “Nothing but what’s in the memo field.”

For expenses, it read.

“So this is supposed to be child support?” I asked. “That’s... a nice gesture.” Even if she should’ve been doing it since day one.

“I guess she got a job or something,” Faye said. “Anyway... I want you to have it.”

I pushed the check away. “Are you kidding? She sent it to you.”

“And you’ve been spending your own hard-earned money on my sister’s kid. Look, this won’t even cover what you spent on that stroller.”

She was right, but still. I stared at her hand. “I spend out of love for Gretchen. You know I care about that kid as if she was my own.”

Her voice softened. “I know you care... but she’s not yours.” She wrapped her arms around me, pressing a long kiss to my cheek. “I want you to have the money. You more than deserve it for everything you do for Gretchen.”

“I already get paid. Anything outside the job description is my own choice.”

“Jaz... I’m serious. If you don’t take it, I’m ripping it up. Take it.”

I examined the check. “You don’t think it’ll bounce, anyway?”

She snorted, then grinned. “There’s a good chance of that, actually. If it’s going to bounce, you might as well take it, right?”

“Hmph.” I slipped it into my pocket, then slid myself into the chair. “You think this is

Amanda's way of saying she's never going to want Gretchen?"

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“I saw it as her saying she’s aware she abandoned her.”

We hadn’t talked about this in a while, and I hesitated before asking. “You wouldn’t still want Amanda to put her up for adoption?”

“I guess I should,” Faye said, “but I don’t. In fact... I’ve been looking into preschools in Rosebridge.”

My eyes widened. “Isn’t she way too young? She’s barely six months old.”

“Sure, but these places are competitive. You have to get signed up really early.”

“Two years early?”

“If not earlier.” Faye laughed at my expression. “They only have so many slots. Even if I register Gretchen now, she’ll probably have to pass a test closer to the start date. That’s if I want her at a good preschool, anyway.”

“And you do.”

“The best, if possible.” She stuck a hand in Gretchen’s carriage, getting her to wrap her tiny fingers around her thumb. “The only thing is that only her parent or guardian can enroll her.”

“So?” I frowned at her. “Wait... are you saying you want to adopt her?”

“I... I spoke to a lawyer about it over the weekend.” Her cheeks were tinged with

pink. “It’ll be easier if Amanda is on board, but I don’t see her having an issue with it. As far as I can tell, that would be her best-case scenario, to the extent she even cares what happens t

o Gretchen.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t resist the urge to pull the baby out of the carriage and hug her to me. This was good news, but how would it change my relationship with her? And with her?

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” Faye said.

“What? What do you mean? You don’t owe me anything.” I pursed my lips, looking at the child in my arms. Like Faye said, she wasn’t mine. “I’m just the babysitter.”

“You’re more than that.” Faye leaned in as if wanting to touch me, but the desk was too much of a barrier, and she backed away. “I’ve told you before, I don’t know how I would’ve done any of this without you.”

My gut churned. “You would’ve found a different babysitter.”

I set Gretchen back in her carriage, suddenly irritated for reasons I couldn’t even articulate to myself.

Faye stood, stepping out from behind her desk as I began to walk away. “Jaz, you’ve probably spent as much time with her as I have. You’re more than an employee.”

“Except who would know it? You’re the aunt, and officially soon to be the mother. I’m the fuck buddy.”

She grabbed my arm. “Jaz, I thought you were happy with this arrangement.”

“I’m not.”

16

Faye

“You’re not?”

Of everything Jaz could’ve said at that moment, that was the last thing I’d expected.

We’d been doing this for so long, and she’d always seemed fine with the way things were. If anything, I’d been holding back for fear of getting hurt myself.

She was a youngster, unattached and free of commitment. Why would she ever want to tie herself down to a stodgy old professor like me? All right, I was only twenty-nine, but my lifestyle made me feel older.

And okay, the sex was hot. We burned up the sheets like nothing I’d ever experienced before. Jaz was the one bringing the heat, though. I imagined that to her, hours-long marathons involving feats of incredible skill were ordinary.

And sure, she liked Gretchen. Loved her, even. But that didn’t mean she was ready to sign on to be part of this for real. As her babysitter, she was already spending more time with her than an average single parent’s partner would.

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It had never crossed my mind that she might want more.

“I know, it’s unthinkable.” Jaz wrenched her bicep out of my grasp. “For me to have any pretensions of having a real relationship with you is just inconceivable.”

“What are you talking about?”

Pain flashed in her eyes as she stared into mine. “You’re the fancy professor with the promising career and the family responsibilities. I’m just the idiot who’s barely struggled through a first draft of her thesis.”

I put a hand to my chest, which suddenly felt tight. “Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

“It’s true, isn’t it? You’re fine with having sex with me, but only if it’s all physical. Isn’t that what you said six months ago?”

My words from back then echoed in my mind. A physical entanglement, if you’re willing, maybe I could manage.

“All right,” I said hoarsely. “I did ask you for that.”

“Because you didn’t want a relationship.”

“Well, no... not at the time.”

My thoughts raced, recalling my realization that I did feel something for Jaz, and my

decision to keep quiet about it because I was sure she didn't feel the same. I'd been so certain in that belief, I'd never considered asking her to be official with me.

"And now?" she asked, her voice laced with bitterness.

"Jaz, I never meant to hurt you." I took a step toward her, wishing we were anywhere but in my office. "I care so much about you."

"As a friend," she said flatly.

Unable to speak, I shook my head.

She crossed her arms. "Are you telling me you're ready to commit?"

Yes. Yes. God, yes. I've been ready for months.

But the injured look on her face didn't change. "Or do you just like the easy sex and babysitting arrangement too much to let go?" From her vantage point in the carriage, Gretchen let out a wail. The sound rose to the rafters, echoing off the walls.

Before I could answer Jaz's question, she was in motion again. In one fluid movement, she stuck a soother in Gretchen's mouth and opened the office door.

I leapt after her, grabbing her arm and dragging her into the hall. "Stop. You're not even letting me speak."

"Maybe I don't want to hear what you have to say."

"Maybe you would if you'd let me say it!" I seized her shoulders, wanting to shake the insecurities out of her. "You've created this whole narrative about what I'm thinking and feeling, but you never once asked to figure out if it was right."

She hesitated then, her eyes darting around the halls to check if any other staff were around. They probably were, but I didn't care anymore.

"I care about you, Jaz. I fucking—I think I might love you." I watched as her eyes widened and the hard set to her mouth softened. "Yeah, the sex is insane and I'm blown away by the way you take care of my niece. But it's not just that, Jaz, it's you. And I didn't think you felt the same."

She swallowed, glancing around again. A few doors were definitely open that hadn't been before, but she seemed to care about as much as I did. "You assumed I didn't... meaning you created a narrative about what I wanted without asking me?"

I had to chuckle. "Maybe a little."

"So you really want to go out with me?" she asked. "Like full-on, public dates, take-home-to-mama kind of thing?"

"All of the above." I grabbed her hand and pressed it to my heart. My eyes fell on the bulletin board beside us, and I pointed. "Look, there's a Spectrum Coalition mixer this Thursday. How would you feel about being my plus-one?"

She gave me the biggest grin I'd ever seen on her face. "It's a date."

* * *

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So it was that I went from a single childless woman to a relationship almost-mother.

The transition was an easy one, as far as these things went. Gretchen didn't have the capacity to understand the changes in our relationship. For my part, I gave her some extra-big hugs after my lawyer put in the adoption papers.

I found myself minding less when I needed to wipe her nose or clean food off her face. She was only learning, and soon I'd miss these innocent moments. In a little over a year, I'd have the terrible twos to deal with. Not to mention the teenage years—they said those snuck up on you faster than you'd expect.

I'd read a few parenting books over the months since I'd gotten her, and now I dove into them in earnest. I spent breaks between classes reading about how to be an authoritative guardian and not an authoritarian one. I bought all the Baby Einstein DVDs I could afford, then sat on the couch watching them with her.

Little by little, my apartment filled with toys... dolls, blocks, Legos. I even got her an iPad. "We're a world of digital citizens now," the blogs said—best to start kids off young. I wanted Gretchen to have every possible advantage.

Hoping she might grow up bilingual, I played her music in Spanish, then told myself to aim higher and added in French, German, and Mandarin. I switched to organic baby food and anti-microbial cloth diapers. Yeah, I was becoming one of those moms.

Sometimes Jaz and I stayed up late working on the scrapbook of her first year.

Pictures, sketches, poetry. Gretchen was going to love it when she was older.

An occasional check arrived in the mail. Amanda never sent any notes along with them, nor did she call to see how her daughter was doing. I cashed them, usually giving the money to Jaz since she spent so much on Gretchen.

I told Amanda about the adoption over text.

She sent me back a smiley face.

* * *

My first public date with Jaz took place three days to the hour after we became official.

We?

??d been acting normal-ish in the meantime. Kissing more, cuddling longer, generally loving each other up. But that wasn't much of a difference.

Turned out we'd basically been in a relationship for a while now. I just hadn't realized it.

When we arrived at the Spectrum Coalition mixer, though, I was... nervous.

The campus LGBT society had reserved a room at the local gay bar. Crush was usually packed later in the night—or so I was told—but they were willing to rent out sections earlier in the evening. Apparently some of the students would stay and do some dancing later.

As we walked in, I was overwhelmed by the turn-out the group had gotten. The seats

in the room were already full. “Hey, newbies,” a woman said, coming over to welcome us. “Come on in and start mixing. I’m Brooklyn.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jaz said. “I think I might’ve seen you in the grad lounge before.”

“Are you two grad students? I feel like these things only attract undergrads.”

“One masters student and one professor.” I squeezed Jaz’s hand.

“A-a-ahh, I see!” Brooklyn whisked us inside to introduce us to more people.

Nobody at the mixer seemed to care about the student-faculty status of our relationship. They were more interested in hearing about Gretchen, especially when Jaz pulled out her phone and started scrolling through the camera roll.

“Here she is sitting up on her own for the first time,” she said proudly to a guy named Arthur. “And here she is sitting on my lap at the library.”

Arthur’s eyes were glazing over after thirty or so pictures, but he made a valiant effort to enthuse over them anyway. “You’re such a loving mom.”

“Babysitter, actually.”

“Oh.”

I pulled Jaz away as I spotted a professor of my acquaintance. “Alice? I didn’t expect to see you here!”

By the end of the night, it felt like we’d socialized with every lesbian, gay, trans, and bisexual person at Beasley. Not a bad feeling, really.

I'd never bothered to come to one of these events before. I liked the idea that these people knew Jaz and I as a couple. That in their eyes, we were a solid unit.

At that particular moment, it felt as if they were right.

17

Jaz

“Did you hear that?” Faye asked.

I spun my computer chair to face her. I’d set up a mini-office in her living room when I moved in, really a sliver of a desk crammed into a corner—but it was large enough for me to work there while Faye typed on her laptop on the couch. This way, we could both get our stuff done while being close to each other.

“Hear what?”

“Gretchen.”

We both got up and peered into Gretchen’s crib, which took up another corner of the room. The baby was on shaky feet, holding onto the sides to keep herself upright.

“Buh.”

My jaw dropping, I stared at Faye. “Did she just say book?”

“Say it again, kid.” Faye had her phone out, the camera pointed at her. “Tell us what you just said.”

Gretchen’s face scrunched up, and she shook the crib’s sides with all her

might—which wasn't much, but she made her best effort. "Buh!"

"This is when you usually read to her, isn't it?" Faye said. "She's asking for a book."

"Holy shit. Her first word was book." I grabbed Faye's hand and jumped in the air. "She's talking! And she's going to be a nerd like us!"

"Nurture wins over nature." Faye grinned.

"Did you get a good picture? This is going straight in the scrapbook."

Standing in her crib, Gretchen let out a cry. "Bu-u-u-uh!" The sound turned into a wail by the time she'd finished stretching it out to four syllables.

"She's going to be a demanding nerd." I scooped her up and grabbed a picture book. "How do you feel about Robert Munsch, kid? The Paper Bag Princess?"

Faye followed us with the camera, taking shot after shot of her on my knee, her red face slowly fading to its normal color as she listened to the lines of the story.

At the end, where the dragon insulted the princess and the princess danced off into the sunset without her, Gretchen clapped and cheered.

"You think she actually understands this stuff?" I asked, setting the book aside.

"More than we think." The phone beeped as Faye stopped recording. "That's why we're immersing her in feminist literature from day one."

"Obviously it's a straight line from The Paper Bag Princess to Adrienne Rich." I rolled my eyes.

“You’ll find out how right I was in a few years.”

The allusion to the future made my heart jump. At this point, we were a pretty solid thing. We’d been together officially for almost six months, and sleeping together unofficially for another six before that.

Two months ago, I’d packed up my meager possessions and brought them over to her place. I was over here all the time anyway. It should’ve been a pretty big step. And it was... but I wasn’t on the lease.

Just like I wasn’t on Gretchen’s birth certificate.

Not that it was a big deal or anything. I wasn’t her mom. Wasn’t even blood-related, like Faye was.

Except if we ever did break up in the future, I’d have nothing to tie me to her. Not that I had any intentions of breaking up with Faye. Are you kidding? She was only the best thing to ever happen to me, including but not limited to libraries, oral sex, and being born.

“What?” Faye asked.

“Nothing.”

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All right, I didn't always communicate what was on my mind. But seriously, where do you even begin to bring up something like that? Oh, I've been thinking, and I want a permanent bind to this baby. A legal one, to be specific.

Sure, I'd been here for the first year of her existence. And yeah, I'd spent a ton of time with her.

It wasn't like she'd actually remember me if I were to disappear. Babies changed nannies all the time, and as far as I knew, it had no negative effect on them. They just went on their merry little way, eating and crying and pooping as if nothing had ever changed. If anything were to happen to this relationship, it'd be me missing Gretchen, not the other way around.

Faye flipped through her camera roll. "Let's pick the best picture and print it for the scrapbook."

"Sure. Sounds great."

The little hole in my heart was growing a little every day.

And Faye was completely oblivious.

* * *

At our meeting, Dr. O'Neill was full of suggestions on how to polish my thesis. I thanked him profusely as I packed up my things and slid them into my backpack.

He'd been more than understanding of the extra time it was taking me to finish. Theoretically I would've been done last spring. Now it'd been almost a year since I'd started, which meant I wouldn't be able to defend the thesis until the end of the fall term.

I tried not to be too hard on myself about it. I'd basically been working two jobs, and there simply hadn't been time. If anything, Faye was more disappointed about the delay than I was. She said her expert help should've had me finished in less time than usual rather than more.

Of course, that ignored the fact that her "expert help" always ended up with us falling into bed together.

I drove home to find Faye slumped on the couch, phone in hand. Gretchen was crawling around on the floor, so I thought at first that she was taping her. She wasn't.

"What are you looking at?" I asked, scratching Gretchen on the head as I passed.

"Oh. It's just a stupid message from my ex. Here."

>BRENDA: I miss you. How are you?

My jaw clenched as I read further up the history. There was a series of messages like that, sometimes days apart, sometimes weeks or months. I scrolled up to the time our relationship had begun. Faye had never responded.

"Why don't you tell this chick to go fuck herself?"

"Jaz!" Faye gestured at Gretchen. "She's learning to talk, remember?"

The baby fell onto her heels and giggled at us. "F-f-f..."

“Oh, dammit.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Seriously, why haven’t you told her to get bent?”

“I used to.” Faye tossed the phone onto the coffee table. “I gave her a piece of my mind, several times, and it didn’t do a thing to stop her. Eventually I figured I was better off ignoring her, and that she’d take a hint eventually.”

I grabbed the phone and checked the dates again. Brenda’s last message had come almost three months earlier. Apparently this girl was never going to take a hint.

“You haven’t had any more issues with Craigslist people, have you?”

Faye winced. “There was one time when you were out with your friends...”

“All right, fuck this. Sorry, Gretchen.” The baby flopped onto her stomach, and I continued. “I’m going to tell this person off for you. If that doesn’t work, I don’t know what will.”

>ME: Hi, Brenda. I’m great. I’m in a loving, happy relationship of nearly a year. Needless to say, I have no intentions of getting back with you, now or ever, nor do I plan on being in touch with you. As you may have noticed, I haven’t been replying to your messages for months. Please stop contacting me and stop sending strangers to my home, or I’ll be forced to take this to the authorities and pursue a restraining order.

I showed the message to Faye for her approval. She nodded, and I hit send.

“I feel like such a fool for ever caring about that woman,” she mumbled. “How did I not realize what a piece of shit she was?”

“Hey, we all make mistakes. Hopefully she’ll get the picture now.”

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I kept an eye on her phone, certain that Brenda would react in some way. Surely the threat of a restraining order would get to her. But as we went back to a normal conversation and started getting ready to make dinner, the phone didn't make a sound.

Pretty quickly, Faye caught me

looking. I was probably being pretty obvious about it.

"She's not going to respond," she said, balancing Gretchen on her hip. "That's not her style."

I set down my cutting knife. "What is?"

"She takes a couple days to mull over my response, or lack of one. Or maybe it takes her that long to line up an anonymous hook-up for a fake ad. I don't know. Either way, just be on your guard for someone showing up here."

"Got it." I gave her a kiss and kept it in the back of my mind.

* * *

Although the steep flights of stairs to her apartment always left us flushed and sweaty, Faye and I were still laughing as we reached the top. Today's trip to the park with Gretchen had left us with a heap of new inside jokes.

"So if you're not quite ready to try swinging, we'll try the slide next time."

I cut myself off as we rounded the top of the stairs and a man I'd never seen before came into sight. Faye stopped laughing half a second later.

The guy had a different vibe than the woman Brenda had sent early on. Whereas that one was older and unkempt, this one was around our age and clean-cut, dressed in a business suit and shoes that probably cost more than six months of our rent.

And yeah, the gender was different too... but still, there was no question as to who he might be.

Understanding crossed Faye's face, and I stepped between her and the stranger before the man could see her. Faye had dealt with this her way plenty of times. Now it was my turn to try.

And if I failed, I'd follow through on that promise of a restraining order. I'd drag Faye down to the police station if I needed to. Enough was enough!

"Faye," I said, "go stand on the landing."

She looked at me, wordless, her hands moving instinctively to Gretchen in her sling.

"Take her and go."

Her eyes narrowed, but she went a floor down. She'd be able to hear the conversation from here, but hopefully Gretchen wouldn't catch on that something was wrong. Her getting upset was the exact opposite of what we needed.

I gave the stranger a grim smile, daring him to act before he could even open her mouth.

None of this was his fault, of course—he was just a pawn for this Brenda person—but

I wasn't too fond of him anyway. He'd had the nerve to think about having sex with Faye—my Faye. That alone was a good enough reason to dislike him.

“Hi,” the man said, actually offering his hand. “I’m Derek.”

I stared at Derek’s hand like it was a dead fish. Did he really think I was going to shake his hand? Introduce myself?

“Give me your phone,” I demanded instead.

“Excuse me?”

“Your phone, buddy-boy. Hand it over.”

The “buddy-boy” had slipped out of me unplanned. I kind of liked the way it sounded. Maybe I wasn't just a babysitter-book nerd. Maybe I'd secretly had a badass hiding inside me all along!

Except Derek showed no inclination to hand his phone over, regardless of how tough I was being. “Why in God’s name would I do that?”

“Look, the woman you came here to fuck isn't going to fuck you.”

Derek stared at me as if I'd just started speaking Greek.

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“I know you got your hopes up, and maybe you came a long way. Clearly she’s hot. I mean, she’s my girlfriend.” That didn’t seem to scare Derek off, so I repeated myself. “Mine.”

A bead of sweat appeared on his forehead. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

So he wasn’t just trying to get with my woman, he was a liar too. “Open up your Craigslist profile so I can tell the girl who sent you here exactly where to shove her little revenge fantasies.”

After blinking a few times, Derek paused and scratched his head. “Do you mind explaining what you’re talking about?” He tipped his head as if trying to make sense of me from a new angle. “What exactly do you think I’m doing here?”

“I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing here, seeing as I’m not even the girl you were supposed to be meeting. What, you think I’m going to bring you in and introduce you to her? Got your hopes up for some kind of threeway porno orgy?”

“Look, I’m pretty sure we’ve had some kind of miscommunication. Slow down and tell me what’s going on from the start.”

I glared at him. Derek. What kind of douchebag name even was that? “You spoke to someone on Craigslist. A website where people can meet anonymously, since you insist on pretending not to know anything.”

Derek’s eyes widened. “No. You’re already wrong.”

Given his white-collar all-American looks, I wasn't surprised he'd deny being on the app. "Sure, buddy. How did I get this wrong? Let me guess, you're not on Craigslist. You're not here for sex at all. Is that it?" I rolled my eyes. "I can keep a secret. Wouldn't want your wife to find out."

Now Derek sighed, sounding like he was exasperated with this whole conversation. "No, actually. You have me all wrong."

I sneered. "And how's that?"

"I'm not here about any... hook-up... with your woman." He stood straighter. "I came here to get my daughter. Gretchen."

18

Faye

I shuffled Gretchen in my arms, weighed down by the bag I'd slung over my right shoulder. This kid had so much stuff we had to drag with us everywhere, and the amount only seemed to grow. Exponentially, at that.

"You want to talk again?" I asked her. "Maybe apologize for turning a grown adult woman into your packhorse?"

She gurgled and smiled.

The voices from upstairs were indistinct, just loud enough for me to figure out they weren't happy. I wondered why Jaz was so sure she could take care of this when I'd been unable to stop it. Of course, I'd been unwilling to get the police involved.

I was fairly sure Brenda was breaking one law or another by doing this. Some last

clinging remnant of affection had stopped me from taking legal action. Now that Jaz was in the picture, Brenda's bad behavior seemed more serious than it had before. Not to mention that while women were unlikely to get violent, her sending men could put me in actual danger. It was probably time to put this to a stop once and for all.

"If Jaz doesn't get through to Brenda today, I'll take this to the cops," I told Gretchen.

Slow footsteps on the stairs made me turn. I took in Jaz's face, about three shades paler than it'd been a minute before.

"You... you'll want to talk to this guy."

"Why? What is it?" I moved to go up the stairs, but Jaz stood there frozen. I touched her arm. "What's wrong? Is he not taking no for an answer?"

"He's not from Craigslist. He's..." Jaz shook her head and came into motion, taking the steps two at a time as if she was in a race.

I followed her as fast as I could, weighed down by the baby and the bag. My second look at the man told me nothing I hadn't seen before. I didn't know the guy, didn't see why Jaz was acting all weird about this. I turned to her in confusion.

"He's Gretchen's father," she said.

"Derek." The man extended a hand.

My arms wrapped instinctively around Gretchen, and I took a step back. An inch further and I would've fallen down the damn stairs, but at the moment, I wasn't overly concerned with minor things like making sure my feet were on solid ground.

“Gretchen’s father?” I squeaked.

“Yeah.” Derek stood taller, glaring at me now. “I assume you’re Amanda’s sister, Faye. And this must be your... lesbian... lover.”

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He shot Jaz a glance people would normally reserve for pieces of crud under their shoes. I had half a mind to punch him in the nose just for that.

“I don’t know what kind of situation you’ve been raising her in,” Derek said, turning that same look on me. “Bringing random Internet men over for drug-fueled orgies...”

“There were never any drugs,” I said.

“Or orgies!” Jaz waved her hands. “None of that was what it sounded like.”

“Regardless, that’s my daughter you have there.” Derek reached for Gretchen, attempting to touch her cheek.

I yanked her away. “How are we supposed to know that’s true? We don’t know you from Adam.”

Derek glanced at the door. “As much as I hate to ask for an invitation to your sex den, that might make this easier.”

I swallowed, looking at Jaz for agreement before opening the door. “Fine.”

The apartment pretty much was a sex den. We’d banged each other’s brains out on every surface in the place... and a few outside it.

Hey, doing it on the balcony was perfectly normal.

And the windowsill, well... sometimes we got a little overexcited.

Luckily, the dildos and vibrators and other assorted paraphernalia were stashed away for now. I didn't like the way this Derek guy was speaking to us. We were raising Gretchen perfectly fine. And who was he to barge in here acting like he even had any claim on her?

If he was really her father, where the hell had he been for the past year?

In the kitchen, I pointed Derek to a chair. I didn't offer him water, or anything else. Hospitality be damned, I wasn't giving jack shit to this man until I understood who he was and where he was coming from.

"I ran into Amanda at the nightclub where I first met her," Derek said without preamble. "She seemed different from before, more serious. She used to be the one dancing on the tables. This time she only sat with her friends, barely touching her drink."

"So you went up to her?"

Derek nodded. "After we talked for a while, she admitted she'd had a child. My child. I never knew she was pregnant, or I would've never let her go through it alone. Or let Gretchen live... here." He looked around, his nose wrinkling. "She told me where to find you."

My heart beat unsteadily at his story. It sounded plausible enough, except for one thing. "Amanda told me she didn't know who the father was. Why would you assume it'd be you?"

"That would be impossible." Derek didn't even blink an eye. "I've done the math. We were barely apart that month. Then one day, Amanda vanished into thin air. I never knew where she went... until now."

“We only have your word as proof,” I said. Why would Amanda have made herself out to be so promiscuous? Then again, why would Derek go to such lengths to claim a child he wasn’t sure was his?

“I’d be happy to do a paternity test.”

“Good,” I spat.

Derek shrugged. “I don’t mind at all. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure Gretchen comes home to me.”

19

Jaz

Faye was fuming as Derek left the apartment. Literally fuming, as in I expected smoke to come out of her ears at any second.

“How fucking dare he,” she said, pacing around the room with unrestrained fury. “That son of a motherfucking bitch.”

“Faye, your language.”

“Muhfuggin bih!” Gretchen called out happily.

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“Put her in the bedroom, would you? I need to talk freely.”

I set her in her crib, then gently combed her hair with my fingers. She wasn't going to be taken away from us. Faye was mad, but she'd know what to do. She was way too smart to get blindsided by this kind of thing. She'd probably already come up with some brilliant plan.

“I have no fucking clue what to do,” she said when I came back into the kitchen.

My stomach flipped over. “You don't?”

“I never expected this,” she said. “Not for one moment. When Amanda said she didn't know who the dad was, I never thought to question it.”

I'd never seen her this pissed, not even the time before we started dating when she called me to her place in the middle of the night to soothe Gretchen's cries. Seeing her like this was kind of scary... kind of intimidating... and all right, kind of goddamn sexy. I was in love with the woman, okay? As concerned as I was for Gretchen, seeing Faye all worked up and passionate was fucking hot.

“Maybe she lied.” I pulled her close to me, leaning both of us against the wall.

“Maybe she's trying to pull something over on this guy.”

“I don't know.” Faye exhaled, leaning her head on my shoulder. “Derek seems pretty sure of himself. From the sounds of it, he already knows the results of a paternity test.”

I stroked her back. “We can’t let him take Gretchen, right? I mean... she already has a mom.” Two moms, I held myself back from saying.

“The adoption isn’t finalized.” Faye turned her head to look at me, her eyes filled with pain. “I don’t know the legal status. I don’t know if the courts will care that I’ve been her guardian for a year. If this guy is her blood father, then...”

“Fuck.” I held her close and we clung to each other.

What would she do without Gretchen? Hell, where would we be without Gretchen? She’d been part of this Faye-and-me thing since day one.

Maybe there were people out there who would’ve been happy at the idea of getting their partner to themselves. Me? I wasn’t that cold-hearted.

I cherished the everloving shit out of that kid. Derek would have to pry her out of my cold, dead hands.

Wait... I stopped my train of thought. “You don’t think this is a good thing, do you?” I asked. “You never wanted Gretchen in the first place. You always complained about having her dumped on you...”

“Want-ed. Complain-ed.” She choked out a laugh at the funny sound of the second one. “You get my drift. It’s past tense. I fucking adore that kid. I don’t want her to leave me.”

“Me, either.” To put it mildly.

“And this Derek guy is a douchebag, isn’t he? We’re better for Gretchen than that.”

“Oh, yeah. That guy just reeks of cucumber sandwiches and casual racism.”

“Probably complains about Mexicans over high tea at the country club.” Faye gave me a half-smile. “Did you see the way he looked when he said lesbian lover? I mean, you’re my girlfriend. Everybody knows that.”

I loved this woman a little more every day. “You’re the greatest,” I murmured. “But what are we going to do?”

“I’m going to start by calling Amanda.”

* * *

In a turn of events surprising absolutely no one, Amanda wasn’t answering her cell phone.

Faye and I were left to deal with things as best as we could in the meantime. Which was... not that well.

There was some yelling and crying and staring at each other.

There was angry sex and comforting sex and everything in between.

And yet, I never saw it coming when Faye pushed up her glasses one day and asked me to see her lawyer with her.

“Six o’clock tonight,” she said almost shyly as we sat, as usual, in her office. “You don’t have to come, of course. I just thought you might be interested. This kind of concerns you, too.”

“Of course I’ll go with you.” I didn’t need to be asked twice. If she’d ever thought to ask me to go to any of the other appointments, I would’ve gone to those, too.

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Tisha Bradley's office was just outside of town, its entrance hidden among the crumbling brick of decades-old homes. I almost expected a white-gloved butler to open the door. Instead we got Tisha, youthful and bubbly.

She was around Faye's age, and her outfit would've suggested a serious career woman if it weren't for the multicolored polka dots peppering every article of clothing from the pencil skirt to the blazer.

"Where did you find this woman?" I murmured to Faye.

She gave me an amused glance. "She was highly recommended. She's legit."

Tisha had likely overheard us, but she gave us a peppy smile anyway. "So this little cutie has a problem," she said, gazing adoringly at Gretchen. "I'm not surprised that too many people want her."

"She's the light of our lives," Faye said seriously. "We're not willing to give her up."

"Don't worry, we're going to fight for that darling little face of hers."

I gave the lawyer a hard look. "Do you have children yourself, Ms. Bradley? And how long have you been practicing law?"

The smile dropped from Tisha's face. "I have nieces and nephews that I'd move mountains for. It's been hard to find time to have my own children since I've been working eighty-hour weeks for the past ten years."

“Okay.”

“So if you’re done questioning my qualifications...”

Mollified, I nodded. “Please go on.”

“This is an interesting pickle you’ve gotten yourselves into. Normally the mother is the default to get primary custody, but from what you’ve told me, this little one’s mama isn’t in the picture at all.”

“Not really,” Faye said. “I’ve encouraged her to get involved in Gretchen’s life, but she doesn’t seem interested.”

Tisha shuffled through the files. “A shame that we haven’t been able to finalize the adoption quicker. If it’d already gone through, that would make this a little easier. I don’t suppose you’d consider some sort of custody-sharing arrangement, would you? It’s not as if you want to wrench Gretchen away from her father.”

“It’s not as if we want to, but...”

“He’s a prick,” I interrupted. “We do want to wrench her away from her father.”

“I see.” Tisha examined the files again. “I’ll see what I can do for you. We’ll look into both biological parents and evaluate how the courts will perceive them, versus you. Judges generally want to provide the most stable living environment for a child.”

“That’s what we want to give Gretchen.” My voice came out higher than I’d intended it to, nearly cracking as I finished the sentence. “We’re a couple. We live together. Gretchen’s spent her entire life so far with us.”

“And that’s a plus,” Tisha said. “But we’ll have to see what we find out about this

Derek character.”

“What do you think?” I asked as

we left Tisha’s office.

“I think... I’m glad I have you for support.” Faye grabbed my hand, the one that wasn’t holding Gretchen in her sling.

As we reached her car, I gave her a baleful look. “I’m not just here to support you, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

But I couldn’t tell her.

If she didn’t get it yet, she’d have to figure it out for herself.

20

Faye

The news wasn’t going to be good. I could tell from the look on Tisha’s face.

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She'd hardly stopped smiling during our first meeting a week ago. Today she looked as if someone had just kicked her grandfather in the nuts.

Maybe her best friend died, I tried to reassure myself. Maybe it's not about Gretchen at all.

But as Tisha opened our file and winced at what she saw, I knew that was a futile hope.

"Gretchen's father's name is Derek Conway," she said. "Lives in Sargasso. His first step is establishing paternity, and then he needs to contest the adoption. No genetic testing done as of yet, but he's shown photo evidence that he was romantically linked with your sister at the time of conception. Considering he has no other reason to claim the fatherhood, I don't think there's much doubt about that."

I nodded, trying to act like the thought of my kid sister conceiving the baby I was holding didn't make me cringe. At my side, Jaz bobbed her head along with me.

"So what do we know about Mr. Conway?" she asked. "Other than that he's a sleazy-ass douchebag and a mild homophobe."

"That's the thing," Tisha said. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but Conway appears to be an upstanding pillar of the community."

Jaz groaned, and I dropped my gaze to my lap. Shit.

"What's so great about him?" Jaz asked.

“He’s a Conway... of the Winchester Conways,” Tisha said.

“The so-called high society family that’s dripping with old money?”

“That’s the one.” Tisha didn’t have to explain any further. I already knew the clan was made up of governors, diplomats, and various other eminent professions. “Never married, no children. An investment banker, makes an excellent living. Homeowner, taxpayer. Does charity work in his spare time.”

“He sounds... stable.” I massaged my temples. It didn’t take a genius to figure out a wealthy banker with a fancy home would look better to a judge than a couple of impoverished academics.

Jaz sounded as discouraged as me. “Isn’t there any good news?”

“Uh... not particularly. According to Conway, he’s always wanted to be a father, and he’s willing to battle you two in court for as long as necessary.”

My throat clenched up, only easing up a little when Jaz’s hand slipped into mine. “There’s two of us and one of him,” she said. “Doesn’t that matter at all? Wouldn’t the judge prefer Gretchen grow up in a two-parent home?”

“Theoretically, but I doubt they’ll see it like that.” Tisha looked even more sympathetic now. “Maybe if both of you were to adopt her, but as it stands, only Faye is on the paperwork.”

“I’ll do it.”

I sat stick-straight, staring at Jaz. “No. I can’t ask you to do that.”

She set her hands on the desk. “What if I want to?” Her voice cracked slightly. “What

if I've been wanting to for a while?"

Tisha looked from me to her. "You two will have to resolve this together. It won't be a magic bullet to keep Gretchen, if that's what you're thinking."

"I don't care." Jaz held her head higher now, as if a weight had finally come off her shoulders. "I want to do it anyway."

* * *

It would've been utterly selfish of me to let Jaz adopt Gretchen with me.

She was young. She had her whole life ahead of her. She had no need to tie herself down to some older woman and her niece.

But as we got into bed that night and Jaz curled her back into me, saying "I really want to do this, you know..."

Heaven help me, the idea wouldn't let me go.

I lay there for hours, debating possible outcomes, envisioning potential futures. I knew Jaz loved Gretchen. More importantly, we loved each other. And now that the image had come to me, I wanted nothing more than to sign those papers with her, put a ring on her finger, make an honest-to-goodness family together.

But then there were the other possibilities I pictured. Jaz single, finishing her masters in record time without me and Gretchen dragging her down. Jaz completing her Ph.D. because she didn't have to run out and get a job to feed a child who wasn't hers. Jaz finding a great job, putting in a few years, and getting tenure right on schedule.

Jaz heartbroken at first... then meeting other girls. Dating around. Maybe nothing

would come of it at first, but she'd keep at it. She had so much love to give, she wouldn't be alone for long.

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Even if we were great together, she'd be compatible with plenty of other women. She was such a wonderful person, how could she not be? Eventually one girl or another would get under her skin, and she'd feel a spark of attraction. Her interest would grow. Soon she'd find herself falling in love. Forgetting me.

That part hurt... more than I cared to admit.

But as I thrashed in the sheets, cold sweat trickled down my spine.

Because Jaz still had the chance to do this the right way. Date the person first. Get married. Find a sperm donor, or start the adoption process—either way, doing it together.

She wouldn't have to deal with all the drama of my fucked-up family. No Amanda, no Ma, no Brenda.

No me...

But sometimes if you loved something, you had to let it go.

21

Jaz

As I woke up, Faye whispered softly to me, "No."

Her arms were wrapped around me. I smiled, rubbing myself against her bare skin. I

didn't know what she was talking about, didn't care either. Trailing my hand lazily down her chest, I thanked the stars again for giving me my heart's deepest desire.

"Jaz, did you hear me? The answer is no." Her voice was curt enough for me to open my eyes in shock. Her face was just as cold, even if there was a hint of pain there, too. "And what's more, I think it's best if you move out."

"What are you talking about?" I sat straight up, sheets sliding off me.

The bags under Faye's eyes betrayed how much sleep she hadn't gotten, yet she moved with surprising energy as she leapt out of bed. "You should go. No, you need to. I won't let you stay and go through this when you don't have to."

From her crib beside the bed, Gretchen let out a piercing wail. I moved for her, the response automatic. When she cried, I comforted her. That was how it worked.

Except this time, Faye jumped in between us. "I'll deal with her."

"You don't want me to get her to stop?"

Gretchen cried louder.

"You need to go. Now."

I tossed on clothes, still sleepy despite my confusion. "So I'll get Gretchen from you at your office? That doesn't make sense. I might as well take her now if you need me to go out. But I don't get why you want me to go out."

"No, Jaz. You'll pick Gretchen up never. I'll watch her myself today."

"You have classes." I knew her schedule forwards and backwards. This didn't make

sense.

“I’ll handle my classes!” Faye shouted.

My shirt was on inside-out, and I went to fix it.

Faye pointed at the door. “Stop dawdling and go. I…” She cut herself off. “You can pick up your stuff later. Tonight, maybe. I don’t know.”

“Faye, what is this?” I got my top on the right way and pressed a hand to my forehead. “I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“I can’t make you do this. I’m going to lose Gretchen, and I don’t want you going through this along with me.” Her eyes were shining. “I have to do this alone.”

It was beginning to dawn on me. “No, that’s not going to happen. I love this kid. What, you’re going to take her away from me so I don’t have to lose her? Are you even hearing yourself?” It made so little sense, I wanted to laugh.

“Don’t think I haven’t thought this through.” Faye turned away, dabbing at an eye. “This isn’t the life for you. We’re holding you back, me and Gretchen. You’re never going to finish your masters at this rate, never mind your Ph.D.”

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“What?” I crossed the room and grabbed her arm, shaking her to make her look at me. “Did you ever ask if I want a Ph.D.? Did you ever wonder if maybe I love you and Gretchen more than my education?”

“You can’t. You shouldn’t.”

“That’s not your choice to make, Faye.”

“I’m making it anyway.”

Gretchen kept screaming as I backed away from her. “Fine. I’ll go.” I walked to the door as calmly as I could when my heart was shattering.

If Faye was serious, I couldn’t force her to let me stay.

* * *

I sleepwalked through the day. When Farrah found me in the grad students’ lounge at lunchtime, I’d been staring at a textbook for fifteen minutes.

At its front cover, to be precise.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Where’s Gretchen?”

“Baby... daddy... Faye... Ph.D....”

She blinked and examined me closely. “Are you saying the baby’s father came back

and Faye has a Ph.D.?”

That almost made me smile. “Close. She dumped me because she thinks she and Gretchen are holding me back from getting a Ph.D.” I sniffed. “Or something like that. I don’t really know.”

After questioning me a bit more, she shook her head and leaned back. “Where are you going to stay now?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t gotten that far. All I can think about is making her change her mind.”

“You’re welcome to move in with us while you figure out what to do next.” Farrah paused. “I hate to say this, Jaz, but maybe it’s for the best. Faye and Gretchen aren’t your family.”

That was nice of her... I just hoped I wouldn’t have to take her up on the offer. “Would you let Sven break up with you if he thought he was standing in your way?” I demanded. “Or would you tell him he herself is everything you’ve ever wanted?”

Farrah considered for a moment. “I see what you mean, but loving Faye isn’t enough. She does come with a baby.”

“A baby I think of as my own daughter.” I sighed and rubbed my knee. “I know it’s crazy, I know I’m young to have a kid... but there’s plenty of parents our age. I’ve taken care of so many of my cousins, but I never felt like this toward them. Gretchen is... mine. Even if I never see her again, she’ll always be part of me.”

“God, Jaz.”

“I know.” I picked up my textbook and flipped through it as if I had any intention of

actually reading it. “I have to get her back.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We have a meeting with our lawyer tonight at six. I’m guessing Faye thinks I’ve forgotten.”

Farrah bit her lip. “You’re probably not invited anymore.”

She was always so sensible. But sometimes being sensible wasn’t an option.

“All the more reason to go.”

22

Faye

“Yes, there’s a baby in a sling on my chest. Yes, she’s really unbelievably adorable. Any further questions?”

Hands went up across the five-hundred-person lecture hall.

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“Then save them for somebody who cares, because I’m not answering them.” I shifted Gretchen against my chest. “If she becomes a disturbance, you’re all going home. Otherwise, I expect you to act like she’s not even here.”

A rush of whispers broke out. They were loud enough for me to catch the gist—that if the students could get the baby to cry, they’d get the day off from my class.

I smiled sardonically. “Regardless of whether you all go home, you’ll still have a quiz worth twenty percent of your grade on Wednesday. And not all of what it covers is in the book.”

I’d never seen a crowd that big go that silent, that fast.

“Now, let’s talk about the othering of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*.”

I had a sneaking suspicion that Gretchen’s presence today, along with my policies about it, were going to be front-page news in the Beasley student paper. Still, it was good to have the students’ attention again. I’d been slipping lately, not preparing as much as I should’ve, hemming and hawing when I normally would’ve been orating passionately.

Gretchen was keeping my hands full on her own, and then there was the drama with Derek. I’d hardly been sleeping, and my job responsibilities had taken a back seat. A tiny bright spot was that my ex seemed to have given up on her revenge attempts, doubtless because of Jaz’s threat of a restraining order. I could admit she was actually smarter than me sometimes.

But from here on in, I'd be going it alone. And as much as I knew I was doing what was best for Jaz, I still wished it didn't have to be this way.

None of the professors or other staff in the humanities building had been willing to take Gretchen for the morning. They were more than willing to come and coo over her when it was all fun and games, but in a situation where it wasn't convenient for them, they suddenly had a million excuses. They were in the middle of research, they had their own classes to teach, blah blah blah...

I couldn't blame anyone but myself for the circumstances I was in. People had their own lives, I understood. Jaz had just spoiled me by being so willing to take Gretchen anytime, no matter what.

I let out a long exhale, realizing I'd stopped lecturing in the middle of a sentence. I couldn't even blame Gretchen's sweet smile or chubby cheeks. I'd simply been lost in my own thoughts. Looking at the PowerPoint slide, I started over. Still, my mind was far from the material.

My lips twitched as I remembered the time I'd called her and made her get out of bed to come over and soothe her. We hadn't even been dating yet. Not even sleeping together. And even then, she said it wasn't a big deal. She said she cared about her that much.

A ray of warmth threatened to penetrate my heart, but I pushed it forcefully out.

Even then, she'd been putting Gretchen before herself.

And that was exactly what I could no longer let her do.

Jaz

Although I tried to get to Tisha's office early, Faye's car was already there when I arrived. That was a bad sign. It'd be easier for her to throw me out on arrival than to get me out if I was already in there with Tisha.

I grimaced as I got out of the car. For all I knew, she'd already warned her I might show up and the two of them had already decided how to turn me away. At least my other fear hadn't come true—they hadn't rescheduled the meeting.

I knocked on the door and Tisha opened it a second later. "There you are," she said enthusiastically. "Faye told me you weren't coming. I've been small-talking her to put off starting. I knew you wouldn't miss this."

A step behind her, Faye glared at me. "She needs to miss this, actually. It's not her business anymore."

"I'm not here for you," I told her. "I'm here about Gretchen, because I care about her and want what's best for her."

"You'll definitely want to hear what I have to tell you," Tisha said.

"Jaz, go home." When I showed no inclination to leave, Faye turned to the lawyer instead. "She's not part of this. She has nothing to contribute here."

"Look, your relationship has nothing to do with me. Dr. Erwin, you hired me to represent you, but Jaz has been there since the start. I don't want to repeat myself when you decide she should be here after all. Now, are you absolutely one hundred percent positive you don't want her here?"

I caught Faye's eye, hoping she'd see the sincerity there. "Faye... I'm here for

Gretchen. She's like a daughter to me."

"You know what? Fine. I don't care. If you want to take this burden on yourself, go for it."

I cleared my throat. "I don't think she's a burden at all."

I was dying to hold her, actually. It'd been a long time since I'd spent a whole day without her, and it felt like I was missing a part of myself. I'd felt unnaturally light as I walked around campus. And skipping story hour at the library on a Wednesday just felt wrong.

With that settled, we sat down in Tisha's office. As she started talking around the problem, beating around the bush with the lead-up to whatever she was going to say, I let my eyes linger on Faye.

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Was I really never going to get to kiss those plush lips again? Never touch that soft hair, or run my hands down the slender back? Could it really be that I'd never again quiver under her as she ravished me, or listen to her moans as I worked between her legs?

I'd change her mind. I had to.

Don't do this, I told her with my eyes.

In response, she looked at Tisha. "Could you get to the point?"

"Sorry," she said. "The crux of it is that I've been in touch with both Gretchen's mother and father."

"You found Amanda?" I blurted out.

"Yes. She's been living in Sargasso, where Derek ran into her." She turned to Faye. "She's willing to talk to you. Not a negotiation... I mean on a personal level."

"And Derek?" Faye asked softly.

"He's hoping this doesn't have to turn into an all-out custody battle." Tisha bit her lip. "He'd like to talk to you, too. Mediated by me."

"I'm joining you," I said. No question of it. No one and nothing was going to keep me away.

Apparently Faye hadn't gotten the memo. "No," she growled.

"I'll let the two of you work it out," Tisha said.

"There were some small things I was going to go over with you, but all things considered..." She looked from Faye to me. "I think your time would be better spent coming to an agreement together."

She let us out, and Faye and I stood tensely in the parking lot, an arm's span apart. I ached to step closer, to take her in my arms the way I'd been able to for so long.

Funny how fast you can get used to something you never thought you'd have. A year ago, it would've been unimaginable for me to ever kiss Dr. Faye Erwin. Today it was unimaginable that I couldn't.

"You don't have to do this," I said softly. "I'm here. You're not sparing me from anything by pushing me away. You're only making this harder for both of us."

Faye cradled the baby closer to her chest. "Stop trying to change my mind. It's a final decision."

My heart broke a little more. "Fine," I said. "But at least keep me updated on what happens with Gretchen."

"I'll think about it."

I'd never guessed she could be so cold. "Please," I said. "And let me come to the meeting with Derek."

"Maybe."

It sounded like a no.

My limbs felt weak. If she stuck to this decision, today could seriously be the last time I'd ever see Gretchen. My throat got tight at the thought, and I couldn't keep from choking up.

"Let me hold her," I said, nearly begging now. "I just want to give her a kiss."

Faye stepped neatly around me. "It's better if you don't."

"Please..."

"Forget her," she said. "Forget us."

* * *

There was no word from Faye after that. Not directly, anyway.

Through Dr. O'Neill, she sent the message that I could pick my things up the next night, when she'd be out. And like an obedient little ex-girlfriend, I went.

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Just walking into the apartment nearly had me in tears. I'd spent the happiest days of my life here. I'd thought—stupidly—they'd never end.

Before packing anything, I wandered around and touched everything. Here was the couch I'd cuddled Gretchen on. Here was the sink where I'd bathed her.

A few Lego blocks were still on the floor. Out of habit, I picked them up and put them back in the box.

For the last time. I rubbed my eyes.

When the emotion had faded enough, I went into the bedroom. The memories were just as strong here, if more sexual.

Was it only a few nights ago Faye had me pinned to the mattress, telling me how much she loved me as she kissed down the length of my body? It felt like an eternity.

I took my things. Books, mostly—I didn't own much else. My clothes fit in a couple of shopping bags. I could carry everything down to the car in one trip.

When everything was collected in bags at the door, I paused and took a few breaths. As soon as I took this mass of stuff out the door, it'd be as if I'd never been here at all. It was that easy for Faye to erase me from her life.

No wonder she'd never committed to me in any major way. Whether consciously or not, she'd been leaving this option open.

Staying on Sven and Farrah's couch was only a temporary solution. Where did I go from here? Should I get another apartment with new roommates, or move back to my mom's place to lick my wounds? She'd enjoy the company, and I knew my incessant whining was already starting to irritate my friends. For my part, it was a little difficult to spend so much time with a happy couple when I was this heartbroken.

Swallowing my bitterness, I grabbed the bags. A book toppled from one stack and fell on the floor—my copy of *Twenty-One Love Poems*.

I picked it up and set it on Faye's coffee table, leaving it open to the unnamed poem with the line I'd quoted so long ago.

I used to think I understood what Adrienne Rich meant about a body haunting you.

Now I knew. And I desperately wished I didn't.

24

Faye

On the floor, Gretchen scooted from one end of the kitchen to the other. She was restless today, moving constantly around the apartment as best as she could on her chubby little knees.

It did feel oddly empty without Jaz here. But she was too little to understand that.

The phone rang, and I picked it up with a sigh.

"Hey, sis."

"Amanda." I pressed the phone to my ear, sinking back into my chair. "The lawyer

said you would call. I guess you've heard the news about Gretchen."

"I have."

I glanced at the baby crawling into the living room, my heart aching at the thought of her being taken away from me. "This Derek guy... is he really the father?"

Amanda paused for a long moment. "Yes."

"So you knew all along? Why would you tell me you had no idea?"

"I had my reasons, okay?"

"Reasons like what?" I pressed. "Did you know from the start he'd actually want Gretchen? Why would you take her away from a loving home?"

My sister sighed. "I didn't want to put this on him." Her voice got smaller. "I was in love, okay? I didn't know who he was when he picked me up in the bar. Or when we decided to go on a few other dates after that. He always came over to my place, not the other way around. I was never some kind of gold digger. It wasn't about that."

"So you didn't know he was a Conway?"

"No!" Amanda said. "Not until well after I'd fallen for him. We spent every minute together for a month, and I'd never been so happy. He treated me like a princess, and me... I worshiped him."

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I listened, unsure how all this mattered.

“But then I fucked up,” she went on. “I forgot to take my birth control. By the time I took a pregnancy test, I understood who I was dealing with. I knew he’d think I’d done it on purpose, trying to trap him into marrying me. He was always paranoid, talking about how the women he dated were desperate to get a piece of his wealth and attach themselves to his family name. I wasn’t like that. It was an honest mistake, I swear.”

“I believe you.” And for whatever reason, I did. I knew my sister well enough to know she was essentially a genuine person. She could be evasive, she could disappear for months or sneak around the truth when I did get ahold of her, but right now I had no doubt she was speaking from the heart.

“Thank you.” She sniffled. “I couldn’t get rid of the baby. Couldn’t imagine doing it, even when it was only a little ball of cells. I knew it was going to grow into a real person, Derek’s son or daughter. I decided to disappear and give birth.”

“So you could raise Gretchen on your own?”

“No... so I could go back to Derek after.”

My eyes fell on the baby again, innocently making her way around the room on her hands and knees. “You never intended to keep Gretchen?”

“I was going to for a few months,” she said. “Long enough to get my body back... so that Derek wouldn’t notice anything when I went back to him. I figured I’d make up

some story about how I'd been traveling in Europe... I thought we could pick up where we left off."

"And then?"

"And then I had Gretchen," she said, her voice breaking. "And I loved her."

Of everything Amanda could've said, that was the last thing I'd expected to hear. "You did?"

"So much I couldn't stand to be around her." Amanda sniffled again. "I had to get her away from me as soon as possible, or I knew I'd never be able to leave."

"That's when you brought her to me."

"Exactly." She had to be crying now, I could hear the choked sobs. "I'm sorry, Faye. It was for Gretchen's own good. I'm sorry for the way I did it, too, but I had to. I couldn't look at you when I dropped her off. I knew you'd have questions I wouldn't be able to answer. And if I had to stand there and answer them, I would've broken. Forgotten the whole plan and taken her with me. And I wanted to be with Derek more than anything else."

e."

More than being with her daughter. Anger flared inside me. Amanda might've been sincere, but leaving her baby with someone else still made her a shitty mother in my eyes.

"But you didn't go back to Derek in the end," I said. "Why?"

I figured he'd probably had a new girlfriend by that point. A wealthy, attractive man

like that wouldn't stay single for long if he didn't want to.

But Amanda's answer surprised me. "Because of you," she sobbed. "By the time I'd gotten back to my normal self, you'd gotten in my head with your whole thing about how I should've kept Gretchen. I knew I was a terrible mother, a pathetic human being... and Derek deserved better than that."

"God, Amanda." I could almost feel sorry for her. "Where have you been all this time? What have you been doing?"

"Nothing in particular. This and that." She sighed. "I pick up work when I can. Waitressing, bartending... I scrape by okay. I've been sending as much money as I can."

"And I appreciate that. The checks helped. I know things are as tight for you as they are for me."

Amanda made a small sound of acknowledgment. "It's been lonely. I went back to Sargasso, since that's where I was last happy. I tried hanging out with my old friends again, but nothing was the same. All I could think about was Gretchen. And when I ran into Derek..."

"You told him the truth," I finished.

"He got it out of me. I don't think he thinks I'm a gold digger... but he doesn't want me back, either. He just wants to take my baby and raise her. Alone."

"I'm not going to let him do that. I'm going to fight tooth and nail to keep her." I hesitated, a pit growing in my chest. "You don't want to take her now, do you?"

Amanda sniffled one last time. "I don't know, Faye. I know you're a better parent

than I'd ever be. But I miss her. Even though I only had her for one day, I love her."

On the floor, Gretchen had managed to surround herself with blocks of all different colors. For such a tiny kid, she seemed to have a big effect on people.

"We'll figure this out," I told my sister. "The important thing is keeping her in the family."

We hung up, and I focused on Gretchen. "You're giving a lot of people a really big headache, little girl."

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She usually paid little attention when I spoke, but this time she looked straight at me. “Ma?”

I leapt out of the chair. “Did you just say Mom?” Was she calling me Mom? I dropped to my knees in front of her, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. “Say that again, sweetie.” Where was my camera when I needed it?

Pulling her hand away, Gretchen pushed herself onto her butt and looked up at me with innocent blue eyes. “Where Ma?”

Oh. This wasn’t about me at all.

“Jaz isn’t here, Gretchen. She’s not your mom, either.”

Her lips quivered. “Ma!” She began to crawl away.

* * *

Yet again, I couldn’t find anyone to take Gretchen for the day. People were busy, and it was last-minute.

“I can get you the number for the babysitter my daughter uses,” Pauline offered over the phone. “I bet if she’s busy, she’ll know someone else you can call.”

I didn’t feel like playing phone tag. I might only have a few more weeks to spend with Gretchen.

“That’s all right,” I said. “I’m going to take the day off.”

I called in sick, asking the department head to put a flyer on the lecture hall door announcing my classes were canceled. I sent a mass email to my students advising them of the same. And then I was free to take Gretchen wherever I wanted.

“How do you feel about the park?” I asked her.

She giggled and said, “Park!”

When we got there, I put her in the baby swing. She giggled and gurgled as I gently pushed her into the air. Her joy was so pure and innocent, it almost broke my heart. She was so lucky to not understand any of the drama surrounding her.

As for me, the recent events weighed heavier on me every day. Worse, I had no one to talk about them with. Tisha helped with the legal aspects, but I wasn’t about to dump all my emotional problems on her. None of my colleagues would want to hear about my devastation and my heartbreak, my fears and my anxiety. And confiding in Ma or Amanda wasn’t going to happen, for obvious reasons.

Jaz was the only person who would’ve understood.

“Do you want to go in the sandbox, or do you want to eat lunch?” I asked Gretchen.

More and more often, her single words and broken syllables made it seem like she actually understood me. “Hungee!” she said.

I set a blanket down in the grass and opened a jar of baby food. When Gretchen was done, I wiped off her face the way Jaz had shown me all those months ago. With a heavy heart, I unwrapped the sandwich I’d brought with me.

We spent a while sitting and watching the bigger kids play. It was peaceful there, and I lay back on the blanket to stare up at the clouds. I still wasn't sure what I'd do if Amanda wanted her back. It would be better than letting a complete stranger take her away from the entire family, but I'd miss her so terribly. What was best for her, though? That was the real question.

With a sigh, I pushed myself to sit up. "When's your story hour, kid? I know it's at one p.m., but I can't remember if it's on Mondays or Wednesdays."

Gretchen only blinked those big eyes at me in response.

Jaz would know... but Jaz wasn't here, and I had to stop thinking about her. Even if that got a little harder with each passing moment.

"Let's go to the library anyway," I told the baby. "If it's not today, we can still get you some new picture books."

As it turned out, story hour was today. I slipped into the back of the room as the librarian set up in the middle. With Gretchen on my lap, I got ready to listen.

"Ma!" Gretchen said.

"Shh, it's not time to talk now."

She ignored me, reaching her chubby arms out. "Ma!"

I looked where she was looking, right next to us. "Jaz?"

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“Gretchen! Hey, gorgeous.” Jaz held her arms out for the baby, then dropped them immediately. “Sorry,” she said to me. “I forgot for a second.”

Gretchen squirmed wildly, trying to get to Jaz. “Ma! Ma!”

Fuck. I pursed my lips and handed her over to her. “She misses you,” I said quietly.

“I miss you too, Gretchen. So much.” She squeezed her in her arms until she squeaked and giggled. Jaz’s face was lit up, a smile spreading across her face... until she looked at me again and it disappeared.

I miss you too. I don’t want to be alone without you. Please, please come back to me...

“What are you doing here?” I asked instead. I frowned, unable to conceive of why a grown woman would come alone to story hour. “Are you following me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, Faye, I’m following you by showing up here before you even got here. I totally knew you were even going to be here. I’m psychic, in case you’d forgotten.”

“All right, all right. I guess we did only decide to come here at the last minute, but...”

“Excuse me.” The librarian was glaring at us. Apparently the story hour was about to start.

“Let’s talk after,” I whispered.

Gretchen bounced on my lap for the duration of The Giving Tree. For my part, I barely heard a word that came out of the librarian's mouth. I was more focused on Jaz's proximity to me. Even when we weren't exchanging a word, being so close to her put all sorts of thoughts in my head. I ached to lean closer, to take her hand.

All right, I also wanted to drag her out of the room and somewhere private so I could ravish every single inch of her... but obviously that wasn't going to happen.

When the story was over, I picked Gretchen up. Jaz followed me out to the children's area, where I put Gretchen down and let her crawl around investigating the different books she didn't know how to read yet. She became engrossed in one with especially pretty pictures, and I turned to Jaz.

"So why are you here?"

"I don't really know, to be honest. I just find it relaxing. I haven't been able to get much done, and I thought it'd be a nice break."

"You haven't been working on your thesis?"

She dropped her gaze. "Not exactly."

But that was why I'd broken up with her. If she wasn't getting her degree done, what was even the point?

If Gretchen missed her and she missed Gretchen... if she missed me, and Lord knew I missed her...

Stop thinking along those lines, Faye. That's a dangerous road to go down. This is for her own good.

“You should be working,” I told her.

Before she could answer, Gretchen flopped onto her butt and looked up at her. “Ma! Weed!”

I frowned. “Weed?” Was I raising the world’s youngest pothead?

“Read,” Jaz said. “She wants me to read to her.”

“Oh.”

She sat on the floor next to her and picked up the book she’d been examining. Her face bloomed with happiness as she read the introductory words.

And I couldn’t deny it anymore. Gretchen loved Jaz. It was clear as day. As tiny as she was, she understood enough to know who she was and that she adored her. What’s more, the feeling was mutual.

Jaz hadn’t even reacted to Gretchen calling her Ma. I’d been so excited at the thought that she might see me as a mom. For Jaz, it seemed to be a given.

She’d been acting like Gretchen’s mom for the better part of a year. In both of their eyes, she was her mom. And I’d taken her away from her.

“Jaz...” I whispered when the story was over. “I’m sorry.”

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She jerked around to look up at me. “What?”

“I think... I might’ve been wrong. I only wanted what was best for you, but... maybe I should’ve let you decide.”

Gretchen was silent, as if she understood we were having an adult moment.

Jaz stood up, coming

g face to face with me. “Are you saying you want me back?”

“I never stopped wanting you.”

Her hands cupped my face. “You’d take me back, then?”

Slowly, I nodded. More than anything, I wanted her to kiss me right there in the middle of the library. But I couldn’t let her get her hopes up without giving her all the information.

“I don’t know if we’ll get Gretchen away from Derek,” I said softly. “And Amanda might want her too.”

She swallowed, and I trembled. Maybe this wasn’t good enough for her. Maybe without Gretchen, I wouldn’t be enough.

At last she spoke, and although her voice was sorrowful, it was also resolute.

“We’ll make it work,” she said. “We’ll get through it. Together.”

25

Jaz

Faye’s change of heart was so sudden, I couldn’t stop questioning it. “Are you sure?” I asked as we left the library.

“This is for real?” as I brought my bags from my car up her stairs.

“But seriously, though?” as she shut the door to her bedroom.

She’d just brought Gretchen’s crib into the living room, and she listened for a moment to make sure the nap she seemed to be taking had stuck. “This is absolutely for real,” she said. “I’ve been wishing I could take it back since I told you to leave, but I kept telling myself it was for the best.”

It was exactly what I wanted to hear... but how could I be sure? She’d been so cold to me, sounded so final. How could I ever erase the memory of how she’d ended it?

I stood an arm’s length away from her. “You hurt me, Faye,” I said.

“I hurt myself.” She spoke quietly, regretfully. “I’m pretty sure I hurt Gretchen as well. I was trying to salvage what I could from a bad situation, and I fucked everything up even worse.”

“I’ll never agree with what you did... but I think I kind of understand.”

Faye smiled then, her eyes still pained. “I don’t want to drag you down with me. What I’m going to go through in the next few months might not be fun. At all.”

“You say that like it’s a surprise.” I took a step closer, touched her arm. “You say it like I have a choice in whether to leave or stay. I’m already here, Faye, already in this with you. I love the fuck out of that kid, and you. I’m not going anywhere—I can’t.”

“Then... would I be a horrible person if I told you to come here?” She opened her arms.

I fell into them, letting her just hold me for a long moment. It felt like I’d been waiting an eternity for her embrace, and it felt just as warm and solid and comforting as I’d anticipated.

She lifted my chin and our lips met. Then I was kissing her like I’d never done before. With my kisses, I gave her a series of fierce, passionate demands. Don’t do this again. Don’t ever leave me.

And in return, she gave me tender affirmations. I made a mistake, and I’m sorry. I’ll never hurt you.

We clung onto each other, barely separating long enough for her to start stripping us out of our clothes, one piece at a time. I was so focused on kissing her, I was only vaguely aware of her easing my shirt over my head. All I knew was that the heat of her body was suddenly closer, her silky skin against mine.

“I’ve missed you,” she said. “I know I’ve said that already, but I can’t say it enough.”

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“I missed you so much it hurt.”

“You... this... us...” She stopped, shaking her head. “Fuck, Jaz, I really love you.”

Our lips met again and I rubbed against her, desperate to feel close to her. After losing her and getting her back again, there was no time to waste.

When we were both nude, we fell together onto the bed. Faye positioned herself between my legs, a finger testing my entrance.

“I fucking need you,” I moaned.

With a slow nod, she dipped her head between my legs, her finger easing into me. I gasped and tilted my hips up, my back arching against the mattress.

She licked me slowly, taking her time—probably because every caress she gave me made me groan a little louder. I couldn’t help it. Feeling her on me when I’d thought I never would again ... I’d never known anything could be so good.

“So fucking good.” She pulled her head up, echoing my thoughts.

I placed my hand on the back of her head, guiding her back to where she’d been. “Fucking love you,” I murmured—and then I was lost to the sensation of her tongue on me.

Sex between us had never been this slow and loving. For the first time, I was discovering how passionate “making love” could be. Our usual way was pleasurable,

yes... but when she slowed down like this, I got to savor the way her tongue circled my delicate nub and how her fingers slid along my slick folds.

Every ridge and valley inside me responded to her, every nerve ending vibrating at her caress. I stroked my breasts unconsciously, my legs seizing up around her back.

She lowered her head, pressing soft kisses to my inner thigh. “Jaz...”

“Mmm.”

Her hands ran over my body, leaving trails of heat in their wake. “I know I can never make up for leaving you... but I hope this might help a little.”

Before I could form the words for a response, she’d fixed her lips to my clit again, adjusting the angle of her hand inside me. Her fingers curled against something exquisitely sensitive.

A white-hot, blinding light appeared behind the back of my eyelids.

And I screamed... and screamed... and screamed...

* * *

“What the hell was that?” I gasped as Faye towed me down lovingly a few minutes later. “How did you... just... how?”

She gave a soft laugh. “You already forget how well I know your body.”

We fell back onto the mattress together, clinging to each other so tightly I thought nothing could ever tear us apart.

“But on a more serious subject, I have a meeting with Derek on Thursday,” Faye said.
“I mean... we have a meeting.”

“What are we going to do about him?” I asked, curling my top leg around hers. “Do you think there’s some way to compromise?”

“There probably is, but I don’t know if I want to. The thing is, even though I have no evidence to prove this, I get the feeling that he’s some kind of...”

“Douche canoe?”

This time, Faye’s laugh was bitter. “Exactly. A douche canoe.”

I set my head on her chest. “I know what you mean. He really rubs me the wrong way. He is Gretchen’s biological father, though, so I feel like he deserves... something.”

“Does he have to, though?” Faye groaned. “Can’t we just have him assassinated or something?”

“That’s clearly the ideal plan.” I cuddled into her some more. “Seriously, we’ll figure it out. We’ll be together.”

She was quiet for so long I thought she’d fallen asleep. That would have made sense considering how hard she’d just come.

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Finally she spoke again, though. “Jaz? You should put in the paperwork to adopt Gretchen.”

My heart pounded. “Really?”

“Yeah. Even if anything happened with us, I see now that she’s part of your life—and vice versa. I think it’s time to make it official.”

As pressed up against her as I was, I somehow managed to hug her even harder. “Thank you.”

“It’s not a big deal, anyway. It’ll all be the same once we’re married.”

I sat bolt upright. “What? You want to marry me?”

She looked abashed. “I want to make this official eventually. I know you’re the one for me. And I made a stupid mistake this week, so I want you to be absolutely sure I’ll never do something like that again.” Now she paused as if she was nervous. Dr. Faye Erwin, nervous because of me! “You do want to, don’t you?”

“Marry you?” I faked disdain. “Some dumb, ugly chick I have nothing in common with, who definitely doesn’t care about me at all, and who totally sucks in bed to boot?”

r /> She suppressed a smile. “I know it’s a crummy deal, but it’s all I have to offer.”

A grin spread across my face. “Then I suppose I’ve got no choice.”

Faye

“It’s going to be okay,” Jaz said, straightening my collar.

With a sigh, I pushed her hands away. “It’s as straight as it’s going to be. And whether it is or isn’t going to be okay, well, it’s too late to change anything.”

I grabbed the doorknob. The moment we’d been waiting for and stressing over was finally here.

It was time to meet Derek.

When we got into Tisha’s office, Derek was already seated at the head of the table. To my surprise, he wasn’t alone. My sister was to one side, gazing at him longingly despite the empty seat between them.

She looked up at the sound of us coming in. “Gretchen’s not here?”

“No. We got her a sitter.”

“Oh... I was hoping to see her.” Her eyes flitted from me to Jaz. “Who exactly is we?”

“This is Jaz, my... fiancée.”

Her eyes widened. “So I’m not the only Erwin who keeps secrets.”

“I told you about her already. She’s the one who babysat Gretchen all year.”

That seemed to satisfy Amanda a little. “Nice to meet you,” Jaz said. Amanda mumbled the same.

Whose side was she on today? Was she here to support Derek, or to try to keep Gretchen for herself? I watched her closely, but I didn’t see any clues in her face.

“Can we get this show on the road?” Derek asked. “I didn’t come here for pleasantries. I’m here to get custody of my daughter.”

Tisha poured water into glasses, handing one to each of us. “Let’s try not to be so argumentative, Derek. We met today to try to come to an agreement that will work for everybody. It’s going to take some cooperation.”

“See, there’s where you’re wrong.” He stared her down. “I’m the only person in this room who’s fit to be a parent. I’m the only one who can give my daughter the life she deserves, and I want her given to me.”

Where before Tisha had been unflappable, she actually seemed intimidated. “You’re not interested in coming to an agreement?”

“No. I’m here because my lawyers cost a thousand bucks an hour and I didn’t want to waste their time.” He glared at her, leaving unsaid that her hourly rate was much lower. “If this goes to court, none of you will have a prayer.”

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Jaz touched my knee, and I turned to her. I could guess what she was thinking. Maybe Derek honestly could give Gretchen a better life than we could.

“Look, uh...” I grimaced and looked down, unwilling to even hear these words come out of my mouth. “Jaz and I want what’s best for Gretchen. If Derek can give her a better quality of life than we can... it’d break our hearts, but we’d give her up.”

“I’d give her only the best,” Derek said, a cutting smile on his face.

Tisha turned to my sister. “Amanda, you’re the biological mother. Your opinion counts more than anybody’s. What do you want for Gretchen?”

The look on her face said she wanted to be with Derek. “I... I want to hear more about Derek’s plans for if he got custody.”

“She’d have everything the Conway name could bestow on her,” Derek said without missing a beat. “All the best nannies. The finest boarding schools. A fast track to the best colleges in the nation.”

It sounded to me like we’d been defeated... but Amanda’s eyes narrowed at her ex-boyfriend. “Nannies? Boarding schools? Do you plan on spending any time with Gretchen at all?”

That threw him for a loop. “I—I’m busy, Amanda. I work. I have... projects.”

“Why do you want her so bad when you’re already planning how you’ll get rid of her?” Amanda asked hesitantly. “What projects are so important they’d keep you

from seeing your daughter?" Derek went silent, and Amanda turned to us. "You two. How much time do you spend with Gretchen in a week?"

"All of it." I shook my head. "When I'm not there, Jaz is, and vice versa."

"Don't get that look on your face, Amanda." Derek's voice betrayed suppressed anger. "Would you really rather Gretchen be raised by a couple of lesbian lovers than by a future senator?"

The four of us gaped at him. I was still focused on how he chose to label us as lesbian lovers when we'd just announced our intention to get married. Jaz, though—she was a step ahead of me.

"You're planning to run for senate, Derek?"

"Not tomorrow, but down the road," he said with a sneer. "I'm a Conway. It's what we do."

Jaz refused to take the bait. "Would you say you're so eager to get Gretchen because you don't want it known that you had a child out of wedlock? That you were a deadbeat dad who allowed her to be raised by a single mother, and/or her sister and her lesbian lover?"

Now it was all clicking for me. "This is all about appearances for you," I said slowly.

"I tried to spare you from this," Amanda told Derek. "I never wanted this to be an issue."

"I know." His voice went gentler than it'd been at any point today, and he moved as if he wanted to touch her arm, but stopped himself. "I appreciate that."

“You know... I was never trying to trap you, but... it would solve everything if...”
She trailed off.

Derek had understood enough. “That won’t be happening,” he said, placing his hand back in his lap. “You’ve shown yourself to be unstable. Disappearing for months, lying, telling stories... it’s not the material a senator’s wife is made of.”

Amanda looked at her lap, covering her face, her voice barely audible. “I did it for you.”

“That’s enough.” I stood up, slamming my hand on the table so the glasses of water shook. “You’ve come in here and insulted every member of my family but Gretchen. Conway or not, I won’t have it. We’ll never give that baby up.”

Amanda lifted her head slightly. “I’ll fight you for her,” she whispered to Derek.

An alarmed look on her face, Tisha waved her hands. “Everyone, settle down. Faye, please take your seat. We’re here to find a solution that works for everyone, remember?”

Derek’s face was cold. “The only solution that works for me is the one where that baby was aborted two years ago.”

I covered my mouth. Jaz looked similarly horrified.

And again, Amanda surprised me. “Why don’t we pretend that happened?” she asked, staring into her lap. “Derek, you don’t want Gretchen and she doesn’t want you. Forget she ever existed.”

“But when I run for senator...”

“No one will ever know.” Amanda dabbed at her eyes, speaking bitterly. “You’re not on the birth certificate. There’s nothing linking you to her. No one ever knew about you and me, anyway. You always preferred it that way.”

Instead of denying it, Derek huffed a laugh. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

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Tisha held up her hands. “Derek, Amanda has proposed a solution. Give up your rights to Gretchen, and give up your claim on her. How does that sound to you?”

He pursed his lips. “You’ll never ask for child support?”

Amanda was pale. “Not a cent.”

“You know I’ll take you to court the second you try to blackmail me with this.”

“I would never.”

“Fine, then we’re done here. I am, anyway.” He stood up and walked out.

The remaining four of us were quiet for a long moment. I wanted to hug Amanda, to be the big sister she needed in that moment. I could see how much she’d once cared about Derek... and still did. And I could see that he had some sort of feelings for her, but that when it was Amanda versus appearances, he’d toss her aside in a second.

All this time, Amanda had been under the impression that she wasn’t good enough for him. She may not have been perfect, she certainly had her flaws... but I could say this much for sure. That man was nowhere near good enough for my little sister.

“So,” Tisha said quietly. “It’s the three of you now. Amanda, how are you feeling? Are you still willing to allow Faye and Jaz to adopt Gretchen, or do you plan to pursue primary custody?”

Before Amanda could answer, I jumped in. “Move in with us.”

Both she and Jaz stared at me. “Huh?”

“The three of us together can get a nicer place... maybe even a house.” I gestured wildly, my thoughts coming together even as I spoke. “Jaz and I will do the parenting, but you’ll be around so Gretchen can have you there. Between all of us, she’ll always have someone to look after her. And she’ll be the most loved little girl in the whole world.”

I should’ve asked Jaz first, but I knew she’d be on the same page as me—and in fact, at my side, she nodded.

She could see as well as I did how it would be better for Gretchen... and for Amanda. I could be the positive influence I should’ve been all along. I’d slacked off on my big sister duties for a while. Now it was time to make up for it.

“You’re saying you would still adopt Gretchen?” Tisha asked.

“Yes. Amanda could have as much or as little responsibility as she likes.”

We all looked at Amanda. “I... I don’t know what to say.” Her eyes were red, and I braced myself for her to freak out. “That would be the best thing that could possibly happen to me.”

My urge to hug her came back, and this time I didn’t deny it. “This is going to be perfect, little sis.”

“Thank you for doing this for me.” Her tears wet my shoulder.

“So we have an agreement?” Tisha asked.

The three of us nodded, and then Amanda leaned heavily into my arms.

“I won’t let you down, Faye. I promise.”

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Jaz

“You know, it would’ve been nice if you’d gotten my opinion before asking Amanda to co-parent with us,” I murmured behind our bedroom door a few hours later.

Faye looked adorably ashamed. “It was on the spur of the moment. I did look at you first.”

&nb

sp; “And I definitely read your mind through that look.” I gave her a light punch on the arm, then flopped onto the bed. “Totally psychic, as we’ve already established.”

“I’m sorry.” Faye lay down next to me and wrapped me in her arms. “You don’t mind too much, do you? We could always back out...”

“Back out now that she’s agreed to move in with us, sure.” I smiled into her neck. “No, honestly, I think it’s a good idea. I’m not completely sure what Amanda will be like as a co-parent, but I think we should give her a fair shot. And if she’s terrible, we’ll be Gretchen’s primary moms anyway.”

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“My thoughts exactly.”

I ran my hands along Faye’s body, savoring the moment of being alone with her. Gretchen was sleeping peacefully outside the door. Soon the three of us would move and find a bigger place where Amanda could join us. Everything was going to change, but hopefully only for the better.

“What do you think Gretchen should call us when she gets older?” I asked lazily.
“Mom One and Mom Two?”

“And who would Mom One be?” Faye growled. “I’m not being number two.”

“As long as we both come before Derek, I’m good.” My hands tensed into fists. “I can’t believe what a piece of shit he turned out to be.”

“He was much worse than I ever thought.” Faye stroked my arm, calming me. “What about Mom A and Mom B? Less hierarchical.”

“Uh, that’s still just as hierarchical. And you really don’t see any other problems with it?” I pitched my voice high like a little girl’s. “Mom A! Mom-A! Mom-may!” I dropped to a seductive baritone. “Mommay is here for you, baby. Mommay has everything you need.”

“I guess my mind doesn’t work as creepily as yours does.” Faye rolled her eyes. “If you don’t go down that road, it would be cute. Mommay and Mombee.”

“Come to Mommay, Mombee.”

She climbed on top of me, straddling my waist. My breath caught in my throat, and it didn't help when I felt her fingers slide between my thighs. I closed my eyes and thrust lightly against her hand. I couldn't believe how happy I was to have her with me. She was mine.

“What's your pleasure?” Faye breathed into my ear.

I pressed my hips up as I pulled her down. “Anything involving you.” Having second thoughts, I grabbed at her shirt. “And a lot less clothes.”

“That can be arranged.”

* * *

Amanda's car pulled up to the side of the road a second after mine did. “Are you nervous?” I asked as she got out.

I didn't expect more than a basic polite answer. Why would she open up to me, her sister's girlfriend? We'd only met for the first time a few days ago—she didn't know me. We'd never had a proper conversation, and here I was asking her about the most personal question possible.

She nodded slowly, though. “It's a strange feeling. I haven't seen her in so long, and I know she's not even going to recognize me anymore.” She leaned on the car door, letting it support her until she got the strength to walk further. “I know all that's my fault. Before you judge me, just remember I thought I was doing what was best for everyone at the time.”

“I'm not judging you. You did what you had to do.”

I liked to think I was telling the truth. Even if I didn't agree with her actions over the

past year, I understood—kind of—what she'd been thinking.

Faye and Gretchen were only a few feet away, but Amanda and I stood by the curb without moving. I had the feeling this was an important conversation, one that we needed to have.

"I know I haven't been much of a mother," she murmured. "You don't have to put a positive spin on it for my sake."

"Not at all. I've never been in your position, and I can't say what I'd do if I was."

That seemed to satisfy her. "I haven't had the chance to say this, Jaz, but thank you."

"For what?"

"For looking after my baby while I was away being too selfish to take care of her," she said. "For looking after my big sister, too." Before I could answer, she blinked away a tear and went on. "And thank you in advance for continuing to be a mom to Gretchen. I'm going to try my best to be there for her as much as I can, to be as much of a mother as I can... but I know I'm never going to be perfect."

"I'll always be there for her," I said. "I don't mean that it won't matter whether she has you or not. Her life will be so much better for having you in it. But if you end up needing to move somewhere, or if anything happens, Gretchen will always have us."

Amanda nodded tearfully. "You're adopting her out of pure love, and that's the most amazing gift I can imagine. I'm going to try my absolute best to be worthy of what you're doing." She took a step toward Faye and Gretchen, then paused. "I might as well tell you, since both of you are going to find out soon enough. I plan to quit drinking."

I tried not to let the announcement get me too excited. I knew alcoholics tried to quit all the time, and that it was easier said than done—easier by a long shot. “When do you plan to?” I asked.

“Well... I’ve already unofficially done it. I haven’t had a drink since I came to Rosebridge. It didn’t feel right, considering everything that was going on.” She gave me a small smile. “I managed to not drink once I found out I was pregnant. It was difficult, but I can do it again.”

That was more than I’d expected to hear. With no words that would show how hopeful I felt, I settled for pulling her into a hug. Her eyes shone again when I let her go.

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Together we moved toward the grassy field where Faye was already setting out the blanket and picnic lunch. I smiled at the sight of my partner looking beautiful in the sunlight.

Meanwhile, Amanda's breath caught in her throat. "Is that her?" she asked. "It can't be."

"Yes, that's Gretchen."

"My God..." She walked toward the baby as if hypnotized. When she reached Faye and sank to her knees beside Gretchen, I was right behind her, eager to hear every word.

"Gretchen, do you know who this is?" Faye asked.

The baby shook her head. "No."

"That's your mother, sweetie," I told her. "You might not remember her now, but she's going to be around from now on. You can call her Mommy."

"Mom...my?"

"That's right, darling. Last time I saw you, you were about this big." Amanda held her hands a few inches apart. "Now you're practically all grown up."

Gretchen crawled toward Amanda and plopped down on her lap. "Mommy... here."

“Yes, darling, I’m here now.”

We ate lunch in the sun. Amanda barely took her eyes off Gretchen the whole time. Occasionally she’d glance briefly at Faye and murmur again, “She’s so big,” or “She’s already so smart.”

I’d had my doubts that she’d be the motherly type. Now that I saw her with Gretchen, holding her and feeding her, a weight I hadn’t realized was there began to lift off my shoulders.

Maybe, just maybe, this was all going to be okay.

Epilogue - Faye

“Ma, Ma!” Gretchen yelled, skidding to a stop in front of me. “Where’s Mama?”

Despite her unreasonable volume, I had to smile at the sight of her in the white dress she’d carefully chosen. At five, she was beginning to have a fashion sense all her own, and it showed in her dresses’ huge shoulders and lacy frills. When she was older, I hoped she’d look back at the pictures from today and laugh.

“You know Mama and I can’t see each other right now,” I said. “Not until we walk down the aisle.”

“But Mama isn’t in her dressing room.”

“All right. Why don’t you go look for Mommy?” Amanda should’ve been somewhere in the vicinity.

She’d done an amazing job of staying around for the past few years. It might’ve been a bit of a stretch to call her stable, since she still hadn’t held a job longer than a year

and she'd ha

d a few minor relapses into drinking. But she was making her best effort, and generally succeeding.

She'd ended up getting back with her ex, Wesley, and he was sympathetic to her parenting situation. He was no future senator, but he was a good, kind man who worshiped the ground she walked on. He'd found a managerial position at a community center in Rosebridge, and then Amanda had moved out of our place to live with him. She still came by to spend time with Gretchen almost every day. The two of them had also agreed to look after Gretchen and the pets while Jaz and I went on our honeymoon.

We'd adopted not one, not two, but three giant German Shepherds from Jaz's sister's animal rescue. They'd come from a home where they were beaten and kicked around, and neither of us could deny them when we saw their scars. Of course, they'd grown quite a bit since then... but they still occasionally got new battle wounds when they came too close to the fat tabby cat we'd also taken in.

"There's Mommy!" Gretchen exclaimed.

Amanda walked through the hall outside the dressing room door, our mother at her side. "You look so handsome," Amanda said.

"That tuxedo is perfect," my mom added.

She and Amanda had finally patched things up in the lead-up to this day. She'd reluctantly apologized for not being fully present when we were growing up, and Amanda had said she was sorry for the insults she'd thrown behind her back in the years since.

It might've been an unsteady truce, but it was holding up for the moment. And from the looks of it, both of them wanted to continue improving their relationship rather than go back to fighting and ignoring each other.

My mom scooped up the little girl. Soon she'd be too big for any of us to do that, so we took advantage of her size while we could. "Spin, Grandma!" Gretchen ordered, and she complied.

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I had to grin as I watched them. Gretchen had brought this family together in a way nothing else could've. Ever since I'd first talked my mom into meeting her, she'd fallen hard for Gretchen's charms. She got all the good times with none of the hard work, she said. And as if to prove how much she was enjoying it, she made the trip down to Rosebridge on a regular basis so she could spoil her first grandchild rotten.

"Stop!" Gretchen said. "I'm dizzy!"

My mom put her down, laughing. "Wouldn't want you to get sick on your moms' wedding day. Why don't you find a nice book to read until the ceremony starts?"

Gretchen was constantly reading. I assumed she'd picked up the habit from always seeing both of us with our noses in books. To my utter joy, she was already reading at a third-grade level. She hadn't touched a book with a picture in it since she was three. Jaz liked to sneak time with the kids' books when she wasn't around. The familiar words comforted her—but if Gretchen caught her, she'd laugh at her.

Unlike either of her moms, she enjoyed writing little stories too. I intended to encourage her to keep doing so as she grew older. I had a secret hope that she'd grow up to be an author of children's books, or maybe of lesbian romance novels.

At the moment, her face went solemn at the mention of Jaz. "Where's Mama?"

"It's all right," I said. "I'll find her."

Tradition be damned. We were two women getting married—that was already flouting tradition.

I searched through every nook and cranny of the large hall we'd rented. Every two seconds, I'd get stopped by some well-wisher who shouldn't even have been back there. With all of our academic connections, the parents we set up play dates with, and assorted other friends and family members, the audience for our nuptials had turned out to be well over two hundred.

Seeing Jaz's sisters deep in conversation, I waved at them. They both looked nice in their formal gowns, but they either hadn't been able to find a date or hadn't bothered, and they looked a bit lonely. "Hey," I said. "I'm looking for Jaz."

"I haven't seen her," Stephanie said.

"Maybe she's still in the bathroom," Gillian said. "I think she was feeling a bit overwhelmed."

Uh-oh. I spun around and raced toward the restroom. As Gillian had said, Jaz was in front of the sink, splashing water over her wrists.

"Hey, Mommy." I wrapped my arms around her from behind.

"Hey, Mombee."

She dried her hands. In her simple white dress, she was ravishing. The make-up artist had done a great job bringing out her natural beauty. Even after all this time, the lines and contours of her face were as hypnotizing as ever. Her looks had only gotten better with age, and I only hoped she felt the same about mine.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing's wrong." She rolled her shoulders back. "I'm just a little nervous. I mean, I'm about to marry this woman, this Dr. Faye Erwin. You've probably never heard of

her.”

“Sounds like a piece of work,” I said.

She smiled weakly. “Completely. She’s super ugly, not smart at all, total jerk... all-around wrong for me.”

I kissed the back of her neck. “Then why are you so nervous?” God, tell me she’s not getting cold feet. I won’t be able to live a day without her if she leaves me now.

“I have no idea. Would you believe I’ve already adopted a kid with this chick? And that we’ve been happily raising her together for the past five years?”

“That’s probably a bigger commitment than getting married.”

“Oh, Faye! I mean... oh, stranger I’ve never met before.” She leaned her head against my shoulder. “It’s not the commitment that’s the problem. I want nothing more than to be committed to this woman, totally and completely. I love her more than I ever thought possible. I’m just in shock—I can’t believe this is happening. It’s absolutely surreal.”

That eased my tension a little. “It’s real,” I whispered.

She turned to hold me. “You’d think five years would be long enough for me to get accustomed to the idea of marrying the Dr. Faye Erwin... but now that it’s actually happening, it’s like I’m living in a dream.”

“Well, this might come as a surprise, but I happen to be getting married today, too.” Jaz faked shock. “I’m getting hitched to this amazing, intelligent, fucking gorgeous woman named Jaz Neeson—soon to be Dr. Jaz Neeson. It’s a little stressful, too.”

“Hmm.” Jaz looped her arms around my neck. “Do you think your bride would have an issue if I were to kiss you right now?”

“Why don’t you try it and find out?”

Her lips found mine, and everything else disappeared—the hall, the crowds waiting outside, even our whole history of meeting each other and fighting for Gretchen. All I knew in that moment was that I was there, now, kissing and holding the woman I loved.

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When we pulled apart, Jaz's lips were swollen, her eyes filled with adoration. She pressed against me in a way that made me wish we could skip the ceremony and go straight to being alone.

"Come on," I told her. "Let's go walk down that aisle."

Backmatter