



Carnal Desire

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Description: When billionaire developer Ariel catches her much-younger house cleaner sleeping in her bed, there's only one solution – make her stay.

Ariel

A boss falling for their employee is cliché, that's why I've tried my hardest to stay away from my house cleaner Sadie. I fell in love with her the minute I saw her, but she's too young for me, and I learned long ago to keep things easy and casual. Until I come home early from a business trip and find my golden-haired princess fast asleep in my bed.

Sadie

After a rough night in the shelter, I figure there's no harm in taking a quick nap in my boss's bed. The older, powerful woman is totally intimidating, but she'll never know I was here... but when I wake up to find her staring at me, I figure I'm in big trouble. Turns out it's the best kind of trouble, because when Ariel demands that I stay with her for a while, things quickly turn hot. Suddenly, I'm living out my fantasies. There's only one problem: Ariel has a hero complex and I promised myself I'd never be dependent on another person again.

She's a billionaire who wants to save everyone, in love with a woman who refuses to be saved. When control meets independence, sparks fly, but will they burn everything down?

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Sadie

I hummed to myself as I finished mopping the bathroom floor. The bathroom was spotlessly clean when I got here, so I just used the mop with those disposable pads, giving it a cursory swipe, fighting the desire to sit down.

Leaning the mop against the doorjamb, I sighed deeply. I was tired. Bone tired. The kind of tired that comes from months of not sleeping, not eating right, and looking over your shoulder in fear.

I pulled my phone out of the pocket of my shorts to check the time. Two forty-five. This was my last house today since the people whose house I usually cleaned after this one had canceled their service. The line for the homeless shelter didn't open until seven, so I had a few hours to kill. Maybe I'd head over to the library and read for a while, or use their computers to look for a place to live.

If I could stay awake. They frowned on sleeping in the library.

The familiar waves of self-recrimination and despair rolled over me, nearly taking my breath away, but I did what I always did: I stuffed it down and got to work. I did a quick survey of the bedroom, making sure I hadn't missed anything, but everything was clean and in its place, just like Ms. Fernandez liked it.

Then again, she'd been gone most of the week. When I came to work last Friday she'd left a note on the counter with her payment, letting me know that she was going away on a business trip Monday and wouldn't be back until Saturday afternoon.

I loved the way she always left me little notes, always with an extra tip. She was a generous client.

My eyes traveled to the king sized bed in the center of the room. The plush padded headboard was pushed up against the wall so that if a person were to sit up against the headboard they'd be able to look out the floor to ceiling windows on the far wall. The view from there was incredible. Lake Michigan on one side, and the Gold Coast on the other.

One thing about these rich people, they knew how to get the best views.

The bed looked so comfortable. I'd never dared to even sit on it, but with its super thick mattress, high thread count sheets, and the mound of pillows I knew it must be like sleeping in a cloud.

I looked around again, considering. Would it be wrong to take a little nap while I was here? Probably. Well, definitely. I didn't need to ask to know that my boss at the cleaning agency would frown on me napping in my client's bed. I couldn't afford to lose this job and yet I couldn't resist the idea of resting, just for a few minutes. Maybe I could even take a quick shower afterwards. It would be nice to have some privacy...

If I changed the sheets again when I woke up and cleaned up after myself after my nap, Ms. Fernandez would never even know I'd been in her bed. I only slept in short bursts now anyway.

Surely resting here for an hour or two would be okay. I could just stay until the shelter opened.

My decision made, I kicked off my shoes and removed my bra. It was naptime.

Ariel

“You’re back in Chicago already? I thought you were going to be in Phoenix until tomorrow?”

I nodded my head even though my assistant Theo couldn’t see me. Walking through my front door, I dropped my suitcase in the foyer and headed straight towards the bedroom. I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than a shower, a glass of wine, and a good night’s sleep, in that order.

“You know how much I hate Phoenix,” I said grumpily. “It’s always so fucking hot there. Someone I know was coming to Chicago tonight, so I hitched a ride with them on their private plane.”

Theo chuckled. “I keep telling you that you and your little club should invest in a plane. You’re the only billionaires I know who fly commercial.”

Very few people could get away with calling my ride or dies a ‘little club’. Theo was one of them. He’d known me for years, ever since I’d literally plucked him off the street and given him a job at my company. It had proven to be one of the best decisions I’d ever made. Theo was a loyal and dedicated employee, as well as a good friend.

“I’d rather donate to save the environment than ruin it with private plane pollution.”

Unlike a lot of billionaires in this country, I gave generously to charity. Mostly anonymously. It was a commitment that Grace, Maeve, and I had made to each other years ago – we would use our money to leave the world a better place. Fortunately we all had enough money to live the lives we wanted and meet our charitable goals too.

“You’re all about the environment unless you’re stuck in Phoenix and you have a free

ride on a private plan,” he chuckled. “All right then, you have a totally clear weekend and --.”

“What the hell?”

“What’s wrong now?” Theo asked, nonplused by my interruption. Apparently I was ‘a little dramatic’ from time to time, according to my assistant. And my friends.

I stared in confusion at the sight in front of me. There was a human-sized lump in my bed. Had I entered the wrong condo? I looked around quickly. No, this was definitely my bedroom. Was I hallucinating? Maybe I’d gotten heat stroke in Phoenix?

“Someone’s sleeping in my bed!”

Theo chuckled. “Is it Goldilocks?”

I walked around the bed, noting the golden hair sticking out from beneath the comforter, the only thing I could see about my intruder.

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“I think it is.”

“Wait? You’re not kidding are you?” Theo’s voice turned serious. “There’s someone in your house?”

“Sure is. Do I have a stalker you haven’t told me about?” I asked.

“Not to my knowledge. Do you want me to call the cops?” he asked.

“No, but stay on the line while I figure out what’s going on.”

Quietly I walked over to the closet, looking for a weapon in case this was some kind of crazy person who’d broken into my condo. On the way, I spied a mop leaning up against the doorway of the en-suite bathroom. That was weird, it wasn’t like the cleaning woman to leave things laying around.

I shoved my phone between my shoulder and my chin, gripped the mop handle like a baseball bat, and walked closer to my bed.

“Hey!” I called loudly. “What are you doing here?”

The figure didn’t move.

“Are they dead?” Theo whispered, his voice a cross between fascinated and horrified.

“I don’t know.”

I called out again, and still there was no movement. Cautiously I extended the mop handle towards the small figure buried under my blankets and poked what I thought was probably a leg.

“Hey!” A sleepy voice came from the blankets, although the person still didn’t move. “This bunk’s taken. Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Who are you?” I asked, using my most authoritative voice. “What are you doing in my bed?”

I poked her with the mop handle again. Suddenly the person in my bed sat up and scooted away, the covers dropping to her waist. She was wearing a familiar looking tee shirt with a cleaning service logo.

I blinked in shock. Hold on, I recognized this woman. I’d spent innumerable hours watching her on my security camera while creating elaborate romantic fantasies about her. It was Sadie, my cleaning person. She looked around frantically, her eyes wide with fear and her hair sticking up at all angles.

“Sadie? Is that you?”

I knew it was, but I couldn’t believe my eyes. After all the times I’d dreamed about having Sadie in my bed, this couldn’t possibly be real.

“Sadie?” Theo parroted through the phone. “Your cleaning lady Sadie that you have a crush on? She’s sleeping in your bed?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll need to call you back Theo, okay?”

“Be sure you do,” he ordered, as if he was the boss instead of me.

I closed the phone and stuck it in my pocket, watching Sadie carefully the entire time.

There was something about this woman. I was fascinated with her. Her petite figure with soft curves. Her mess of golden blonde curls that always escaped the ponytails she wore to work. The bright blue eyes that looked a little haunted. That cute little cupid's bow mouth that always was set in a serious line other than the polite facsimile of a smile she'd give me when the occasion called for it.

I'd first met her two years ago when the cleaning service sent her over as a possible replacement for Marta, my previous person. I'd fallen for her immediately, even though I knew it was ridiculous. I didn't know the first thing about her, yet I'd spent the last two years making up excuses to justify watching her on the security camera set up in the foyer facing the main living area.

I'd told myself that I was a pervert, lusting after my cleaning lady like something out of a bad novel. Yet something about her fascinated me, enough that I did my best to avoid her. I never wanted to make her uncomfortable or misuse my positional power, even if I did sometimes have the feeling that Sadie was as attracted to me as I was to her on the rare occasions we ran into each other.

"Sadie." She jumped as I repeated her name in a stern tone. "Why are you sleeping in my bed?"

Then to my horror, she began to cry.

Sadie

I opened my mouth to answer Ariel Fernandez and to my absolute mortification, I began to cry. I couldn't believe she was home early from her trip. It figured that the one time I'd ever broken the rules I'd get caught. Damn it.

“Oh my God, Ms. Fernandez, I’m so sorry!” My words ended in an embarrassingly loud sob. “I... I...”

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Ariel looked distinctly uncomfortable at my show of emotion, which only made me cry harder. It was like all the feelings that I'd bottled up for the last few months had burst past the dam of my control and now that they were free, I couldn't stop them.

"Come with me," Ariel ordered, her voice stern but her expression completely blank.

I loved that bossy tone of hers. Sometimes late at night alone with my vibrator I imagined Ariel ordering me to do stuff. Back when I had a house that is. I'd had the most ridiculous crush on Ariel ever since the day I met her. Sometimes I'd go weeks without seeing her and I'd convince myself that my feelings for her were all in my imagination. Then I'd see her again and those confusing feelings would come rushing right back.

I slid out of bed, vainly trying to smooth my rumpled clothes. I was still wearing the shorts and cleaning company tee shirt I'd been wearing when I serviced Ariel's condo earlier today. Except I'd removed my bra. I looked around furtively. Where had I put my bra? I spied it sticking out from underneath the bed, right next to my backpack. I guess I'd leave it there for now.

Ariel strode out of the room, confident that I'd follow her, which of course I did. I tried and failed not to stare at her rounded backside in the tight fitting pencil skirt she was wearing. Her ass was luscious, there was no other word that came to mind. I loved those pencil skirts she favored, and the cute little blouses she wore with them, always with one more button undone than was completely professional. Then again, Ariel had incredible breasts, much bigger than my tiny little ones. She should let those babies shine.

I followed her to the kitchen, then slid onto a stool at the island when Ariel pointed there, grunting, “Sit!”

The kitchen was large and open, with white tiles, white marble countertops, and white cabinets. Everything was top of the line from the fancy oven to the built in refrigerator to the bright blue Kitchen Aid mixer. The room should have been stark, but Ariel had warmed it up with dark blue appliances and a basket of sunflowers on the marble island that she had delivered fresh every week.

She returned with a bottle of merlot and two glasses. I didn’t know anything about wine, but I’d bet my last dollar that the bottle cost more than anything I owned. Ariel poured us each a glass of wine, sliding mine over to me, then she took a slow sip.

“Tell me why you’re sleeping in my bed like my own personal Goldilocks,” she instructed. “I’ve noticed that you’ve seemed extra... stressed the last couple of months so start at the beginning.”

I spent the next ten minutes word vomiting the sad tale that was my life. How I’d moved to Chicago to meet a woman I’d never met in person and somehow ended up living with her. How she undermined my confidence enough over the years that I gave up on my education and settled into a menial role cleaning houses for rich people. How she suddenly dumped me and kicked me out of her house – after blocking me from our joint bank account – leaving me broke and homeless.

I couldn’t even look at Ariel while I told her the story, it was too embarrassing.

“Back up,” she said when I paused to take a breath. “You moved to another state to live with someone you’d never met in person? Why would you do that?”

“My mom had just died,” I mumbled. “I was depressed and lonely and not in my right mind. I thought I was in love. The relationship was good in the beginning but it went

gradually downhill. I didn't realize how bad things were until it was over."

"And how long did you live with this person?" she asked. The way she said person told me that she wanted to use a less flattering word.

"Six years."

"So you are...?"

"Twenty-five," I answered the question I knew she was asking.

"Oh Jesus, you're even younger than I thought."

That's what she took from my story? It meant I was nine years younger than h.

"Anyway, I've been staying at the women's shelter downtown but it's really hard to sleep there," I explained. "People are up and down all night, there's coughing and snoring and people with mental illness talking to themselves. I haven't had more than a couple of hours of sleep in weeks. I knew you were out of town, and I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow night so... well, obviously I helped myself to your bed."

I chanced a glance at Ariel.

"I'm so so sorry. What I did was completely inappropriate." I was babbling nervously now. I took a breath and slowed down my speech. "I promise nothing like this will ever happen again. Please just... don't report me. My boss will fire me."

If I lost my job I'd never save up enough money to get an apartment of my own. I'd have to set up a cardboard box and a tarp on Lower Wacker Drive along with the other homeless people.

Ariel's phone rang for the third time since we sat down. She rolled her eyes.

"Theo is going to keep blowing up my phone if I don't answer," she said. "He's worried you're a stalker or something."

I had no idea who Theo was, but I nodded anyway.

"Hey Theo... yeah it's a long story but my cleaner Sadie needed to rest... I am being nice! I was just about to order us a pizza. I'm fucking starving... Okay, yeah that would be great." Her eyes strayed to mine. "What kind of pizza do you like, Sadie?"

"Oh no, I can't stay. I need to get going."

I glanced at my watch and winced. It was after eight. I'd slept for five hours and I had a feeling that I would still be sleeping if Ariel hadn't woken me up. There was no way I'd get a shelter bed now. I either needed to ride the train all night or dip into my meager savings for a cheap hotel room for the night.

"You're not going anywhere," she said firmly. "Now tell me what kind of pizza you like."

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“Sausage or any of the vegetables,” I answered before I realized what I was doing.

The fact is, now that I’d gotten several hours of sleep, I was ravenous and pizza sounded really good. I guess I could eat before I went wandering around the city for the night.

“You got that Theo?” Ariel said to the person on the other end of the call. “Yeah, Aurelio’s... Oh good idea, have them send breaded mushrooms too... Sure, I’ll call you tomorrow. Thanks again, bud.”

Ariel set the phone on the counter and turned her attention back to me. Her dark brown hair was a bit disheveled, probably from traveling, but her lip stain was still in place, the dark red a contrast to the light brown of her skin.

When I’d first started working here I made it my business to research Ariel. I’d learned that she’d grown up here in Chicago and gone to some ritzy private prep school with the women who became her two best friends, Grace and Maeve. The three of them had gone to Northwestern together and stayed close friends.

Even though the three friends were born into wealth, they’d made a name for themselves in their own right, each of them a self-made billionaire. They’d gone into business for themselves, forming a development company specializing in boutique projects.

They’d built the building we were in, AGM Tower, named for the first initial of each of their names. The building had a restaurant and nightclub on the first two floors, with luxury condos on the other floors. The three friends had built their own homes

on the three top floors, one floor for each of them, with a fancy rooftop garden and heated pool that was just for the three of them.

Rumor had it they were all very generous with their money, supporting a variety of charities, although they never made a big deal of it, staying out of the spotlight.

I also knew that all three women identified as sapphic, although none of them had been linked to each other romantically. The gossip sites were full of pictures of the three of them with models and athletes and other very important and very glamorous people.

Ariel lived in a different world from me, which made my crush on her all the more ridiculous.

“Do you have your belongings at the shelter?” Ariel asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shook my head. “No, you’re not allowed to leave anything behind.”

She frowned. “Where’s the rest of your stuff then?”

“Everything I have is in my backpack.”

My ex had kicked me out so fast I hadn’t had time to gather all my belongings.

“What’s the name of the shelter you’ve been staying at?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure why she wanted to know but I figured there was no reason not to answer. “It’s called the South Chicago Women’s Shelter, it’s just south of the loop near Chinatown.”

Ariel frowned, probably because it wasn't the best neighborhood. Then again, no one was going to put a homeless shelter in one of the fancy neighborhoods.

"Do you mind if I ask how it works?" she asked. "Like, do you have a room? What do you get there?"

I gave a humorous laugh. "No, nothing like that. It's a big room with rows of bunk beds. You have to line up by seven o'clock every night and they take people until they run out of space, which is usually around seven thirty. The lower bunks always fill first but I prefer the upper ones, it's easier to tell if someone is trying to steal from you while you're sleeping."

I paused and she waved her hand in a 'go on' gesture, her mouth set in a grim line.

"They feed you dinner, whatever the volunteers bring, so it's usually a casserole or a sandwich. You can take a shower while you're there, either before lights out at ten or between six and seven-thirty," I explained. "Then you strip the sheets and blanket off whatever bed you slept in to help clean up, and they send you out on your way at seven-thirty with a large cup of coffee and a boxed meal for later. It's actually one of the nicer shelters. The sheets are clean, and the staff are nice as long as you follow the rules. And sometimes they have donuts or cookies, that's always nice."

Ariel was glaring now and I knew instinctively that it wasn't aimed at me.

"So there's no privacy? People steal from you? And what the fuck are you supposed to do at seven-thirty in the morning when they kick you out?"

I shrugged. "Most of us go to work. Honestly it's not a bad place to crash."

She gave me a long, probing look before she said the last thing I ever expected her to say. "That's it. You're moving in with me."

Ariel

Sadie's mouth dropped open in shock, then she shook her head like she thought maybe she'd misheard me.

She was right to be shocked. My impulsive offer was totally crazy.

“What?”

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“You’re moving in with me,” I repeated, liking the idea even more the second time I said it.

I couldn’t believe the woman I loved was sleeping in a damned bunk bed worried about someone stealing her shit and eating random meals from God knows where. No wonder she looked so tired and thin.

I texted Theo asking him to get me a research report on the Chicago Women’s Shelter. Even if Sadie wasn’t going back there, I wanted to help the people who’d given my girl a place to stay when she was desperate.

“I, uh, I... I can’t move in with you.”

“You can and you will,” I said firmly.

Sadie looked shocked, and she probably should be. I mean, who in my position would invite someone she barely knew to stay with her? Somewhere in Evanston a vein was throbbing in my attorney’s head, although he had no idea why. Yet.

“I’m your cleaning lady,” Sadie reminded me.

My eyes dropped down to the cleaning company’s logo over the front of her tee shirt, then I realized she wasn’t wearing a bra, so I popped my eyes right back up to her face. It was a little too early to go down that road.

“You’re a hardworking person who’s temporarily down on her luck and needs a place to stay. As you know, I have plenty of space.”

I resisted adding, in my bed, right next to me.

I had no idea what I was doing. All I knew was that the woman I'd been secretly in love with for a while was in trouble, and that activated all of my protective instincts. Besides, she was single now and I'd not gotten where I had in life by letting opportunities pass me by. Sadie would stay with me and once I made her fall in love with me, I'd be able to keep her forever.

Not that I was going to lead with that.

"That's really so nice of you Ms. Fernandez --."

"Ariel."

"Ariel," she repeated softly.

I loved the sound of my name on her lips.

"But I'm a total stranger. Honestly, the shelter is fine. It's just someplace to stay while I save up enough for an apartment. They have nice people running it and if I can get there in time to get a bed, it's all good."

She didn't look much more convinced about that than I was. I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable but there was no way I was letting her go back there. No way.

"You're not a total stranger. I've already done a background check on you and you've worked for me for at least two years," I reminded her. "If you were going to kill me or rob me, I should think you would have done it already."

"But my boss..."

“Doesn’t need to know about this,” I replied quickly. “If she finds out, I’ll deal with it. If I have to, I’ll just buy the company.”

Her mouth dropped open again. She was so adorable.

“You can’t do that,” she protested.

“Sure I can,” I countered. “I have more money than I know what to do with and if I can’t spend it on people I care about, what’s the use of having it?”

I paused as I realized that I’d possibly revealed too much. For all she knew, I was just one of her cleaning clients. She had no idea that I’d fallen in love with her the minute I saw her. Time to downshift.

Reaching forward, I took her hand in mine. It was small and work roughened, highlighting one of the many differences between us. I worked hard but I’d never done any hard work in my life, not like this woman. If I had my way, she’d never scrub another toilet as long as she lived. I’d have to figure out what she really wanted to do with her life. While there was nothing wrong with cleaning houses, I was quite sure this wasn’t her dream job.

As our skin touched, Sadie inhaled sharply, staring at our hands in confusion as if she could feel the same little electrical pulse running between our hands. Good. I was glad I wasn’t totally alone in this attraction. My heart was pounding so hard in my chest I was surprised she couldn’t hear it.

“Look Sadie, you’ve obviously had a run of bad luck. Let me help you. Please.”

I saw the internal struggle behind her eyes before she finally acquiesced. “Okay Miss F--, uh Ariel, thank you. I just need a few days to figure something else out.”

I had the feeling she was just appeasing me, but I'd take it. For now.

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“You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like,” I said.

Like forever, I added silently.

My phone dinged with a text from Theo. I dropped her hand to check it out.

Theo: Pizza will be there in fifteen. Bob will have a detailed background check on Cinderella within the hour.

Ariel: You’ve got your fairy tales mixed up, you’re thinking of Goldilocks. But thanks. I trust her.

Theo: We’re still getting a background check, just in case. I added cheesecake to your pizza order. Call me tomorrow and let me know what happened tonight.

That was the great thing about having one of your best friends as your assistant. They knew what you needed without your even asking for it.

“The pizza is coming soon,” I told Sadie. “I’m going to take a shower and change into something more comfortable. Can you grab the pie when it gets here? The doorman will send them right up.”

“Sure.”

I started to walk out but Sadie stopped me. “Oh, uh, sorry, let me get my stuff out of your bedroom before you go in there.”

I bit my lip to keep from suggesting that she keep it there. Her stuff would be in my room soon enough. But I didn't want to scare her off quite yet, so I waited in the hallway while she gathered up a battered backpack and a pair of equally battered gym shoes, both of which she'd stuffed halfway under my bed.

"Make yourself at home in the guest room," I said, pointing to the room across from mine.

There was another room down the hall, but I wanted her close. Sadie walked past me with a mumbled thanks. I hated seeing her like this – sad and defeated. Even though she'd done her best to be quiet and unobtrusive whenever she came to clean the condo, there had always been a spark of life there. A touch of bravado. But being kicked out of her house and having her savings drained by that bitch of an ex had sucked the life out of her. And now this situation had clearly thrown her for a loop.

"By the way, what's your ex's name?"

Sadie looked over her shoulder at me. "Uh, it's Jane Bedlow."

I typed out a text to Theo, asking him to have our P.I. run a deep background on Sadie's thieving ex.

"B-E-D-L-O-W?" I spelled it out.

"Yeah. Why?"

I waited until Sadie met my eyes so she could understand the seriousness of my words.

"I'm going to make her pay for what she did to you," I vowed, my voice cold and deadly. "She will give you back everything she's stolen from you, or I will

systematically ruin her life, and I will make sure she regrets her life choices every day for the rest of her miserable life.”

“You can do that?”

“I can and I will,” I replied.

Sadie stared at me for a long moment, then she flew across the hallway and threw her arms around my waist, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Thank you, Ariel. Thanks for everything.”

Sadie

It had been a long time since I felt like someone was in my corner. Since my mom died in fact. Her death had been sudden. One day she was fine and the next one a blood vessel burst inside her brain. She was dead before she hit the floor. For the first nineteen years of my life it had just been me and my mom against the world, so her death hit me hard.

That’s why when I started talking to Jane I was so easily wooed. I felt alone, and desperate for affection. We met on a gaming site and somehow that led to us becoming online friends. I created this whole romantic fantasy in my head and when Jane encouraged me to drop out of school and come live with her in Chicago, I thought I was finally going to get my happily ever after.

It didn’t take long to realize that Jane wasn’t exactly Princess Charming. She held all the power in our relationship, and I never challenged it. My biggest regret wasn’t that I moved to Chicago to have a relationship with her, it was that I stayed in a relationship with her about five years longer than I should have.

That was the thing about abusive relationships, they started off okay in the beginning. Then something happened and you wrote it off, but one bad incident followed another until you didn't realize how bad it had become.

Jane had never hit me, but she'd been emotionally abusive. She'd destroyed my sense of self, always making me feel small and worthless, then when she was done with me she stole every dollar I had.

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It was my fault for being passive with her. For not learning to stand up for myself, for not learning to stand on my own two feet. I'd learned my lesson the hard way. There was no way I'd ever be so dependent on another person again. I was strong and independent now, relying only on myself.

But when I saw the fierce expression on Ariel's face as she promised to ruin Jane for what she did to me, something broke loose inside me. And for the first time in a long time I felt something like hope. And the sensation that someone actually cared for me.

Maybe it was inappropriate for me to hug her like this, but I wasn't sorry about it. Not when her soft curves were pressed against me and my face was buried in the soft skin of her neck. Somehow she smelled good, even after a long day of traveling.

I pulled away slowly, regretfully. "I'll let you take your shower."

"Sadie."

I paused, my face about six inches from hers, and looked into the chocolate brown depths of her eyes. "Yeah?"

"Everything's going to be okay now, I promise."

She couldn't promise that, but for some crazy reason I believed her.

Ten minutes later someone knocked on the front door. Ariel was still in her bedroom, so I pulled open the front door, thinking it was the pizza guy. It wasn't.

Two blonde women stood in the doorway, looking me over curiously.

“You must be Sadie,” the woman with the wavy hair said as she pushed past me to enter the condo. “I’m Grace and this is Maeve. We’re Ariel’s friends.”

I recognized Ariel’s best friends and business partners from the pictures scattered around the condo, as well as from some magazine articles I’d read about Ariel. I knew that they lived on the two floors beneath Ariel, although I’d never been inside either of their units.

They were both beautiful women, effortlessly sophisticated, dressed casually but wearing clothes that clearly cost more than anything I owned. The women studied me carefully, and I couldn’t help but feel that I was coming up lacking. I felt frumpy in my wrinkled shorts and faded tee shirt. I wondered if they could tell that I wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Hi,” I said. “Nice to meet you both. Ariel should be out in a minute.”

I started to close the door, but then I realized the pizza guy was walking up from the elevator. He handed me two large pizza boxes with a paper bag balanced on top, then hustled off after saying, “Thanks for the nice tip, lady. Enjoy your pizza.”

Apparently Theo had taken care of everything.

“Ooh good, the pizza is here! I’m starving!” Maeve eyed the boxes in my hand hungrily. “We got here just in time.”

I wondered how she knew we were getting pizza.

“Who invited you two?” Ariel called as she walked down the hallway with a bemused smile.

She was wearing navy blue sleep pants and a baggy Chicago Cubs tee shirt, her feet bare. With her face free of makeup and her dark hair slicked back from the shower, she looked younger and more carefree.

“Theo said you had a new friend, so we came to meet her,” Maeve said with a wicked smile. “He sent extra pizza for us. We thought we’d get to know your new friend.”

Maeve and Grace turned to study me again. I resisted the urge to squirm under their perusal. They didn’t seem judgmental, just curious about me.

“Remind me to fire that blabbermouth.” Ariel slid one of the boxes out of my hand and gave it to Maeve. “Why don’t you nosy bitches enjoy your extra pizza downstairs?”

“But...”

She gave her friends a little shove. “Go on now, kids. I’ll talk to you later.”

Maeve and Grace exchanged a look, then their gazes swung from Ariel to me and back again.

“You’ll bring her for Found Family Dinner tomorrow, right?” Maeve demanded, moving slowly towards the door.

Ariel looked the tiniest bit uncomfortable. “Maybe.”

“Oh this is interesting,” Grace said. “You know, I had a feeling about this, didn’t I tell you, Maeve?”

“You sure did,” Maeve answered, her expression amused as she looked between me and Ariel again.

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I had no idea what they were talking about, but judging by the expression on Ariel's face, she did.

"Bye now," Ariel said firmly.

Ariel hustled her friends out the door and I went in search of plates and napkins. She came into the kitchen behind me, dropping the food on the dining room table along the way. The kitchen, dining room, and living room all flowed into one large open space, affording a view of the city skyline from every room. In the distance I could see the Sears Tower, as the locals called it, or the Willis Tower, as tourists would say. It was a whole Chicago thing, and I'd lived here long enough now to be in on it.

"Plates are up here," Ariel said, reaching over my head.

I could feel the heat of her body against my back, and I resisted the sudden urge to lean back and rub myself against her. She smelled good, like the citrus body wash she favored. Not that I'd ever noticed her body wash while cleaning her shower. Oh God, what was I doing? Lusting after my boss and the woman who was helping me out? I was such a jerk.

I scooted out to grab some napkins, then took the plates from Ariel. She retrieved two glasses, pouring us each some water from the filtered dispenser on the refrigerator, then she followed me to the table.

We were both quiet as we served ourselves a few slices of pizza along with some breaded mushrooms.

“I’m sorry if my friends made you feel uncomfortable,” Ariel said.

“They didn’t,” I replied. “Well, not much.”

“We’ve all been tight since we were babies,” she explained. “Our parents were friends and the three of us went all the way through school together before starting our business.”

“You’re in real estate development, right?” I asked, pretending like I hadn’t devoured every single bit of public information on this woman that I could. And spied on whatever I saw in this condo.

“Primarily, although AGM – our company -- has other business holdings as well, mostly nightclubs and restaurants,” she explained. “We all have separate enterprises, but our joint ventures are the big moneymakers.”

I nodded, feeling completely out of my depth. Our eyes caught and held, and for some reason I started to feel hot. A trickle of sweat traced its way down my spine, but I couldn’t look away. When Ariel finally glanced down at her plate, a flush of pink across her cheeks, I felt ready to combust.

We ate in silence for a few minutes. I hadn’t had pizza in more than six months, and I devoured it like it was my last meal. I’d been relying on the dinners they gave us at the shelter – usually casseroles of some kind – and the boxed lunches of sandwiches and noodle cups they sent us off with in the morning. Things like pizza were a luxury for me right now. I was going to enjoy every bite.

“Do you have plans this weekend?” Ariel finally asked.

I resisted saying that my weekend plans involved me wandering around the city until it was late enough to go back to the shelter.

“No.”

“Great, you’re going to hang out with me.”

My head popped up. “Oh no, you’re already letting me stay here, I couldn’t impose on you more.”

“Sadie,” she said slowly, the way she said my name in a tone that almost sounded tender made a little thrill go through me. “I’d like to think we’re friends. Can we be friends?”

“Sure, I’d like that,” I said honestly.

Although if I was being one hundred percent honest, I would say I wanted to be more than friends. Unfortunately I was a broke and homeless cleaning lady and Ariel was one of the richest and most sophisticated women in the country. This was not some fairytale. Women like me did not end up with women like Ariel, at least not for more than a quick fuck. I’d do well to remember my place.

“Great, then let’s have some fun this weekend, okay?”

I wondered how much her kind of fun would cost. I had about three hundred bucks in the new savings account I’d opened after Jane took me off our joint account and stole all my money. I needed to save every cent for an apartment. I could afford cheap rent somewhere, but getting several thousand dollars together for deposits and move in fees were a killer.

To my surprise, Ariel seemed to pick up on the reason for my hesitation.

“Don’t worry about a thing. This weekend is on me. It won’t cost you a thing.”

“Oh no, I...”

Ariel held up her hand. “No arguing,” she said in that sexy bossy tone.

My lips clamped shut without any consultation with my brain.

“Now let’s go to bed,” she said firmly. “You look like you’re dead on your feet.”

Ariel

It was not even ten o'clock, but I'd had a long and exhausting trip. Sadie meanwhile looked like she was about to pass out right in her pizza, which would be a terrible waste of Aurelio's. We wrapped up the rest of the food, putting it in the refrigerator, then I filled up both of our water glasses and led Sadie back to her room.

"There's some sweats and tee shirts in the dresser," I told her outside the guest room, eyeing her little backpack.

She couldn't possibly have more than a couple of essentials in there. I made a mental note to text Theo and ask him to send over some clothes in her size.

"I try to keep an assortment of clothes in different sizes in case I have unexpected overnight guests. Anything you might need in the bathroom. Help yourself to the toiletries or a new toothbrush, and feel free to take a bath or a shower. Just make yourself at home, okay?"

Sadie nodded, looking dazed. I didn't think it was about me though. She'd been struggling for so long, now that she knew she didn't have to worry about where to sleep or what to do, she was probably having an adrenaline dump. I'd bet anything she slept right through the night.

"Good night Sadie," I said, rubbing her shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I grabbed my e-reader and settled in bed, leaning back against the padded headboard and looking out at the lights of the city while I thought about Sadie. Knowing that

she'd been here in my bed gave me immense pleasure. I picked up the pillow she'd been sleeping on and pressed it against my face, smelling the fabric like a weirdo. There was no way I was changing these sheets.

I'd plugged my phone into the charger when I took my shower and I saw that I'd missed a few messages, mostly from Maeve and Grace. I'd made the mistake of confiding in them about my crush on Sadie one night when I'd had enough alcohol to loosen my inhibitions. I thought they'd forgotten about it, but clearly they hadn't.

Pressing ignore, I settled into read until I fell asleep.

Twelve hours later Sadie was still sleeping. The poor girl was clearly exhausted. She'd left her bedroom door cracked open and I glanced in just to make sure she was breathing. She was sleeping on her back, spread out like a star fish, occasionally emitting the cutest little sound. It was somewhere between a snore and a snort.

I stared at her for way longer than I should have.

Sadie finally got up just before ten. I heard her moving around, closely followed by the sound of the shower starting. Ten minutes later she came into the living area, her hair wet, dressed in another rumpled pair of shorts and an ancient tee shirt.

I was glad that I'd asked Theo to have some clothes sent over. I couldn't have my girl dressed like she'd just dug her clothes out of a dumpster. I texted him to let him know that Sadie was awake and he could bring the clothes now. I didn't want him wandering around talking loudly while she was sleeping. Theo did not know how to speak softly. Although given how hard Sadie had been sleeping, it probably wouldn't have mattered.

"Good morning, Goldilocks."

She smirked at the nickname.

“I’m so sorry I slept so late,” Sadie said. “I usually wake up early. I can’t remember the last time I slept for more than a couple of hours.”

I shrugged, but it made me happy knowing that she felt safe enough to relax here.

“You obviously needed the sleep. Besides, it’s Saturday, there’s no rush.”

I pointed towards the kitchen.

“There’s coffee in the kitchen.”

Her eyes brightened. “Oh, great.”

She returned a few minutes later with a cup of coffee, settling across the dining room table from me. I closed my laptop and gave her a smile.

“One Saturday a month I get together with a bunch of friends for what we call our Found Family Dinner,” I said. “It’s tonight. I was hoping that you’d come with me.”

She opened her mouth to argue but before she could get a word out I said, “I insist.”

“I don’t really have anything to wear for going out.”

“Don’t worry about it. My assistant is going to drop off some clothes for you to try on.”

Before she could stress about it I said, “It’s stuff that was going to go to charity anyway. Theo was organizing a clothing drive at the office. I asked him to bring by some items in your size.”

Maybe it was wrong to lie to her, but I wanted her to keep her pride. That's why I'd asked Theo to be sure to remove all the tags.

“Have a seat, I'll bring your breakfast.”

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“Oh no, thanks, I’m not hungry.”

I placed a hand on her shoulder. “Sadie,” I said firmly. “You need to eat. Sit.”

She lowered herself into a chair.

“Good girl.”

Sadie’s eyes flared and a myriad of filthy thoughts raced through my mind before I tore my gaze away. Going into the kitchen, I retrieved the plate I’d kept warming in the oven for her.

“This is a bacon and vegetable omelet with a side of potatoes,” I said, heading back to the kitchen to grab some things from the fridge. “Here’s butter, jam, ketchup, and a fruit salad.”

Sadie stared at the little bowl of fruit for a long second before looking back up at me. “Eat.”

I went to the other side of the table and pretended to work on my laptop while covertly watching Sadie eat. For someone who professed that she wasn’t hungry, Sadie tucked into that omelet like she hadn’t eaten in weeks. It made me happy, watching her eat the meal I’d prepared for her. I liked taking care of her.

She’d nearly cleaned her plate when I heard a quick knock on the door, followed by the sound of the keypad beeping. Theo.

My assistant was a tall, slim Black man, totally bald, with a small diamond in his left earlobe and the whitest teeth you've ever seen, thanks to his religious bleaching routine. He was dressed in sharply creased grey pants, a shiny silver shirt open at the neck, and shoes that cost a thousand bucks. I knew, because I'd bought them for his last birthday.

He swept in surrounded by a cloud of expensive cologne, his arms full of shopping bags.

"Ariel, my queen, who have we here?" he asked dramatically, looking Sadie up and down. "She's the cutest little thing I ever saw."

Sadie shrunk back a bit at his perusal.

"Theo, this is my friend Sadie. Sadie, my assistant and friend Theo."

He dropped the bags on the chair and grabbed Sadie by the hand, pulling her to her feet. He walked around her, nodding.

"I think some of the clothes from the..." he sent me an amused look over Sadie's head, "charity clothing drive will fit you for sure. I'll just leave everything here and you can send back whatever you don't want."

"Thank you," Sadie said quietly. "That's very nice of you."

"Thanks Theo," I added.

He shot me another look before hustling towards the door. "Okay girls, I'd better get home before my husband sends out a search party. It is the weekend and all. We'll see you at Found Family Dinner."

Then he was gone, leaving Sadie blinking like she wasn't sure what to make of him. Theo got that a lot.

Sadie sat back down, reaching for her coffee.

“Do you get seasick?”

Sadie took a drink of her coffee, frowning as if she thought she hadn't heard me correctly. The poor thing seemed totally disoriented this morning. Some fresh air would do her a world of good.

“Seasick?”

“Yes. I thought we'd go out on my boat today. It's going to be a beautiful day. I know you just ate breakfast, but I thought we could have a light lunch on the deck later on.”

Sadie perked up. “Oh that sounds fun. I've never been on a boat before.”

“Great. Let's get dressed and I'll call my car service.”

Ninety minutes later we were walking down the dock at the Chicago Yacht Club. Ricky, my captain, jumped off the boat with a friendly wave.

“Welcome aboard Ms. Fernandez. It's great to see you again.”

I shook his hand and returned his smile. “Thanks Ricky. It's a beautiful day for a sail.”

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“That it is, Miss Fernandez.”

His eyes moved to Sadie, who was standing a little behind me. I gently grabbed her arm and brought her up to stand next to me.

“This is my friend Sadie. Sadie, meet Ricky.”

After learning that Sadie had never been on a boat before, Ricky reviewed the safety instructions and at my insistence, Sadie put on a life jacket. We ambled up to the deck, scoped out some chairs, and settled in for the beginning of our sail.

I glanced over at Sadie, dressed in a new pair of black shorts and a flowy white tank top that Theo had brought, and gave her a big smile.

“It’s sail time!”

Sadie

My head swiveled from side to side as the boat started moving away from the dock. It was a beautiful early summer day, the temperatures in the low eighties, and as we started to move a breeze kicked up, cooling us off a bit.

When Ariel suggested a ride on her sailboat, I thought it would be one of those little two people boats. I imagined us working together to operate the sail and hoped I wouldn’t mess anything up. But this was a huge boat, with an entire bedroom downstairs as well as a large deck. I wasn’t sure if it qualified as a yacht, but it was definitely much larger than the average boat. Plus most people didn’t have their own

captain on standby.

We moved smoothly along the lakefront, the Chicago skyline to our right as we headed south. I leaned back on my elbows, more relaxed than I'd been in a long, long time. That solid twelve hours of sleep hadn't hurt either. Sleeping in Ariel's guest room was like sleeping on a cloud or something. Everything was soft and comfortable and apparently well insulated, because I hadn't heard anything when Ariel got up.

"This is fun," I said. "Thank you for bringing me."

Ariel looked at me over the top of her sunglasses. Like me, she was wearing shorts and a tank top, but somehow she still managed to look sophisticated.

"I'm glad you came. We'd better put on some sunscreen though," she said, rooting around in the tote bag she'd brought along. "My skin's a little darker than yours but I'm still prone to burning."

I pretended like I wasn't watching as she slathered sunscreen on her arms, cleavage, and on both sides of her long legs.

"Can you get my back please?" she asked, lifting her dark brown hair and tucking it underneath the hat she was wearing.

That's when I realized that her shirt was low cut in the back, the edge of the neckline just above her bra line.

"Sure," I said, my voice rough as I moved behind her.

I spread some cream on my hand and tentatively moved my fingers along her back and the top of her shoulders. Her skin was soft, the lightest of brown, like coffee that was mostly milk, and already turning the tiniest bit pink. She sighed softly as I spread

the cream over her back. Meanwhile my mind was going off in weird directions, wondering how she'd react if I lowered my head and kissed my way along the long column of her neck.

"There you go," I said huskily, stepping back.

"Now you," she said, pointing to the chair. "Stand up. I'll help."

I strangled a groan. The more time I spent with Ariel, the more attracted to her I felt. Having her hands on me was a very bad idea. Nevertheless, I stood up, remaining still as Ariel slathered cream along my shoulders, upper back, and the back of my arms and legs. Her touch was gentle and assured, yet somehow it felt arousing.

When she moved around to my front and started to crouch in front of me, I stepped back, afraid she'd be able to tell that my panties were damp with arousal. God help me, if she knelt in front of me there was no way I was going to be able to resist the urge to rub against her.

"I can get the front. Thank you."

Avoiding Ariel's gaze, I quickly applied sunscreen to the front of my body. Then I walked over to the railing and stared out at the water as the cream dried on my skin.

We chatted idly, punctuated by long periods of silence, until one thirty when Ricky came down with a large basket.

"Are you ready for lunch, Miss Fernandez?" he asked.

"Yes Ricky, thank you."

Ricky walked over to a table with two chairs at the corner of what I thought they'd

called the 'bow', the very front of the boat. We watched as he spread out a tablecloth, then took out several containers of food.

"I'll be right back with the plates and drinks," he promised.

"Are you hungry, Goldilocks?" Ariel asked me.

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“Yeah, I think I am,” I said, surprised to find that it was true. “I know I ate a huge breakfast a few hours ago but I could definitely eat again.”

My poor body had been starved for nutrients for so long it was going to take any chance it could get to consume calories, apparently.

We walked to the table as Ricky brought plates and gave us bottles of water.

“Wine or sparkling cider?” he asked.

“Cider please,” I answered quickly, not wanting my defenses to be down more than they already were. Plus, I’d never been much of a drinker.

“Me too Ricky, thanks.”

Ricky poured our drinks and walked away, then Ariel opened the lids on the containers.

“We’ve got bread, cheese, pasta salad, potato salad, watermelon, sliced apples, grapes, and cookies,” she said as she checked out the offerings.

After we ate lunch we napped on the deck, waking up when we were on our way back to the pier. Being on a boat was surprisingly tiring, I realized. Maybe it was all the fresh air.

We bid Ricky goodbye and headed back to Ariel’s place.

“Found Family Dinner is at six,” she told me after we entered the condo.

“What is that, exactly?” I asked.

“Maeve and Grace and I started it years ago,” she explained. “It’s grown since then with about twelve of us usually in attendance. Once a month we take over the private room in the restaurant and have a huge carb-filled dinner, along with any friends, partners, or strays we have in our life at the time. Then we go upstairs to the club and dance our asses off.”

“So I’m one of your strays?” I laughed.

“Friend,” she emphasized. “As you know, not everyone is accepting of their queer family members so we wanted to create a space where we could celebrate our found family.”

“You’re not close to your parents?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I see them once every month or so and we text regularly, but my folks have never been super excited about both me and my sister ‘turning out gay’ as they put it. My mother is sure she did something wrong to make it happen.”

Ariel rolled her eyes at that.

“They’re also offended that I started my own company instead of becoming a lawyer and working for my father like they’d always planned. It’s not that there’s bad blood with them per se, we just don’t have too much in common.”

She didn’t seem particularly sad about it, but then again, I’d already realized that Ariel was very good at hiding her feelings.

“My mother never knew that I was a lesbian,” I told her. “I started questioning in high school, but it wasn’t until I was with a woman my freshman year of college that I realized women were a much better fit for me. I’d been planning to come out to her eventually, but she died before I got the chance.”

Ariel cupped my shoulder with her hand, then rubbed her palm up and down my upper arm. It was meant to be comforting I was sure, but all it did was make my nipples ache and my breath quicken.

“Well, now you’ll have a Found Family with us.”

Her eyes were soft and warm as she studied me, her hand still gently stroking my arm. The air between us grew heated and I felt my body shift towards her, like drawn by a magnet. Ariel leaned forward until our lips were only a few inches apart.

Then her phone beeped with a message and we both jumped apart like we’d been caught doing something naughty. And we probably would have been, if not for the interruption.

Ariel glanced down at her phone and frowned.

“I need to talk to Theo and also return a few emails. But I’ll meet you here at six for dinner, okay?”

“Sure, but what should I wear?” I asked, not wanting to stick out like a sore thumb.

“Anything you want is fine,” Ariel shrugged. “Maybe one of the sundresses you got today?”

It was only after she walked away that I wondered how she knew that there were sundresses in those bags that Theo gave me. I’d gone through the clothes in the

privacy of my room. Somehow everything he brought was the perfect size for me. And for clothing that was supposedly second hand and going to charity drive, it all looked perfectly new and clean, not a stain or a wrinkle in sight.

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I shrugged. It must be a rich people thing to take such good care of their clothes, I thought. I didn't totally believe that, but it gave me an out to keep the clothes. And I really wanted to keep the clothes.

Ariel

“Everyone, this is my friend Sadie.”

All conversation at the table stopped as my friends looked at me and my house guest. Theo smiled widely, whispering something to his husband Archie, while Grace and Meave looked like cats who ate a canary. They knew I'd had a crush on Sadie for a long time, and that while I'd invited many random people to Found Family Dinner, I'd never brought someone.

“Move over,” I nudged Maeve to slide down a chair so I could sit next to Sadie.

There were already bottles of red and white wine on the table, as well as water, bread, and little bottles of olive oil.

“Wine?” I asked Sadie.

“A little white please.”

I poured her half a glass of wine and a glass of water before placing two pieces of bread on the side of her plate, ignoring my friends' curious looks. There was nothing wrong with taking care of Sadie.

“Try it with the olive oil,” I instructed, pouring a little on first her plate and then mine.

She watched me dip my bread in olive oil as if she’d never seen anyone do it before, then copied me.

“Oh my God, this is so good! The bread is still warm!”

I smiled, happy that she liked it. When I looked across the table, Theo was giving me an appraising look that I ignored.

The good thing about our Found Family Dinner was that everyone who attended was super welcoming. It wasn’t long before a friend of Theo’s husband and someone who with Grace at her family business had engaged Sadie in a spirited debate about some video game I’d never heard of.

Meanwhile our restaurant team brought out a variety of pasta, breaded veal cutlets, fried clams, eggplant parmesan, and giant salads.

Through it all, I was aware of Sadie sitting next to me, her leg pressed against mine under the table. Every time she moved I felt a little zing travel right to my core.

She was wearing one of the sundresses that Theo brought over, a dark blue with little white flowers, the colors a nice compliment to her pale white skin. She’d paired it with a light white sweater, just enough to keep her warm if the air conditioning was too high, and a pair of battered sandals that reminded me that we needed to get her some decent shoes.

I wasn’t sure how I was going to pull that off as easily as the clothing though. I didn’t think she’d believe that people were giving away a bunch of unused shoes. I slipped my phone under the table and texted Theo anyway. He’d figure out her shoe size and

take care of it for me.

Whenever Sadie wasn't paying attention I piled food on her plate, much to the amusement of my friends. Despite the sizable amount of food she'd eaten at breakfast and lunch, Sadie ate with gusto. It made me happy to see her enjoying her food. I'd noticed that she'd lost weight over the last few months, and now I knew why. It was okay though, I'd get her back to a healthy weight.

When we finished dinner our little group headed upstairs to the nightclub on the second floor. As was usual for a Saturday night, it was jam packed, but as the owners, we'd reserved the entire VIP section for our use. We sat on the upholstered couches that overlooked the dance floor, and Sadie leaned closer to whisper in my ear.

"I think I'm underdressed for this place."

I followed her gaze down to the dance floor where a bunch of women in short, clingy dresses danced with guys in expensive shoes. The club had a fifty dollar cover to get in, so only people with money made it in here. Even so, there was no set dress code. There were a few sundresses and even some jeans mixed in amongst the crowd.

"You look beautiful just as you are," I whispered back, hating that she felt uncomfortable. The dress Theo got her fit her perfectly and she looked good enough to eat. She'd fit in almost anywhere.

The uncertainty on her face cleared.

"Do you want to dance?"

Sadie's eyes darted to the dance floor and back to me. I could tell she wanted to say yes, but didn't think she should. Her fingers were tapping on her thigh, keeping time with the music.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing her hand and pulling her to her feet before she could argue. “Let’s dance.”

I threaded my fingers through Sadie’s and led her down the stairs and through the crowd to an empty spot on the dance floor. The businesswoman in me was glad to see that the club was crowded, between the cover charges and the high drink prices, we pulled in a lot of money here. But part of me wished that everyone would go home, leaving this space for me and the woman I loved.

Pulling Sadie closer, I placed my hands on her hips and began moving with the music. It was a fast song, and a loud one, so we couldn’t really talk.

Sadie stood stiffly in my arms until I pulled her hands up to my shoulders and leaned in to yell in her ear, “Relax, baby. Close your eyes and just feel the music.”

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Sadie gripped my shoulders and closed her eyes.

“Good girl,” I shouted.

I was close enough to catch her sharp inhale of breath. She liked that.

Sadie gradually relaxed, moving to the music while holding onto my shoulders like I was a lifeline. I didn’t mind that. I didn’t mind it at all. I watched as she circled her hips and bobbed her head to the beat, mimicking my movements.

The song changed and I circled around her, sliding my body against her back, rolling my hips against her ass. I thought maybe she’d turn around and punch me, but to my surprise, Sadie reached behind her and put her hands around my neck, holding me close. I resisted the urge to kiss her as I ground against her.

We danced like that for a minute or two, then circled around to face each other again, our bodies moving in tandem until the third song started. This one was a slow song, Melissa Etheridge’s “I’ve Loved You Before”. I knew without even looking up at the VIP area that one of my friends was responsible for that selection.

I pulled Sadie closer and when she dropped her head on my shoulder and wrapped her arms around my waist, I closed my eyes and gave myself over to the song. At some point my hands slipped down to Sadie’s ass and instead of complaining, she relaxed into my body like she didn’t want to be anywhere else. We fit together perfectly, like two pieces of a puzzle, and as we swayed together, I was filled with a contentment that I’d never felt before.

Everything else faded away. The other dancers. My friends on the balcony. The entire world was me holding Sadie in my arms. Finally. I was acutely aware of her closeness. My panties were damp, and my nipples were hard points, pressing against the fabric of my dress.

Then the song changed again, this time to “I Will Never Be the Same”, confirming my suspicions that my friends were directing the music here now.

“That’s funny,” Sadie murmured, looking up at me. “Two Melissa Etheridge songs in a row, and this isn’t even a lesbian bar.”

I stared into her bright blue eyes, my entire body humming as Melissa sang in the background, then I did what I’d been longing to do for two years: I lowered my head and pressed my lips against Sadie’s.

I started off slowly, the gentle press of lips against lips, but then Sadie sighed, her lips parting, and I couldn’t resist the invitation to slide my tongue inside her mouth. Lifting one hand to cup the back of her head, I explored Sadie’s mouth, rejoicing as she returned the kiss with an equal amount of passion.

We kissed until I felt dizzy from lack of oxygen and then I slid my mouth down to lick along her neck, just like I’d wanted to do forever. She was the tiniest bit sweaty, and I tasted the salt on her skin before returning to press little kisses along her jaw.

“What are we doing?” Sadie asked, raising her voice as the music picked up again.

I pulled back just enough to look at her, my eyes bouncing between hers. She looked a little dazed, and I loved that I’d been the one to put that look on her face. It meant that I wasn’t alone in this. It made me feel a glimmer of hope.

“We’re doing something I’ve wanted to do for a long time,” I said, moving closer

again.

“You have?” she asked, a flash of hope crossing her face.

“Yeah.”

She stared at me for a long moment before saying, “I’ve wanted that too.”

This time it was Sadie who was kissing me. And I’d never been happier.

Sadie

There must have been something in the wine -- or maybe Ariel had put me under a spell somehow – because I was not a person who made out in public. And I certainly didn’t dry hump them on a busy dance floor. But as soon as I’d started dancing with the woman who was technically my boss, I’d lost all sense of propriety.

I wrapped my leg around her calf, unable to stand even a hint of space between us, and kissed Ariel like my life depended on it. She tasted like wine and tomato sauce and something uniquely Ariel, and I couldn’t get enough of it.

In the background I was vaguely aware that the song had changed again, the volume turning loud, but even though people were jumping and gyrating around us, Ariel and I stood still, wrapped in each other’s arms and kissing like we were alone and had all night to learn the secrets of each other’s mouths.

Someone bumped into us, and we broke apart, gasping for breath.

“Hey, you girls, why don’t you get a room?” a deep voice asked in a teasing tone. “Or use one of the many rooms you have upstairs? That kiss was hot as hell, but it’s bordering on inappropriate for general company, you dirty girls.”

It took me a second to comprehend that it was Theo who'd interrupted our kiss. He was dancing next to us with his husband Archie, both of them sending us amused smiles. Theo gave me an exaggerated wink.

My face flamed as I realized how intimate Ariel and I had been. How out of control. I'd literally been about two minutes away from throwing Ariel to the floor and fucking her leg like a dog in heat. Or licking her pussy, I wasn't fussy. I'd never felt so wanton in my life.

All I knew was that I needed more. More Ariel. More kissing. More of these feelings that made the last six years of drama fade away until all I could feel was desire.

"Are you ready to go home?" Ariel asked. She seemed completely unflustered by what had just happened.

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I nodded, suddenly feeling shy. What would happen once we were alone? Would we continue that kiss? Do more? I hoped so, but then again, everything was happening so fast... I vacillated between hoping that we'd continue what we started and wanting to slow things down a bit. I was so confused.

Ariel took my hand and led me to the private elevators at the back of the building. As we passed the VIP area she lifted a hand to wave goodbye to her friends, several of whom were hooting and hollering at us. I kept my eyes down, too embarrassed at how I'd acted in front of a bunch of people I'd just met. God, they probably thought I was a slut or something.

Ariel and I were both quiet in the elevator, standing side by side and facing forward. When we got back inside the condo, Ariel gave my hand a squeeze.

"That got intense kind of fast," she said.

My face fell. Was she regretting kissing me? Had I been too forward?

"I'm sorry, I should have --."

As usual, Ariel seemed to be able to read my mind.

"That kiss was hot as fuck and I want nothing more than to tie you to my bed and make you come so many times you black out," she said.

My jaw dropped at the visual. A rush of arousal flooded my already soaked panties.

“But we should probably slow down a bit,” she continued. “I don’t want to do anything that you’ll regret later.”

I found it interesting that she thought I’d be the one to regret if anything happened. Ariel was rich, beautiful, and successful. I had no doubt she could have her pick of any lesbian, bisexual, or bi-curious woman in the greater Chicagoland area. The fact that she wanted me was almost unbelievable.

Then again, so was the idea of me staying in this fancy condo with the perfect view of the city.

“How about this?” Ariel continued, oblivious to my inner turmoil. “Let’s get our pajamas on and watch a mindless sitcom. Do you like *My Name is Earl*?”

“*My Name is Earl*?” I asked in confusion. “I’ve never even heard of that, although I’ve never been a big TV watcher.”

We hadn’t been able to afford cable or streaming services when I was growing up, so I’d never really gotten into TV show culture. Video games had always been my favorite way to pass the time.

“Do you like weird, quirky shows?”

“Usually,” I responded.

“Oh well, you’re in for a treat then,” Ariel assured me. “Put on your jammies and I’ll meet you back here in five.”

I went back to my room, changing into the same sweatpants and tee shirt I’d found in the guest room dresser last night. After washing my face and brushing my teeth I went out into the living room. Ariel was wearing her pajamas, settled right in the

middle of the overstuffed couch, a remote control in her hand.

“Come on,” she said, patting the cushion next to her. “You’re about to learn about Earl’s special brand of karma.”

As it turned out, I loved *My Name is Earl*. The characters reminded me of people I’d grown up with, and I found myself laughing along at their antics. At some point, Ariel put her arm around my shoulder, and I moved closer, snuggling against her side. It was nice.

We watched four episodes of the show before we decided to call it a night. Ariel walked me to my bedroom, then gently pushed me against the wall and kissed me until I was dizzy with lust. When she pulled back and wished me good night I almost cried out in frustration.

I was so on edge I would have willingly gone to her bed. Then again, Ariel was right. We probably needed to slow down. Not that my throbbing clit cared about common sense. I was tempted to take a bath and spend some quality time with the detachable showerhead, but somehow that seemed disrespectful so instead I just headed to bed.

When I got up the next morning Ariel was at the dining room table working on her computer, just like the day before. I wondered if she ever took a full day off. I guessed she hadn’t conquered Chicago’s commercial real estate market by sleeping in and neglecting work

“Good morning,” I mumbled.

I’d slept hard again, my dreams filled with visions of Ariel and woken up groggy. Once again I’d slept late I realized as I glanced at the clock. It was already nine-thirty.

“There’s coffee there,” she said, pointing towards the kitchen. “And there’s a breakfast casserole in the oven. Help yourself. I left the toaster out if you want toast with it.”

I slipped a piece of bread into the toaster, then served myself some casserole. I wasn’t sure what was in it, but it looked delicious. After buttering my toast and pouring a cup of coffee, I returned to the dining room. As soon as I sat down, Aiel closed her laptop.

“How’d you sleep?” she asked.

“Good. Really good. You?”

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She shrugged. “I was a little restless.”

I was tempted to ask if I was the cause of it but didn’t. No sense in looking like I was fishing for compliments or something.

I took a few bites of the savory casserole, my eyes closing in pleasure. It was a mixture of eggs, potatoes, vegetables, cheese, and some sort of sausage. Everything was flavorful and perfectly seasoned.

When I opened my eyes, Ariel was staring at me with an intense look on her face. I pressed my thighs together and sternly told myself to behave. Determined to not act so desperate and wanton today, I broke her stare and glanced around the room as I took another bite of my breakfast.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to a stack of boxes and bags leaned up against the side of the couch. They hadn’t been there last night.

“Theo brought you some shoes. And some other stuff,” she said with what felt like forced casualness.

I sent her a curious look, then walked over and glanced through the bags, finding a variety of panties and bras, all in my exact size. I’d never had matching bra and panty sets in my life, but there were at least ten here, all with tags from what looked like high end stores.

“How did Theo know my bra size?” I asked curiously as I stroked a red lace bra that was particularly sexy.

She shrugged. "He's a gay man, they're good at that stuff."

Then I opened one of the half dozen shoeboxes. Pulling out a pair of very cute sandals, I looked at the bottom, unsurprised to find there wasn't even a speck of dirt on the soles. My desire to have fancy shoes warred with my innate independence. I couldn't pretend that this wasn't charity, especially when I remembered a conversation Theo initiated last night about people's shoe size.

My eyes narrowed. "Everything here looks brand new."

"I'm not sure where he got that stuff."

Ariel's eyes darted away from me, raising my suspicions about yesterday's clothes too. Nothing in those bags looked like they'd ever been worn. I'd known the clothes were new when I saw them, but I convinced myself that they were just gently used.

"That's not what I asked you," I said, dropping the adorable sandals and marching over to the table. "Look Ariel, I appreciate you letting me stay here, but I don't want to be your charity case. I can buy my own shoes."

"I wanted to buy you something nice," she said. "Just accept the gift. It's not a big deal."

"It is to me!" I slammed my fists on my hips, glaring.

"You have holes in your shoes, Sadie!" she said in a frustrated tone.

"What?"

"The shoes you wore on the boat yesterday, they had holes on the bottom," she explained. "It made me sad."

“I’m sorry my shoes make you sad,” I said sarcastically, even while my cheeks burned with shame. I’d noticed the soles were wearing thin, but I hadn’t even realized there were holes now.

Ariel rose from her chair and pressed her palm against my red cheek. I couldn’t help but lean in against it. She gave me a look that was surprisingly tender.

“Sadie. I have so much money, more than I could ever use, let me spoil you a little bit. Please, baby. You deserve to be spoiled. Let me do this for you.”

Ariel

I watched the struggle in Sadie’s eyes. I knew that she’d been hurt before and that she’d learned not to trust anyone but herself. My girl was strong and independent, and I loved that about her. But I wasn’t going to rest until she believed that I wasn’t like those other women. I just wanted to love her and take care of her. What was the use of being rich if I couldn’t use my money to make other people happy?

She’d get there eventually. She’d learn to trust me.

We both jumped as a loud crack of thunder sounded, quickly followed by a bolt of lightning. It was a dark and gloomy day, with early summer thunderstorms predicted to roll through until tomorrow. We wouldn’t be doing any outdoor activities today, that’s for sure.

Normally I would spend at least part of the day working, but I didn’t want to waste any time with Sadie, no matter how full my inbox was getting.

After what felt like a million years, Sadie finally nodded.

“Okay, thank you. I’ll accept your gifts this time but please, no more. You’ve given

me more than enough.”

She opened her mouth to say something else, but I didn’t want to argue anymore. I wanted to kiss her again. So I did.

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Sliding my hands to her shoulders, I pulled Sadie close and lowered my head. I paused an inch or two away from her mouth, giving her the chance to say no, and when she didn't, my lips crashed against hers in a hard and claiming kiss.

I bit her lower lip, demanding entrance into her mouth, and when she gasped I shoved my tongue inside, dominating her and exploring her mouth. Sadie didn't seem to mind though. She moaned deep in her throat and wrapped her arms around my waist, hands stroking up and down my back.

Walking her backwards, I turned us until the back of her knees hit the couch, and then I gave her a gentle shove. She fell onto the cushion, looking startled like maybe she didn't know how she'd gotten there, but I didn't give her any time to think.

Instead I shoved her legs wide and dropped to my knees, then took her face between my hands and pulled her forward for another long, passionate kiss.

I loved this. I loved kissing her. I loved hearing the little noises she made as she got excited. I loved knowing that I was affecting her as much as she affected me. And she affected me all right. My heart was racing, and my breath was coming in sharp little bursts like I'd just sprinted for a mile.

I dropped my hand down to cup her breasts, squeezing them through the fabric of her shirt. They were just a little more than a handful, perfectly sized. Sadie arched her back, pushing her breasts into my hands, demanding more. I squeezed and teased her until her nipples were hard points against my palms and Sadie was gasping for breath against my mouth.

But it wasn't enough. I wanted more. I wanted to claim her.

I unzipped her shorts and tugged them down her hips, taking her panties with them.

"Lift!" I ordered, giving her side a little pinch.

She gasped at the bite of pain but lifted immediately, allowing me to relieve her of her shorts. When she was bare to me, I leaned forward, studying her cunt like it was a math puzzle. She had a tangle of golden hair at her apex, the folds below pink and glistening.

I needed a taste, so I lowered my head and licked my way up her channel.

Sadie made a keening sound, and her legs fell open even wider as I started licking her up and down gently, then gradually adding pressure. She tasted sweet, with an essence that was uniquely Sadie. I couldn't get enough.

"Tell me if something doesn't feel good," I instructed when I came up for a breath.

Sadie gave me a shaking laugh. "Oh my God, believe me, everything feels good."

"I'm going to make you come on my mouth," I said, my tone deliberately conversational. "You're going to be a good girl and let yourself go, all right? Get out of your head and let me take care of you."

She nodded, her eyes round in her pale face as she stared down at me.

And then I started licking her in earnest, stopping to tap her clitoris at the top, stabbing at her entrance with the tip of my tongue on the bottom. Sadie was panting now, rolling her hips to meet me, and when she grabbed my hair to direct me to her clit, I knew she was close.

I slid a finger deep inside her and started pumping in and out while I concentrated the movements of my tongue on the swollen bud of her clit.

“I’m... I’m close,” she gasped.

I lifted my head while I continued pumping in and out of her with a finger.

“Do you want to come, Sadie?”

“Yes,” she sobbed.

“Ask for permission,” I said in my sternest voice.

“Wh—what?”

I stopped with my finger inside her. “Ask me for permission to come.”

She gave me a wild eyed look, and I casually started tapping against her clit with my thumb. When she didn’t say anything, I leaned forward and bit the soft skin of her inner thigh, hard enough to leave a little mark.

“Fuck!” she cried. “Please, may I come? I need to come.”

“Since you asked so nicely,” I said, stopping to give her slit one long, slow lick before looking up at her again. “You can come, baby. Come hard for me.”

And when I sucked her clit into my mouth and pressed against her G spot with my finger, she did exactly that.

Sadie bucked against my face, tearing my hair out with her fingers while she rode the waves of her orgasm. She was still shaking when she leaned back against the couch

cushions.

“Oh my God!”

Her chest was heaving, and her skin was flushed from her forehead all the way down to her collarbones, but I wasn't done with her.

“You can do better.”

“What?” Sadie lifted her head to look at me like she thought maybe she'd misheard.

“I want a better orgasm than that,” I said, sliding my finger in and out of her again.

“I can't... I don't come more than once.”

“We'll see about that.”

I grabbed her legs, pulling them over my shoulders and then shoving a pillow under her hips to tilt her pelvis towards me. Adding a second finger, I started pumping in and out of her body at a bruising pace, relishing the feeling of her inner muscles tightening and relaxing against my fingers.

I watched her carefully, categorizing her reactions, watching to make sure it wasn't too much. Sadie had a blissed out expression on her face, and she continued to roll her hips, fucking herself on my fingers.

“That's my good girl,” I encouraged her. “You look so beautiful like this, splayed out for me like a fucking gift.”

She made a whining noise but didn't answer.

I took my free hand and gave her a sharp smack over her mound. Sadie yelped, and I saw the moment that her surprise at the little sting of pain turned to pleasure. Then I smacked her pussy again, and then one more time before I caught her clit between my teeth.

Snaking my hand under her shirt, I found her nipple, pulling and pinching it between my fingers the same way I did with her clit between my teeth.

And when I let her go long enough to order, "Come for me Sadie! Come now!" she screamed and covered my face with her juices.

It was one of the best moments of my entire life.

Sadie

My body was tingling for hours after Ariel made me come. Hours. She gave me two mind blowing orgasms, then she'd helped me get dressed again and gone back to the dining room table as if nothing had happened.

Except it had.

Unsure what to do, I'd returned to the table and focused on my breakfast, eating in silence while Ariel tapped away on her laptop. When I pushed away my plate she looked up, giving me a questioning look.

"I've been trying to figure out what to say next," she admitted. "I know I should say I'm sorry that I practically attacked you, but I don't want to lie to you. I'm not sorry at all."

I realized she was as thrown off as me about what was happening, and somehow it made me feel better.

“You didn’t hear me complaining, did you?” I asked. “My only complaint is that you didn’t let me reciprocate.”

Her brown eyes darkened until they were nearly black. When I licked my lips, she groaned.

“I really have to do some work today,” she said regretfully. “But I should be done in about three hours. Maybe we can, uh, hang out then? In the meantime, feel free if you want to use the pool or the gym.”

“Don’t worry, I can entertain myself.”

“Oh great,” she said, already distracted by whatever was on her screen. “Theo sent you a swimsuit, it’s in one of the bags.”

I bit off a snarky response about buying me stuff. I was sure all of this was pocket change to Ariel, but I wasn’t in the habit of buying hundred dollar bras or what I later realized was a three hundred dollar swimsuit. It was literally the most expensive piece of clothing that I’d ever owned.

Although I had to admit that it looked great on me and fit like a dream.

I was swimming laps in the pool when Ariel came out. The pool was shared space for her and her two friends, but I’d been alone here the entire time. She stood at the edge of the pool waiting for me. I swam over and put my elbows up on the edge the pool, staring up at her.

“Are you finished with work?” I asked, eyeing the swimsuit coverup she wore.

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She gave me a bemused look. “For some reason I can’t concentrate on work,” she admitted. “That doesn’t usually happen to me but today I’m all kinds of distracted.”

“Why don’t you come in this pool, and I’ll help you get out of your head?”

I could tell that my boldness surprised her, but she didn’t hesitate to pull off the little cover up she wore and jump into the pool. I got a flash of a jade green bikini before she slipped under the water, popping up a few seconds later.

We met in the middle, where the water was about as high as my breasts, and flew together, our lips meeting in a hungry kiss. As we kissed, I walked Ariel backwards until her back was pressed up against the wall of the pool.

Honestly I couldn’t believe my nerve. I’d never been the aggressor in any sexual encounter in my life. My ex-girlfriend always joked that I was the perfect pillow princess. But with Ariel, I couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t stop touching her. I couldn’t help myself from seeing if I could make her lose control, the way she’d done with me earlier on the couch. I wanted her submission, just like I’d given her mine.

Cupping the back of her head with one hand, I slid the other between us, kneading her breast through the slippery fabric of her bikini top. Unable to get a good grip, I worked my hand inside and caught her nipple between my fingers, giving her a sharp pinch that made Ariel gasp into my mouth.

I wrenched my mouth away to whisper in her ear.

“Do you like that?”

I pinched her nipple again, a little harder this time, and Ariel closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

“Do you like a little pain with your pleasure?”

“Y—yes,” she admitted, and I had the feeling that it was hard for her to admit.

I lowered my head and nipped at the juncture of her neck, biting her hard enough to sting but not enough to leave a mark.

“I think you’re the kind of woman who’s so in control of everything all the time but craves the opportunity to just...” I pinched her nipple harder. “Let go.”

I’d bet my last dollar she was usually the dominant one in any sexual relationship. But maybe we could share the responsibility for being in charge.

I pinched her nipple again and gave it a little tug at the same time, and Ariel released a moan so long and sexy that I almost orgasmed on the spot just from hearing it.

But I wanted to focus on her now. I reached around Ariel’s neck and untied her bikini top, releasing her breasts. They were heavy and teardrop shaped, a little paler than the rest of her body, the lightest shade of brown with darker brown nipples.

Our height difference was a problem, so I boosted her up against the wall of the pool, pulling her legs around my waist. That put her in a good position for everything else I wanted to do. Ariel grabbed onto my shoulders with a little gasp.

I dropped my head and took one nipple in my mouth – the one I hadn’t been pinching. No sense in neglecting that one, I thought with a chuckle. I sucked it into my mouth, drawing on her flesh and teasing the tip with my tongue.

Meanwhile I slid my hands down deeper in the water, one gripping Ariel's hip while the other made its way down the front of her bikini bottoms, but I couldn't get a good grip.

"Take off the bottoms," I growled against her breast.

Ariel immediately dropped her hands, untying the strings at either hip. I pushed the fabric away, not even caring where it went, then cupped her mound in my hand, giving her a little squeeze.

"You're going to come on my hand now," I said, my voice firm.

I had no idea that I even had this side of me, but it felt natural.

Ariel's eyes widened, but she nodded.

I slid my fingers between her lower lips, stroking back and forth a few times before I inserted two fingers into her opening. Ariel gasped at the intrusion, her internal muscles stiffening, so I took her nipple into my mouth again and bit down hard. The sensation made her unclench, allowing my fingers to move easily. I didn't waste any time, starting a rough pace as I pumped in and out of her body while continuing to tease her breast with my teeth.

Ariel was whimpering now, her hips rolling against my hand, her back arched off the pool wall. Her inner muscles were trembling against my fingers.

"Are you close?" I asked, lifting my head to look at her face.

She opened her eyelids with what appeared to be great effort, and her brown eyes looked unfocused as she blinked at me.

“I’m close,” she confirmed.

“You need to get there,” I ordered. “I want you to come for me right now.”

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Before she could respond I twisted the hand in her pussy so I could press my thumb against her clit while I continued to fuck her with my fingers. I slid the hand on her hip and slid in between her ass cheeks. When I pressed a finger against her back entrance Ariel lost it.

“Sadie!” she screeched as her orgasm hit.

She threw her head back and I licked the curve of her throat while continuing to tease her with my fingers. Ariel was shuddering now, riding the waves of pleasure, tiny gasps coming out of her mouth.

She looked beautiful. Totally undone. And I felt incredibly powerful knowing that I’d made this brilliant, driven woman completely out of her mind with pleasure.

After what felt like an hour she finally settled, her attention coming back to me. I removed my hands from her lower body and gripped her shoulders, pulling her close so I could give her a long, claiming kiss.

When we finally pulled back, both of us were breathing unevenly. My clitoris felt heavy, and my pussy was clenching, looking for relief. I’d never felt this horny in my life. I ignored it and focused on the woman in my arms, staring into her eyes.

After a minute or two Ariel gave me a long, considering look, then said the absolute last thing I was expecting.

“You’re going to be my girlfriend now,” she said. “You’ll move into my bedroom tonight. And just so you know, I’m keeping you forever.”

Ariel

I was too dazed with pleasure to be tactful or even consider the words that were tumbling from my mouth. I was operating purely on instinct now.

“Um. What?”

It wasn't quite the excitement I was hoping for. Sadie was looking at me like I was insane. Time to downshift.

“I like you Sadie. I know we talked about you staying with me as a guest, but I'd love to have you stay as a girlfriend.”

“Are you orgasm drunk or something? I can't be your girlfriend!”

Her voice was shrill enough that I winced. She stepped away and my feet slid down to the bottom of the pool. Idly, I wondered where my bikini bottoms were.

“Why not?”

“Because you're some fancy billionaire CEO person and I'm your freaking house cleaner.” She waved her hand between us. “We don't fit together.”

“Maeve is the CEO,” I said. “I'm the COO.”

“I don't even know what that is,” she said, trying to stalk away from me but with the buoyancy of the water, it was more like gliding.

God she was stunning. And the way she took control just now – it was everything I never knew I wanted. My brain had disconnected in a way that never happened when I was having sex with another person. I couldn't wait to do it again.

“The COO is in charge of the company’s operations...” I began but stopped when she threw a glare over her shoulder that could melt steel.

For such a tiny thing she was kind of ferocious when she was angry. I just didn’t get why she was angry in the first place.

Tucking my breasts back into my top, I snatched up the bikini bottoms floating on the surface of the pool and followed Sadie to the staircase on the shallow end of the pool.

“Sadie,” I said, grabbing her arm. “I don’t understand why you’re mad. I thought you liked me too. Did I imagine that?”

She was quiet for a few seconds before turning around to face me.

“You didn’t imagine it,” she admitted softly.

The weight on my chest lightened.

“Then why can’t we date? Why does me asking you to be my girlfriend freak you out?”

“I just... I don’t know what this even is, Ariel,” she said. “People like you don’t date people like me. You clearly have some kind of hero complex--.”

“I’m not trying to be a hero,” I interrupted. “I like you Sadie. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before and if there’s one thing I’ve learned in life, it’s that you have to grab onto the good things while you can, before they’re taken away.”

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Ashley's face floated through my mind. She was my first girlfriend. My first love. And the first person in my life to die. My chest squeezed with a pain I usually tried to keep locked up and out of my mind.

"What?" Sadie asked softly. "You look sad all the sudden. What's wrong?"

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. My girl was clearly intuitive.

"Nothing." I shook my head. "I was thinking about this girl that I dated for two years in high school. We were in love, in that super intense way that happens when you're young. Her, uh, her parents found out about us and pulled her out of our school, trying to separate us. They were the 'pray the gay away' types. She killed herself."

Sadie gasped. "Oh, that poor girl."

I blinked quickly, surprised to realize I was getting teary. I hadn't thought about Ashley in years, yet the pain of losing her still felt fresh and real.

"She was only sixteen. The pain of her parents' rejection and the idea of being stuck with them for another two years until she could be on her own, it was too much for her."

"I'm so sorry that happened," she said softly, pulling me into a hug.

I rested my head on her shoulder and we both were silent for a few seconds while I composed myself. Lifting my head, I met Sadie's eyes.

“I promised myself long ago that when I found someone I cared about, I wouldn’t let them slip away from me, or let anyone else’s opinions influence us.”

“I get that Ariel, honestly I do. But you and I come from different worlds, and we don’t even know each other.”

“That’s what dating is for,” I reminded her. “To get to know each other.”

When she didn’t answer I felt a wave of nausea, sure she was about to dump me, but to my surprise she didn’t.

“I like you too, Ariel. A lot. How about this? We can... uh, hang out... date, whatever you want to call it, while I’m here and we’ll see how it goes.”

“While you’re here?” I prodded.

“I’m not going to stay here forever, this is temporary until I get on my feet. Hopefully I’ll be out of your hair in a week or two. Then we can decide what happens next.”

I wanted to tell her that this wasn’t temporary. That I didn’t want her to move out in a few weeks. That I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, but I could tell it was too soon. She was freaking out. Not that I blamed her. After all, I’d been in love with her for some time, but this was all new to her.

Plus I wasn’t naïve enough to not understand the differences in our lives. Most people in my life, both social and business, would have an opinion about me dating my cleaning woman. It was almost as bad as dating the nanny. And while I didn’t care what people thought of me, I didn’t want to put Sadie in a bad position, especially before we’d fully committed to each other.

My best plan was for me to agree to Sadie’s proposal, then spend all my energy

convincing her that she belonged in my world, and that she belonged at my side.

“So we’re going to date for now, and see what happens? Is that what you’re proposing?” I clarified.

Sadie nodded. “Yes, we can hang out until I get my own place and then if you’re not sick of me, maybe we can try dating when we’re not living together.”

“I’ll never get sick of you, Sadie,” I said firmly.

She rolled her eyes like I was being ridiculous. I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her closer, giving her a long, hard, claiming kiss. When we pulled apart, her lips were swollen and her eyes were a little dreamy.

“I guess we’re sealing this deal with a kiss?” she joked.

“That’s right.”

She headed towards the stairs.

“I’ve got to find some food. Despite that huge breakfast I had, I worked up quite an appetite swimming laps. Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” I said, staring at her ass while she walked up the steps of the pool.

“Great, let’s get changed and raid your fridge.”

Sadie and I headed to separate bathrooms to shower, then met in the kitchen. We stood side by side examining the contents of the refrigerator. Maeve, Grace, and I subscribed to a meal service that brought in a combination of prepared meals and groceries each week, which meant we rarely had to go grocery shopping. I loved

cooking and tried to do it several times a week, but I despised going to the grocery store for some reason.

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That was one of the many nice things about being as rich as we were: we could outsource the tasks we didn't like.

We picked out two pre-prepared meals, a salmon and rice dish for me and a beef and mashed potatoes dish for Sadie and popped them in the microwave. While we waited, I cut up a few slices of bread and some cheese to go with the meal, and Sadie set the table and got us sodas and waters to drink.

It was nice working together in the kitchen. Domestic.

The weather was still dark and stormy, perfect for a lazy afternoon, so Sadie and I decided to eat our meals on the couch and watch some more episodes of *My Name is Earl*. An hour later Sadie was fast asleep, her head on my shoulder. It wasn't long until I fell asleep too.

Sadie

I woke up on the couch, pressed up against Ariel's side. She'd fallen asleep too, sitting up with her head propped up against a throw pillow. On the TV, *My Name is Earl* played on.

Ariel looked so beautiful sleeping, her dark hair spread out around her, face soft and relaxed. Of course she'd also looked beautiful riding my hand and thrashing with the force of her orgasm.

My mind wandered back to our earlier conversation. I hadn't known Ariel for long, not really, but it was already obvious that she was a little over the top. Impulsive.

Impetuous. I assumed she wasn't like that when she was in the business world. Or maybe she was, what did I know about business?

The scary thing was that when she asked me to stay, said she wanted to keep me, I'd wanted nothing more than to agree with her. I was falling for Ariel, falling fast, but I'd learned a hard lesson about falling into relationships too quickly. Ariel seemed great, but so had Jane, at least when we first got together, and I was still healing from the emotional scars of that relationship.

Ariel woke up a little while later, looking adorably ruffled. Somehow she convinced me to go down to her private gym and do yoga. We set out some purple mats and Ariel put on an on-demand class that she said was suitable for beginners. I'd never done yoga before, but Ariel assured me that it was particularly helpful for people with physical jobs like me.

It turned out that I liked yoga. It was a little distracting at first, watching Ariel gracefully moving from pose to pose while wearing her tight little yoga pants and an equally tight tank top. But eventually I tuned her out enough to focus on my own practice, and to my surprise, I really enjoyed it. I couldn't believe how good my body felt when we were done.

"God, my back feels so much better now," I told Ariel as we rolled up our purple mats. "I've had a kink in it ever since I started staying at the shelter."

Ariel's eyes hardened and I knew she was dying to say something about the events that led me to staying in the shelter, but I was too relaxed to think about Jane right now.

"What do you usually do on Sunday nights?" I asked quickly, rolling up my mat and putting it back on the shelf.

“I usually do a little work,” she said. “I like to get a jump on my Monday.”

“Do you work every day?” I asked curiously.

“Well, not all day, but usually there’s too much to do during the week, so I have to put in some hours on the weekend.”

“I have a better idea.”

Ariel looked at me. “What?”

“Let’s read in bed.”

“Read in bed?” Ariel repeated, as if she’d never heard the idea before.

“Right after I eat you for dinner.”

Her eyes widened as I added, “Race you.”

We hurried upstairs, tearing off our clothes as we headed into Ariel’s bedroom. I hopped onto the bed, then laid on my back.

“Come sit on my face,” I instructed.

“I think it’s your turn,” Ariel said.

“You first. I’m dying to taste you.”

She strolled over like she had all the time in the world, then moved to straddle my head. As soon as she lowered her body I gripped her hips and started moving my tongue through her folds.

“Sadie!”

Ariel ground herself against my face, but I could tell she needed more. I focused my attention on her clitoris, sucking the little bud into my mouth and adding pressure until she exploded above me with a gasp. I licked and teased her with my tongue as she shuddered her way through her orgasm, finally collapsing beside me with her eyes tightly closed.

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“When I can breathe again,” she gasped. “I’m going to make you come until you black out.”

“I can’t wait.”

Three weeks later...

“How was work today Goldilocks?”

I toed off my battered trainers – there was no reason to wear my new shoes to clean houses -- and walked over to kiss Ariel on the cheek. She was in front of her laptop, like she usually was if I didn’t insist that she take a break – or distract her with sex. I’d been here for three weeks now, and it had been going surprisingly well.

Most days Ariel woke up early to run on the treadmill in her gym. By the time I was awake, she was drinking coffee and reading her email at the dining room table. I’d join her for breakfast, then we’d both head off to work. In the evenings we’d have dinner together, read or watch TV or do some yoga, and then we’d make love and go to sleep, cuddled together in Ariel’s giant bed.

The sex was great, and the more we were together the more I wanted Ariel. The intimacy after was even better. Falling asleep cuddled next to this woman was like a balm to my battered soul.

The only source of contention was around my job. The more time we spent together,

the more it seemed to bother her that I was heading out to clean other people's houses.

"What did you want to do when you were younger?" she asked me last week. "Before you moved to Chicago?"

"I was studying social work in college," I told her. "I guess I always imagined I'd do something to help kids, or maybe single mothers like my mom."

"You should quit your job and go back to school," she said in that bossy tone of hers. "I'll pay for it."

"No."

Ariel got that same look that crossed her face every time I refused something, it was like she couldn't believe someone was disagreeing with her. Not because she was a jerk, but as I came to realize, in Ariel's world almost everyone was a yes man or woman. There were very few people who argued with her about anything other than Theo and her friends Grace and Maeve.

"Sadie, what's the use of me having all this money if I can't spend it on the people I care about?"

It was an argument she'd used before. Many times. It was how she justified buying the groceries, refusing rent money, and every time she tried to buy me something. I'd lost count of all the 'little gifts' that just happened to come my way.

"I appreciate that you are so generous Ariel," I said firmly. "But as I've told you several times now, I will not be beholden to you. I don't want to be a kept woman."

She knew I was serious. It was hard, but I had to maintain my boundaries with her,

even if she didn't like them. If I became too overly dependent on Ariel, I'd just be recreating the same dynamic I had with Jane, and I'd promised myself I'd never let that happen.

"My work was the same as always," I answered her earlier question. "How was your COO-ing today?"

She shrugged. "Bought some properties, sold some properties, same old same old. What do you feel like for dinner tonight?"

"One of my coworkers turned me onto this new food cart," I said. "She says they have the best street tacos in the whole city."

She smiled at my enthusiasm. "Where is this paragon of Mexican food?"

"Millennium Park."

"I've never eaten at a food cart before," she said.

I shook my head. For someone so worldly, she was also very sheltered. At least in the ways of normal everyday people. "It's going to change your life. Food is much better outside."

"Well then, let me change into something more comfortable and we'll head out."

Ariel returned a few minutes later wearing loose shorts, a sleeveless blouse, and sandals. Dressed like this, she almost seemed average, at least if you didn't know that everything she wore was designer.

"Let's go."

I wanted to take the El, but Ariel insisted on calling for her car service. It was hot and muggy outside, so I didn't argue too much. The train had been super swampy on my way home and I wasn't too proud to enjoy the air conditioned comfort of the air conditioned Town Car.

After getting dropped off at the entrance, we walked through the park hand in hand, checking out the various vendors until we found the cart that everyone at work was raving about. We ordered a variety of street tacos along with two bottles of Mexican Coke, my favorite.

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“That’ll be twenty-nine seventy-nine.”

I reached for my wallet and so did Ariel.

“Let me get it,” she insisted. Ariel always insisted.

“It’s my turn to pay,” I shot back.

Before I could even open my wallet Ariel was shoving a black credit card at the man behind the counter.

“We only take cash, lady,” the unimpressed cart worker told us.

“What do you mean?” Ariel asked in obvious confusion.

“Good old American cash,” he said slowly, like he was pretty sure she was an idiot.

“We don’t take plastic.”

Ariel frowned at her wallet. “I, uh I don’t carry cash.”

I pulled forty dollars out of my wallet and handed it to the guy. “Keep the change.”

He winked and got to work putting our order in.

Ariel seemed a little discombobulated. “I can’t believe they don’t take credit cards,” she said. “Who doesn’t take credit cards?”

“Small businesses who want to keep their costs down by avoiding credit card processing fees.”

“Hmm.” Clearly she’d never thought about it.

A few minutes later they called out our order, and we grabbed our bag of food and sodas and took them to a nearby bench to eat. The food was just as good as I’d heard and we wolfed down our tacos like it was our last meal on Earth.

“Holy shit,” Ariel breathed. “These really are good.”

She had a smudge of crema on her lips, and I reached over to wipe it with my napkin. At the last minute I changed my mind and leaned in to lick it off.

“Yum. That crema is delicious,” I said, smacking my lips. “Almost as delicious as you are.”

Ariel’s eyes darkened and she leaned closer, intent on kissing me, until we heard someone call her name.

“Ariel? Is that you? What on Earth are you doing eating in a park?”

Ariel

It figured that the one time I did something out of character I’d get busted by my mother. I’d stopped listening to her opinions years ago but that didn’t stop Mom from trying to tell me how to run my life whenever she got the chance.

“I’m sorry,” I mouthed to Sadie before turning to greet my mother.

She was dressed in running clothes, my father at her side. Ever since Dad’s heart

attack she'd been forcing him to go running with her. I guess I knew that sometimes they'd run along the lake front but in a city of over two million people, it never occurred to me that I'd run into her.

Then again, other than the social occasional events required for my job, it was pretty rare that I was anywhere but work, home, or my boat. I set my taco on the bench and stood up, Sadie doing the same.

"Hi Mom. Hi Dad."

"Hey sweetheart," Dad said, giving me an awkward little wave. "I'd give you a hug but I'm all sweaty."

Dad hated sweating even more than he hated running, but my mother ruled the roost at home, and he did whatever she told him. Although in her defense, she was trying to help him get healthy.

My mother looked between me and Sadie, her eyes assessing as she looked Sadie over. I had no doubt that she'd seen the intimate position we were. Mom's eyes fixed on Sadie's grubby old gym shoes before she looked back at me.

"Aren't you going to introduce us to your friend, Ariel?"

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I suppressed a sigh. “Mom, Dad, this is my, uh, this is Sadie. Sadie, these are my parents, Evelyn and Diego Hernandez.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Sadie said politely. She looked nervous, her fingers playing with the hem of her shorts.

“Are you two dating or something?” Mom asked.

I grabbed Sadie’s hand and gave her a little squeeze. “Yes we are.”

Mom nodded, her face carefully blank although her tone was haughty.

“Do you work in real estate too, Sadie?”

Sadie shook her head. “No, I’m a house cleaner.”

Mom’s mask dropped along with her jaw, but a lifetime of worrying about manners and appearances meant that she caught herself quickly.

“Oh, isn’t that nice.” Her tone clearly conveyed it was anything but nice. “How did you two even meet?”

“Sadie works for me, Mom.”

Dad’s eyebrows rose to his hairline, but he didn’t say anything. Since I’d stood up to him about wanting to go into business instead of becoming a lawyer he mostly left the meddling to my mother.

“You’re dating yourhousekeeper?” Mom asked incredulously. “Are you serious?”

She gave Sadie the same look she used when homeless people asked her for a dollar on the street corner. I could feel Sadie becoming smaller next to me, her shoulders hunching in.

“I’m sure you’re a very nice girl Sadie, but our family has a reputation to uphold,” Mom continued.

“Mom!” I said loudly. “That’s enough.”

“But...”

“Well it’s been great seeing you two, but we don’t want to keep you from your run,” I said pointedly. “It’d be a shame to let your heartrate drop too much.”

Mom didn’t look like she was going to budge, but Dad touched her arm. He’d always known the value of a strategic retreat.

“Come on Evelyn, you know I hate to prolong these runs.” He sent me an apologetic look over Mom’s shoulder. “Let’s hit the road before my muscles get tight.”

“Fine,” Mom replied, looking like she was trying to decide if she should argue.

I had no doubt she’d be burning up my phone as soon as she got home. I also had no doubt that I’d be hearing from my sister soon too, wanting to know what was going on. Ashley was always on my side, but she loved to hear the gossip.

“Nice to meet you Sadie,” Dad said stiffly. “Enjoy your dinner.”

Then he pulled my mother away and they jogged off. Sadie and I dropped back on the

bench, our food forgotten.

“Well that was awkward,” Sadie said, looking like she wanted to throw up.

I knew that the encounter with my parents, as brief as it was, just reinforced for her that we didn’t belong together. And while it was true that we came from different worlds, I was determined to figure out a way to be with the woman I loved.

“Are you done with your food?” I asked.

Sadie nodded, avoiding eye contact. “Yeah.”

“Do you want to grab a cone from the ice cream cart?” I asked, pointing to the cart across the way.

“I’m not really hungry anymore,” she said quietly.

I knew she was really upset then. Sadie loved ice cream more than she loved breathing air. I’d never been a big fan, but now my freezer was stocked with pints of her favorite flavor.

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Sadie was quiet on the ride back to the condo, rebuffing all my attempts at conversation.

“Sadie, I’m so sorry about my mom,” I said as we walked into my place. “She’s always thought she’s better than everyone else.”

“She’s right Ariel. I mean, what are we thinking? We are so mismatched it’s laughable.”

“I don’t care what anyone else thinks,” I said stubbornly.

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. Before I could go over there, Theo used his code to let himself in.

“Are you two decent?” he called. “I came to bring those contracts you need to review, boss lady.”

He swept into the living room, immediately picking up on the tension between us.

“What’s happening here?” he asked nosily. “Are you two fighting?”

“We’re not fighting,” I said impatiently. “We ran into my parents at Millenium Park and my mother was her typical snobby self when she found out that Sadie and I are dating.”

“Didn’t you tell her that you’ve been in love with Sadie here for years?” he asked.

“What?” Sadie stepped closer.

“Theo,” I said warningly.

He ignored me.

“Surely Ariel told you that she had a thing for you since the day you met?” he asked. “We’re all just surprised it took her this long to make a move on you. Every time we get a few drinks in her it’s all..,” he made his voice higher to imitate me... “Sadie’s so pretty. Sadie’s so perfect. I love watching her on the Ring camera. I want to keep her forever and buy her pretty dresses and take her to the opera and...”

Sadie gave me a look that was a combination of devastated and betrayed.

“Theo!” I yelled.

My former friend jumped, giving me a startled look.

“What?” his voice turned defensive as he looked between us. “I thought y’all had talked about your secret obsession by now.”

“Leave,” I said coldly. “Get out of my sight.”

Theo’s face fell as he realized what he’d done.

“Oh. God, I’m so sorry. Me and my big mouth. Forget everything I said, Sadie. I was just joking.”

I could practically see Sadie planning her escape.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” I shouted at Theo. “Now!”

Theo scurried away without another word, leaving me and Sadie alone again.

“I don’t understand,” Sadie said. “Was this all some kind of game for you?”

“No, of course not,” I protested.

“You built up this fantasy of what? Rescuing the maid? I’m not your...” she paused, searching for the right thing to say, “your Eliza Doolittle or your Pretty Woman lady, whatever her name was. And you watched me on the Ring camera?” her voice rose in pitch. “Do you know how fucking creepy that is?”

“I’m so sorry Sadie. I should have told you.”

I reached for her, but she shrank back. I couldn’t blame her. When you said it out loud, my obsession with her sounded weird as hell even though it had seemed harmless at the time.

“It’s true, I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you,” I said quickly, desperate to explain. “I didn’t want to exploit our power differential and be the creepy boss hitting on the help so I stayed away from you.”

“So you watched ‘the help’ on camera?”

I winced at her tone.

“There’s no excuse for what I did, but you need to know, my feelings for you were real. They are real. I swear it,” I told her. “And maybe it was just a fantasy at the beginning, but once I spent time with you, once I got to know you, I had no doubt that I was in love with you.”

Sadie took a step back, then another step, putting some distance between us. “I need to go.”

“What?”

“I need to get out of here. This is super creepy and I knew, I knew I shouldn’t have trusted what was happening here,” she said sadly. “I knew that something wasn’t right. I knew you probably wanted to control me and make me into your perfect doll or something, but once again I didn’t listen to my instincts.”

“I don’t want to change or control you,” I protested. “I love you just the way you are.”

“As long as I don’t walk around in thrift store clothes in public or wear mismatched underwear.”

“That’s not fair, I never criticized your clothing,” I said firmly. “I bought you clothes because you needed them. Because I wanted you to have nice things like you

deserve.”

“Just because you gave me pretty things doesn’t mean it’s not controlling.”

“People give people gifts when they’re in relationships,” I said hotly. “I give Theo shit all the time and he doesn’t get mad about it.”

“Well I guess Theo and I have different standards then.”

She stalked towards the hallway. “I need to go.”

“Where will you go?” I asked. “It’s too late to go to the shelter. At least stay here tonight, you can stay in the guest room if you want. Or let me give you money for a hotel. Theo can book you something nice.”

That was the exact wrong thing to say, judging by the little scream she let out.

“I’m leaving,” she called over her shoulder. “I can’t stay here with you.”

“Please Sadie, don’t go. Let’s just talk.”

She shook her head. “The time for talking is past. You’re going to have to find another little doll to dress up.”

Sadie

Two weeks later...

“Ariel Fernandez left you another message.”

My boss Christine slipped me a folded sheet of paper, giving me a curious look. After

I moved out of Ariel's condo I asked my boss to assign another staff person to Ariel's account. Christine, to her credit, hadn't asked any questions. I knew she had to be curious about what happened though because Ariel had left me multiple messages over the last two weeks. It was only when the messages started coming that I realized we'd never exchanged phone numbers.

Sadie, I need you to meet me at the South Chicago Women's Shelter tonight at six. I have something to show you. Please come and I promise I won't bother you again.

I re-read the message several times, trying to decide what it meant.

"Is she bothering you, Sadie?" Christine asked. "Did Ariel Fernandez do something inappropriate? Because if she did, I will fire her as a client. I don't care if she is one of the richest people in Chicago, no one messes with my girls."

My boss was a very tiny seventy year old woman and I couldn't help but smile at the idea of her taking on Ariel.

"It's fine but thank you," I reassured her. "We just, well to be honest we crossed some boundaries. But then I remembered I'm just a house cleaner and I shouldn't be getting ideas."

"House cleaners have as much right to a happily ever after as anyone," Christine said. "Are you going to see her tonight like she asked?"

I shrugged. "I guess I'll go just to hear what she wants to tell me and then ask her to stop contacting me. Ignoring her messages clearly isn't working."

My boss nodded. "Sounds like a good plan. You just let me know if I need to get involved."

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Christine really was a good boss. The first night when I left Ariel's place I stayed overnight in a cheap hotel, knowing it was much too late to get a spot at the shelter. The next day I did something I never did: I asked for help. At our morning meeting I asked my coworkers to let me know if they knew anyone who was renting out a room or looking for a roommate. It turned out that Christine's sister had a studio apartment over her garage that she rented out on a short-term basis. Best of all, it was in my price range. I'd moved in the same day.

I'd never lived alone before but to my surprise, I really liked it. I'd never felt so self-sufficient and adult before.

I debated with myself most of the day about whether I should meet Ariel. I couldn't for the life of me think of a reason why we would meet at the shelter, unless she thought I was living there again. In the end, curiosity won out. I took the El from my new apartment, then walked the rest of the way from the train station.

I hadn't been to the shelter since that day Ariel found me in her bed, and I was struck by how the familiar walk somehow felt so different. I knew the difference was me. Despite the short time period we'd spent together, being with Ariel had changed me, made me feel more comfortable in my skin. And living on my own, even though it had only been a couple of weeks, had given me more confidence than I'd had in a long time.

When I walked up to the shelter I saw Ariel leaning against a black town car parked by the front door. She was dressed in slim black pants, a white silk sleeveless blouse and sky high blackheels. She seemed oblivious to the long line of women waiting for their chance to get a bed as she walked past them to meet me.

“Sadie. Hey. Thanks for coming.” She studied me carefully. “How have you been?”

Being near her made my heart hurt. I wanted nothing more than to pull her into my arms and kiss her until we were both breathless. But I didn’t want to be the object of her little Pygmalion fantasy. I was smart enough to know that things could never work out between us even if I hadn’t learned about her strange fixation on me these past few years.

“I’m fine.” I strove for a neutral tone. “What did you want to show me?”

“Come on.”

She grabbed my hand and led me to the door of the shelter.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just wait.” She knocked on the door, ignoring the grumbling from the women in line, and a woman who I recognized as the executive director, a middle aged nun called Sister Mary Claire came to the door with a big smile.

“Ms. Fernandez! So nice to see you again. And Sadie, is it?” She turned her attention to me. “I recognize you from when you were a guest.”

I was sure someone told her my name since the ED didn’t usually work with the so-called guests. But I nodded and gave her a small smile. “Hi Sister.”

Sister Mary Claire gestured for us to come inside and my eyes widened as I took in the dramatic changes in the space since my last visit. The walls were freshly painted, the battered floors replaced with new tile, and the old metal folding chairs in the waiting area had been replaced with padded bench seating and little tables. A beautiful mural of the city covered one wall.

“Wow what happened here?” I asked.

Sister Mary Claire smiled. “We’ve done some major remodeling the last month.”

The main shelter space seemed larger, and I realized that they’d knocked out a wall to combine two areas. Instead of rows of old metal bunk beds there were now new cots, each with a locker at the edge of the bed, which was surrounded by thick privacy curtains on all sides.

“Now our guests can be sure that their belongings are safe,” the nun told us, demonstrating the combination lock on one of the lockers. “And with the privacy curtains people can relax more and get some better sleep while they’re here. The whole design is very trauma informed.”

“That’s great,” I said, knowing that the curtains would do a lot to filter out light and noise and give people at least the illusion of having their own space.

“Let me show you the rest.”

I followed Sister Mary Claire and Ariel as we saw the newly remodeled and now handicapped accessible bathrooms and showers, and the new ‘convenience area’ that held shining industrial sized coffee pots, shelves of snacks, and refrigerators filled with bottled water and other drinks.

“We just got the permits from the city for the addition to the building,” Sister Mary Claire said, pointing at the back wall. “We’ll add another shelter room and more restrooms over there. Once it’s completed, we will have doubled our capacity for guests.”

“This all looks great,” Ariel said approvingly. “You did a nice job here in a short amount of time. And I can’t wait to see the new addition.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Ms. Fernandez. We can’t thank you enough for your generous support.” Sister Mary Claire brought her hands together in front of her chest like she was praying and turned her eyes upwards. “You’re a gift from God, I’m sure of it.”

“You did all this?” I asked Ariel.

She nodded. Before I could say anything else, Sister Mary Claire said, “Oh wait, I haven’t shown you the best part.”

She led us outside to the side of the building and pointed up at the wall. I gasped as I read the new sign: Sadie’s Space, A Shelter for Women.

“Do you like it?” Ariel asked hopefully. “It’s all for you.”

Sister Mary Claire beamed. Meanwhile I could feel my blood pressure rising. Ariel tuned into my mood and her smile faded.

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“We won’t keep you, Sister, I know you’re busy. Thank you for showing us around.”

The executive director took the dismissal in stride.

“On behalf of the board of directors let me just thank you again for making Sadie’s Space a reality. We’re eternally grateful for your support.”

Ariel shook her hand and gave a practiced smile. “Of course. If you need anything in the future, just reach out to my assistant, Theo.”

“We will. God bless you Ms. Fernandez. And best of luck to you, Sadie.”

I waited until the nun had gone back inside the building before I spoke.

“You remodeled a homeless shelter for me?” I asked disbelievingly.

It was both the sweetest and the craziest thing I’d ever heard.

“Yes Goldilocks, it’s all for you,” she said earnestly. “I knew that this was a safe haven for you when you were homeless and I wanted to make it even more so for all the women who came after you. When I saw the shelter’s operating budget, I knew I needed to help.”

She studied my face.

“Why do you seem mad?” she asked. “I did something good with my wealth, and I’m making a grand gesture.”

“A grand gesture?” I asked, my voice rising.

“Yes, to prove my love. You know there’s always a grand gesture in the movies.”

“This isn’t a movie,” I said in exasperation. “And it’s not proving your love Ariel, it’s totally performative. It’s you flashing your money around – again – and trying to buy your way into my affections. It doesn’t work that way!”

“How does it work then?” she asked, getting agitated. “I love you Sadie and I want to make a life with you, but you have to let me in. I can’t help it if I have more money than you and want to do nice things for you. And frankly, your... your prejudice and snobbery about money is insulting to me, especially when I use so much of my money to do good things in this world. I’m one of the good billionaires, and more importantly, I’m a good person who loves you just the way you are. All I want in life is for you to love me back the same way.”

When I just stared at her, her expression fell. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but I could swear that her eyes got a little shiny like she was trying not to cry. It almost did me in.

“I said I would leave you alone if you came today and I always keep my word,” she said sadly. “Have a good life Sadie.”

Then she hurried over to her town car and drove away.

Ariel

Walking away from Sadie was like ripping off a limb. My entire body throbbed with pain and rejection. I thought for sure that she’d see the love in my grand gesture and appreciate that I’d made things nicer for the women who came to the shelter after her. I thought she’d appreciate that I was using my money to make things better for those

who had less than me. But I was wrong.

I understood on some level that she had issues with rich people who were assholes. So did I. The sad fact was that most billionaires lived lavishly extravagant lives without a thought about people who were less fortunate. That's why my friends and I had joined a group of socially minded billionaires and pledged to give away most of our money before we died, including donating a minimum of twenty-five percent of our earnings to charity every year. Sadie's Space was in addition to my other giving. Something just for Sadie.

My phone beeped with a text. For a second I hoped it was Sadie, but it was just Theo. I was still a little bit mad at him for fucking things up with Sadie. My assistant had a big mouth, even though I knew he hadn't meant any harm by what he'd said to Sadie. Then again, his teasing wouldn't have mattered if I hadn't kept things from her in the first place.

Theo: How did it go?

Ariel: My gesture was performative. Just another way I throw my money around.

Theo: Damn, that's harsh. The shelter looks great. The place was a shithole before you got involved. It's amazing what you can do with a million bucks.

Ariel: Yeah. I'm heading home for the night to eat my feelings.

Theo: Okay boss, keep your chin up. Let me know if you need anything.

I powered off my phone and headed home, feeling a strong urge to cry. I guess I wasn't surprised when I found Maeve and Grace sitting on my couch when I got back to the condo. No doubt Theo had blabbed to them as soon as he found out that Sadie had rejected me. Again.

“We brought alcohol, chips, and chocolate,” Maeve announced as soon as I entered the room, confirming my suspicions.

“No ice cream?”

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I was just teasing her, given that I still had at least six containers of Sadie's ice cream in the freezer. The thought made me want to cry.

"Please, do you think we're amateurs?" Maeve asked. "We brought vanilla bean from that place you like so we can make Whiskey Floats."

"Great, let me put on my pajamas."

I came back a few minutes later to find my coffee table covered with a variety of snacks, and three large tumblers of icy cold goodness. I grabbed one as I fell onto the couch, sighing happily as I tasted the mixture of Coke, whiskey, and vanilla ice cream.

"Fuck, this is just what I needed."

My friends sat quietly, waiting for me to give them the details. But I needed a distraction first.

"What's up with you two?" I asked. "It feels like I haven't seen you in a while."

"Because you've been moping about fucking things up with Sadie," Maeve reminded me with her usual tact.

I waved at them, gesturing for them to talk. They knew me well enough to know I couldn't spill my guts until the alcohol hit my bloodstream. Grace started first.

"My parents want me to partner with Nicole Lowenthal on a development deal."

For reasons that Maeve and I didn't understand, Grace continued to work part-time at her parents' development company in addition to her work with AGM. Her parents specialized in residential projects, so it wasn't really a conflict of interest since we didn't compete with them. But there was more than enough work at AGM to keep her busy.

My eyes widened. "Your archenemy since grade school Nicole?" I asked. "Why?"

"Our parents have decided that our company partnering with Nicole's is the only way to get the Grant Park College deal," she said. "She was at the joint board meeting with her parents, although I could tell Nicole didn't know about the partnership idea until I did. She was clearly blindsided by our parents' edict, the same as I was."

Grant Park College was an abandoned school campus that the city wanted to turn into a new neighborhood that included everything from affordable housing to condos, along with businesses and community amenities. Every large housing developer in the country was vying for the deal.

"Damn. Are you going to do it?"

Grace leaned back against the cushions and took a huge sip of her drink.

"Nicole and I are meeting next week to discuss it."

"Better bring your body armor," Maeve said drily, no doubt remembering all the battles those two had back when we were in school.

"What about you Maeve?" I asked, taking another gulp of my drink. "What's new?"

"Absolutely nothing. Now quit stalling and tell us everything that happened with Sadie."

My friends had gotten to know Sadie when she was living here, and they seemed to really like her. Grace and Maeve listened intently while I told them about my meeting with Sadie and our tour of the remodeled shelter.

“What are you going to do now?” Maeve asked, shoving some Cheetos into her mouth. It left an orange ring around her lips.

“Nothing,” I said. “I promised her that I’d leave her alone, so I guess I’ll leave her alone and let her live her life.”

“I guess I understand her feeling weird about your money,” Maeve started. “And frankly I’d feel weird about dating someone super poor...”

She held up her hand as Grace and I started to protest.

“Not because I think I’m better than them or something, just that our lifestyles are so different, it feels like the money would always be an issue somehow. It’s like if you dated someone whose native language wasn’t English, there’s always going to be at least some minor misunderstandings.”

“I don’t know that I agree with that logic,” I told my friend. “But I get what you’re trying to say. The thing is, what am I supposed to do? Go live in a shack because I fell in love with someone who comes from a lower socio-economic class than me?”

Grace looked thoughtful. “Do you think this is really about the money?”

“She’s been pretty clear that it is,” I said..

I grabbed a handful of chips.

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“Maybe the money is just an excuse,” Grace continued. “Maybe the real problem is that her ex held all the cards and she’s worried that with you having more money, you could easily block her out and make her be homeless again if you get tired of her, just like her ex did.”

That made a lot of sense.

“Maybe that’s part of it,” I conceded. “But it’s not like we can even talk about it. I just have to accept that it wasn’t meant to be. She doesn’t want me.”

“It isn’t like you to give up,” Grace reminded me.

“I don’t want to be the creep that doesn’t let a woman have her own agency,” I said. “As much as it kills me, I just need to let Sadie go.”

“Maybe she just needs some time,” Grace said.

I shrugged. “Or maybe I’m just destined to be alone. I should probably look into getting some cats.”

Sadie

I’d been home for a couple of hours when I heard a knock on my door. Assuming it was my landlady, I opened without looking to see who it was. To my shock, Theo was standing there, perfectly dressed as usual. He gave me a broad smile.

“What are you doing here, Theo?” I asked warily.

He rolled his eyes and pushed his way into my apartment. “Yes, I’d love to come in, thanks.”

“Did Ariel send you?” I asked as I followed him into the main room.

“God no, she’d cut off my balls and hang them from her rear view mirror if she knew.”

“Ariel doesn’t have a car,” I reminded him. “She uses a car service.”

“She’d buy herself a car just to make it happen,” he said, shivering dramatically.

“What do you want then?” I asked.

He reached into his leather messenger bag and handed me an envelope.

“What is this?” I asked nervously. “Are you serving me a subpoena?”

“Oh for the love of God, of course I’m not serving you a subpoena,” he said in exasperation. “Why am I surrounded by crazy females? Just open the damned thing.”

There was a folded piece of paper as well as a cashier’s check for ten thousand dollars. My eyes met Theo’s as I looked up from the check in confusion.

“Read it,” he prompted.

To my shock, it was a short letter from my ex-girlfriend Jane, apologizing for stealing my money and paying me back ‘with interest’.

“How did this happen?” I asked.

I'd never heard Jane apologize or take responsibility for anything the entire time I'd known her.

"Ariel can be very persuasive," Theo said. "She bought the building your ex lives in and the company where she works, then made it very clear that the bitch was soon going to be homeless and unemployed if she didn't make the right decision."

I stared at the letter and the check, my eyes filling with tears. "This really is a grand gesture," I whispered.

"I just wanted to get this to you," Theo said. "I picked it up today. Ariel doesn't even know it came yet."

"Thanks Theo," I said, stepping forward to give him a quick hug. "I really appreciate it."

He gave me a long look.

"I'm not the one you should be appreciating," he said meaningfully.

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Then he left without another word. I spent the next hour alternating between staring at the check and thinking about Ariel. I knew what I needed to do, I finally realized. I just hoped it wasn't too late.

By the time I got to Ariel's building it was after eleven. I debated calling her but decided to surprise her. Using the code I had from my cleaning days, I headed up the elevator to Ariel's condo and let myself in the front door. It was totally silent inside, making me think I was making a big mistake creeping in like this.

But then I had an idea.

Toeing off my shoes, I walked quietly into Ariel's bedroom. She was sleeping on her back, a sheet pulled up to her chin. I went to the other side of the bed and slipped in beside her, making Ariel stir awake.

"Move over Ariel, I think your bed is just right for me."

Her eyes flew open.

"Goldilocks?" she asked groggily. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," I replied. "It turns out that I like a grand gesture after all."

I knew we needed to talk, but instead we flew together, arms and legs tangling as our mouths connected. I didn't hesitate to slide my tongue inside, dominating Ariel's mouth. When we broke apart I started sliding lower, kissing my way down her neck and over her collarbones.

“Are you really here?” Ariel asked, stifling a gasp as I bit her nipple through the thin fabric of her sleep shirt.

“I’m here,” I said, pausing to look up at her face.

The bedroom lamps were turned off, but the lights of the city reflected into the room through the floor to ceiling windows, making it easy to see each other.

“For good, if that’s okay with you.”

Ariel jackknifed up to sitting and pulled me up against her. I straddled her legs and she dug her fingers into my hair before giving me a long, claiming kiss. By the time we were done, I was rubbing my pelvis against her, working myself up. I’d missed her so much.

“What changed?” Ariel asked as we pulled away to catch our breath.

“I had a visit from Theo...,” I started.

Ariel groaned. “That dude cannot mind his own business.”

I shrugged. “He brought me a check from my ex-girlfriend and... I don’t know, I realized maybe I was being a little hard on you. I mean, you’re going to help a lot of people by remodeling the shelter.”

“You can make it up to me now,” Ariel said roughly. “Start by getting naked.”

“Only if you do too.”

We both took off our clothes in record time, and as soon as Ariel was naked I slid down between her legs and thrust my tongue inside her channel. I could already taste

her arousal on my tongue.

“Oh God,” she moaned.

I licked her up and down a few times before spearing her opening with my tongue. I slid it in and out while I teased her clitoris with my fingers. Ariel rolled her hips, rubbing herself against my face the best she could.

“Wait,” she called out.

I stopped immediately. “What’s wrong?”

She lifted her head to meet my gaze. “I want to get you off too.”

I shifted upwards, laying on one side, and Ariel rolled over to face me. She slid one of her legs between mine and we rotated and adjusted until we could each access each other’s pussies easily. I cupped her mound, and Ariel slid her fingers between my lower lips, and then we teased each other until we were both panting with need.

I was desperate to come, but I wanted to get her there first, so I lowered my head and arched my back enough to catch her nipple. I sucked it into my mouth, then bit down hard enough to make her cry out, and then Ariel was bucking against my hand as she rode the waves of her pleasure.

Somehow she pressed two of her fingers inside my body, and I reached down to circle and press my own clit until I was flying as well.

“Ariel,” I cried as I succumbed to my orgasm. “I love you.”

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“I love you too,” she panted. “So fucking much.”

I wrapped Ariel in my arms, holding her close until her breathing evened out, telling me that she’d fallen asleep. And for the first time since I was a little girl I fell asleep imagining a future that included a happily ever after.

Epilogue – Ariel

One year later...

“Okay, enough working. It’s time for Found Family Dinner.”

I saved my document before Sadie could close my laptop. My little girlfriend got strict with me about not working too much, and I couldn’t say that I minded. For some reason Sadie’s bossy side was hot as hell. Especially when we were in bed.

Plus thanks to her I had a much better work/life balance now.

After a year of living together we’d fallen into a nice rhythm. Sadie decided to use part of the money she got from her ex-girlfriend to enroll in school part-time. She was also working for the AGM Foundation, the charitable organization that Grace, Maeve, and I had started many years ago to handle most of our philanthropic endeavors.

At first Sadie had been hesitant to accept a job with the foundation, but my friends and I convinced her that we needed someone with experience using the services system to help us assess where to direct our resources. She was good at what she did and even better, she loved the work. She was already talking about changing her

major from social work to non-profit management and staying with the foundation.

As for me, Sadie didn't only keep me from working too hard, she also kept me grounded. It wasn't unusual for her to drag me to a food cart somewhere or insist that I visit the grocery store with her. Not that we didn't still enjoy the benefits of things like food delivery and a car service.

After freshening up, I grabbed Sadie's hand and headed downstairs to our reserved room for dinner. The room was more crowded than usual. Maeve, Grace, and I were all in committed relationships now, and a few newbies had joined the group as well.

Sadie slid into a chair at the end of the table, and everyone suddenly got very quiet. She looked around in confusion.

"What?"

Then her mouth dropped open as she realized that I'd dropped onto one knee next to her. I held up a small black velvet ring box.

"Sadie my love, you've made me incredibly happy this past year. The only thing that would make me happier would be if you did me the honor of becoming my wife."

She stared at me for so long that I thought she'd say no.

"Show her the ring," Theo called.

I opened the box, showing her the small emerald surrounded by two tiny diamonds set in a white gold band. Theo had gone with me to pick it out, assuring me that it was perfect for Sadie.

"The ring isn't ostentatious," Sadie finally said, sounding surprised.

I tilted my head in confusion. “What? You don’t like it? We can get something different. Something bigger if you want.”

Damn that Theo. He’d insisted that Sadie would want a small ring.

My girlfriend shook her head, and I noticed that her eyes were filling with tears.

“No, this ring is absolutely perfect. I love it.”

“Told you,” Theo sing songed.

Ignoring him, I focused on Sadie. “What do you say? Will you marry me?”

“Of course I’ll marry you, Ariel.”

Sadie flew out of the chair and dropped down onto the floor next to me, pulling me in for a quick, hard kiss. I slipped the ring on her finger, and we both looked at it for a long moment before we kissed again. Dimly, I heard our friends clapping.

“I can’t wait to marry you,” I said as we got back to our feet.

“I don’t want some giant spectacle of a wedding,” she warned.

“I was thinking we could get married on my boat at sunset, with just our closest friends there.”

Her face lit up. “You really get me.”

I nodded. “And now I’m going to keep you forever, Goldilocks.”

“Yes you are.”
