



Catnip, Claws, and Chaos

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Category: Romance

Description: Emily Baker can't seem to keep a job, a home, or a goldfish alive. Dr. Logan Price is a smoking-hot vet with enough emotional baggage to fill an entire nation.

When Emily crashes her pizza delivery scooter trying to avoid hitting a stray cat, she finds herself with three new problems.

One: She's now the reluctant owner of said cat, who seems determined to destroy what little remains of her life.

Two: Her new job at Price Veterinary Services might finally be her chance at stability, if she can just avoid antagonizing her impossibly handsome but frustratingly cold boss.

Three: Dr. Sexy should have no business making her lady parts tingle, but every time he rolls up his sleeves, Emily forgets how to form basic sentences.

But as their paths tangle in unexpected ways, it's becoming painfully obvious that their story could end with Emily in the emergency room, Logan in therapy, or both of them tangled in bedsheets... depending on which disaster strikes first.

Some love stories come with roses and chocolates. This one comes with fangs, claws, and a pregnancy test fished out of a toilet.

Total Pages (Source): 102

CHAPTER ONE

Emily

The last time I wore orange, I was six years old and convinced I was a tiger. And between you and me, I was kind of badass. Now, at twenty-two, I look like a traffic cone that someone has hit repeatedly, thanks to the neon polyester of my Little Caesars uniform.

The wind slices through my thin uniform. I curse, remembering how I assured my mother that New York would be different. I have a plan, I told her, clutching my degree like a winning lottery ticket. Turns out, having a plan and having a good plan are two very different things.

So here I am, dressed like an orange nightmare, with my butt frozen and my nose redder than Rudolph's.

Though I've looked worse. The chicken costume I wore advertising wings at El Pollo Loco still haunts me. The feathers got everywhere, including places feathers should never, ever be. Like, think about it for a second. Feathers, there. Yeah.

They fired me before my first week ended. No surprise. The manager found me in the parking lot trying to pluck myself. Not my finest moment.

If my mom could see me now, she'd ask when I'm going to get a real job. As if I haven't been asking myself the same question.

Five more blocks. Five more blocks and then I can take this stupid uniform off and maybe, just maybe, treat myself to a hot shower. If my water heater works today. Big if.

With this comforting image, I twist the accelerator and continue down Madison Avenue. The streets lie almost deserted because of the incoming blizzard, but the rich snobs on the Upper East Side still want their pizza. They don't care about delivery people, even in January, for fuck's sake.

Why are they ordering pizza from Little Caesars anyway? I'd never order from a place like this if I could afford an apartment in Manhattan's most expensive areas. I'd have my own chef and eat delicious gourmet dishes every night.

Stupid rich people.

With a sigh, I speed up. Speed limits be damned tonight. Not that this scooter can go very fast. At least I have transportation, even if only during my shift. But if I get a good tip on this last delivery, I'll go home on the subway. Otherwise, I'll walk from the pizza place to my apartment in East Harlem. Five blocks on foot, in January, at night, in New York City.

I'm screwed.

I approach an intersection. The light's red, but the street's empty, and I need to get this damn pizza delivered on time. So I floor it. Naturally, at that precise moment, a car appears out of nowhere. I jerk the handlebars and swerve, avoiding a crash into the door of the expensive SUV and becoming a meatball squished against the window. My heart thuds against my ribs as death by a luxury vehicle passes me by.

The driver honks. Look where you're going, stupid bitch! Or at least, that's what I would have said if I were the driver.

Under other circumstances, I might apologize, but I need that tip. So I turn my back on the black SUV and putt-putt away.

The cold makes my eyes water, and the scooter tires skid on the icy road. My fingers go numb on the handlebars. Then, just as I reach my destination, two small yellow eyes appear out of the darkness right in front of me.

I scream at the shadowy form, but it's useless since the beast doesn't move. Instead, it sits in the middle of the street, licking its paw. I'm going too fast, and when I brake, I lose control and skid.

I lose balance, and the world spins in a blur of orange, white, and black. I hit the ground hard. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs with a painful whoosh. The scooter lands partially on my leg, and pain shoots through my knee. A large rip shows in my uniform pants, with what I suspect is a nasty cut underneath.

My body pulses with pain, but my helmet protected my head. I'm alive, but the cat is nowhere in sight. I can't have another death on my conscience when I'm already haunted by ten goldfish.

Tears prick my eyes. I didn't want to kill him. I'm not an animal-hater! They're the ones who hate me.

Still on the ground, I sob. And then I hear it.

A little meow behind my head. Mocking. Contemptuous. The stupid cat taunts me while I lie here, bruised and bleeding.

I scream like someone possessed. I have to deliver this pizza if I want to keep my job.

But the pizza box has opened, spilling its contents onto the icy New York streets. If I

move fast enough, I can shove it back into the box with no one noticing the bell peppers' coating of asphalt.

Slowly and painfully, I push the scooter off my leg. I can't feel my toes, but that's probably the cold rather than the accident. As I prepare to stand, the idiot cat sits on top of the pizza, licking the cheese off it while its muzzle turns bright red from tomato sauce.

I'm well and truly fucked.

Superman, where are you when I need you?

As if by magic, light suddenly bathes me. A post-Christmas miracle? Through the halo of headlights, a figure approaches. The falling snow catches the light, creating a shimmering curtain around the silhouette. I squint through the glare. Brakes sound, followed by a car door slamming. I blink, and my jaw drops.

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Oh. My. God. It's taken twenty-two years, but He finally heard my prayers.

Superman is here!

Maybe I hit my head without realizing it because standing before me is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. Besides Henry Cavill, of course.

At least six feet tall with broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist. His wool coat can't hide that he's built like a Greek god. Strong jaw, perfect nose, and eyes so green they glow in the darkness. Thick, dark blond hair, slightly tousled, and full lips pressed into a thin line.

"My hero," I whisper as tears fill my eyes and my pulse quickens.

"Poor kitten, are you okay?" His deep voice carries on the winter air, wrapping around me like a caress.

"What?" I don't mind that he's already using a pet name, but isn't it a little soon? We barely know each other.

His large green eyes rest on mine, and he runs a hand through his hair. A small wrinkle appears between his brows. The warm puff of his breath hangs between us like a question mark.

Is he worried about me? My heart races as a dumb smile spreads across my face. But his expression remains undecipherable. Fear? Concern?

I blink, trying to focus. Then the truth dawns. He's not concerned about me. He's pissed off at me. The gentle crease between his brows deepens into a scowl. So, not Superman. My brief fantasy crashes to the pavement alongside my dignity.

"What the hell?" he barks. His voice is deep and masculine, the kind that makes you melt even when the words are harsh. "Be more careful next time!"

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. "Are you talking to me?" I stammer, looking around like an idiot, as if someone else might be there. Of course there's no one. Just him, me, and the stupid cat. The cat that, at this precise instant, rubs itself against my hero's ankles. What the fuck?

The corners of his mouth soften as he glances down at the feline, a flicker of gentleness crossing his features before they harden again. He bends over and gathers the little monster in his big, capable hands.

I've never hated anyone as much as I hate that cat. He strokes it, lifts it, and examines it. The crease in his forehead deepens as he runs his fingers along its back and legs. Taking a deep breath, he holds the cat tighter, turns around, and heads back to his car.

"You can't just leave me here!" I yell after him. Tears threaten to spill again.

He ignores me, opens his SUV, and puts the cat inside. I hear him fiddling around with something. I close my eyes. What's the point of looking? I just lost Superman to a cat.

"Can you get up?" His voice is severe, but when I open my eyes, he's extending his hand toward me. His fingers flex slightly, impatient but not unkind.

I blink as he stands before me again. So now he's worried about my health. I glower at him, cross my arms, and nod.

“Well, come on, then. Hurry!” he barks over his shoulder as he heads toward his car.

My jaw drops. “No!”

He stops mid-step. “No?” He turns back. He wasn’t expecting that answer. His frown deepens. “Would you prefer I call the police?” he challenges.

At the word police, the blood freezes in my veins.

“Um, what?” I stammer.

“I’m sure they’ll have something to say about speeding and running red lights. Oh, and that you hit a poor animal on the street.”

“I didn’t hit him!” I reply indignantly.

He shakes his head and exhales an impatient sigh. “You’re either coming with me, or I’m calling the police.”

For a few minutes, we engage in a Mexican standoff. I’m confronting one of those alpha males from my romance novels. The first to look away loses. I have to be strong.

His eyes hold mine. They’re not just green but flecked with gold around the pupils. He raises an eyebrow in silent challenge. He’s telling me I’ve already lost.

That I sneeze, getting snot on my uniform collar—as if I haven’t humiliated myself enough—only proves even the universe is against me.

I wipe myself clean with my jacket sleeve. He wrinkles his nose in disgust, then looks away, though I catch a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. Is he trying not to

laugh?

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He turns and starts walking away. “Let’s go.”

With a snort, I throw my arms up. “All right,” I say as I pull myself to my feet, staggering for dramatic effect. I’m a fragile fawn entering the big bad wolf’s cave. And yes, I know I’m an idiot. “Wait a minute, I can’t leave the scooter here!”

He stops and turns back. A vein pulses in his neck. I swallow. Maybe I can leave the goddamn scooter here after all. But Mr. Animal Lover passes me without a word, picks up my scooter as if it weighs nothing, and heads for his car.

“Anything else, Your Highness, or do you think you could get into the fucking car now?” he asks, maneuvering the scooter into the back of the SUV.

“Um, I don’t think it will close now,” I babble, pointing at the back door. All I earn is another annoyed look.

“Get. In. The. Car.”

I hasten to the passenger side and climb in. The interior smells of expensive leather and pine air freshener, with an underlying hint of something medicinal. A glance behind shows the cat in a carrier in the back seat. Weird that a guy would drive around with a cat carrier, but I’m too intimidated to ask why.

From the corner of my eye, I see he’s left the back door open. I told him it wouldn’t close! My lips curve into a small smile of triumph, which morphs into terror when Mr. Animal Lover climbs into the driver’s seat.

“Fasten your seat belt,” he barks somewhere between a dog growling and a lion roaring.

I swallow. My palms sweat, and the hairs on my arms rise. I must have hit my head harder than I thought because instead of curling up and crying, something I excel at, I turn toward him, raise my eyebrows, and ask, “Are you always this much of an asshole, or is it just me?”

His jaw goes rigid, but he doesn’t respond. Instead, he turns the key and presses the accelerator. With an irritated snort, I look out my window at the city lights glistening on fresh snow. All this time waiting for Superman, only to discover he’s a complete asshole.

But still, the hottest asshole I’ve ever seen.

CHAPTER TWO

Logan

Another fucking endless day. My blood’s more caffeine than plasma at this point. I love what I do, but Christ, some days I fantasize about disappearing where no one can find me. Especially when each patient arrives with an owner who is more neurotic than the last.

Like Mrs. Haversham with her sick Saint Bernard. Insisted the beast swallowed her diamond earring. Two hours X-raying a healthy one-hundred-and-fifty-pound dog who’d rather hump my leg than sit still. Her wailing about her irreplaceable family heirloom and how she’d just put it down for a second still rings in my ears. After sedating the monster and digging through literal shit for her earring, her cleaning lady found the damn thing under the couch. Then she had the audacity to ask for a refund since no medical care was provided. Because manually examining dog feces is my

hobby. I deserve hazard pay for this crap.

And then she happened. While I was in my car, dreaming of my bed, this small creature with zero fashion sense and a fiercetemper crashed into my plans. Perfect ending to this day from hell.

“Fasten your seat belt,” I mutter, refusing to acknowledge her pout.

“Are you always this much of an asshole, or is it just me?” Venom drips from her words, but I can taste the terror hiding behind her anger. Something about those defensive claws fascinates me in ways I don’t want to examine.

People drain me. With this girl, it’s even worse. She gets under my skin like a splinter I can’t reach.

She buckles up with trembling hands. An abrasion marks her wrist, but it’s minor, superficial. Years of veterinary work make me catalog injuries by reflex, a defense mechanism against feeling too much.

“Are you aware that I could report you?” I dart a look her way. These kids think they own the fucking road. She could have killed that cat or, worse, herself.

Her face blanches in the darkness. Good. Maybe next time, she’ll think twice before doing something so goddamn imprudent.

“Wh-what? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“So you say. I almost ran you over when you blew through that red light!” My voice spikes despite my effort to remain calm. The image of her nearly crashing into me on that stupid scooter haunts me. And then her body sprawled in the street with that frightened cat beside her... How can anyone be so reckless with their own life?

She juts her jaw and balls her fists. Frightened yet defiant. Her pulse hammers visibly at her throat.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Where are we going right now?”

Home, whiskey, blessed unconsciousness, that was the plan. Instead, thanks to her, I’m going back to the fucking clinic. Great.

“I need to examine the cat and make sure it’s okay,” I say, “and then we can decide what to do next.”

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She dips her chin in faint acknowledgment.

Silence reigns, broken only by feline protest from the back seat. The cat is malnourished, filthy, and half frozen, but otherwise intact. The girl is too, apart from minor scrapes. Lucky, both of them.

She turns to the window, and I study her profile against my better judgment. Young. Very young. Too young for me. Not that I'm considering her that way. My body betrays me only because it's been months since I've touched a woman.

I only date older women. No interest in girls barely out of their teens. Yet something about this one both attracts and infuriates me, pulling at parts of myself I thought I buried years ago.

An orange cap with red and yellow lettering perches on her head. The same logo emblazons her jacket, something about a pizza delivery chain. Her brown hair is pulled back, but I can't see her doe eyes beneath her lowered lids. Her hands still tremble from adrenaline's aftermath.

Why am I cataloging her features? She's not my type. Definitely not.

No. I banish those thoughts. Two days without sleep, and here I am, dragged back to the clinic because this twit raced her ridiculous scooter on icy Manhattan streets. This explains why I avoid younger women. They're immature, irresponsible complications I don't fucking need.

My phone buzzes. Maybe Leah or Susie or another friend. Women over forty,

unpretentious, with minimal expectations. Yet my gaze drifts to her again. Those full, slightly parted lips harden me instantly. Her tongue traces her bottom lip, leaving a glistening trail in the streetlight.

My deep breath fails to cool the heat surging through me. What's wrong with me? This night must end. She has to disappear from my life before I do something I'll regret.

Check the cat, check her, and send her back on her scooter. Easy peasy.

"Will it be okay?" Her small voice yanks me back to reality. "The cat, will it be okay?"

I could lie to deepen her guilt, but her desolate expression unravels something in me. What's happening? Since when have I wanted to comfort anyone?

Stubble rasps against my palm as I rub my face. I forgot to shave again. Mrs. Moore would arch that eyebrow tomorrow, channeling my grandmother's disapproval. The image coaxes a smile despite everything.

"It will live," I snap, harsher than necessary. The cat fares better than she does, honestly.

Yep, endless night ahead. And something tells me it's just the beginning of my troubles.

Emily

His car stops in front of what appears to be a veterinary clinic, and my racing pulse slows a fraction. At least I won't end up in some ditch, murdered by the most gorgeous stranger I've ever seen. True crime articles have taught me how these

scenarios end.

The clinic nestles between two taller buildings on this stretch of uptown Manhattan, its pristine storefront glowing against the darkening sky. Gold lettering on the door reads Price Veterinary Services, bathed in tasteful exterior light.

He exits the car, grabs the carrier with the cat inside, and strides toward the entrance without glancing back to check if I'm following. I scramble out and hurry after him, with my sneakers slapping against the wet pavement.

He pats the pocket of his jeans, searching for something, and I seize the moment to appreciate his perfect ass. It fills out those designer jeans in a way that should require a permit after business hours.

Kate's voice echoes from our last girls' night. "You need to stop obsessing over men's butts, Em. It's not 1999 anymore."

Maybe she's right, but old habits die hard.

He pulls out a bunch of keys attached to a small silver carabiner and inserts one into the lock.

"What are you doing?" The stupid question tumbles out before I can stop it. Of course, he's unlocking the door.

He throws me a glance that says: shut up and follow me. I obey, not that I have much choice, and step into a space that belongs in a luxury hotel rather than a vet clinic.

"Holy cow!" The word escapes as I venture farther into the large, white room. Elegant charcoal leather seats circle the space, a massive oak desk holds an expensive-looking computer, and framed photographs of animals line one wall. The

air carries hints of lavender mingled with antiseptic, and weirdly enough, they are pleasant together. “What are we doing here?”

Again, he ignores me and heads for a door behind the desk, opening it to reveal a hallway.

Four cats and three dogs start to hiss, growl, and bark from their enclosures along the corridor as soon as they see me. A particularly fierce tortoiseshell cat swipes through the air toward me.

“I can wait outside.” I step back. “No need for me to be here. In fact, I don’t even know why I came in.”

“Just stay where you are,” he mutters in that low, stern voice. “After I examine this cat, I want to look at your knee.” He nods toward the cut on my leg, still leaking blood, a small dark stain spreading on my pants around the torn fabric. The idea of being examined by a vet in an animal clinic triggers something primal in me.

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That's definitely one for future therapy sessions.

He leads me to a room at the corridor's end. Unlike the warm lighting of the waiting area, this space blazes with clinical brightness along the stainless steel and white cabinets. Containers of medical instruments line glass shelves in neat rows. A dog breed chart hangs beside what appears to be a canine skeletal diagram.

Setting the carrier on the steel examining table, he opens it and peers inside. His entire demeanor transforms as if someone flipped a switch. "Come here," he murmurs. His voice flows calm now, with a gentle lilt I hadn't heard before. Even his face changes. The perpetual scowl dissolves into a smile, softening the hard angles of his jaw.

The transformation steals my breath. This must be the real him, the man beneath the gruff exterior.

The cat ventures cautiously from the carrier. Mr. Animal Lover strokes it. His hand is oversized against the small creature. His fingers work with expertise, scratching behind its ears until the cat's eyes drift closed as it leans into his touch.

He begins his examination, checking its eyes and ears with a small penlight. The cat remains still as he inspects its teeth and gums. He bends its paws back and forth with impossible tenderness for hands so large. After listening to the cat's vitals with a tiny stethoscope, he straightens with a sigh. "All you need, kitten, is something in your belly and a nice hot bath."

He walks away, leaving the little beast on the steel table. It turns toward me with

yellow eyes full of contempt as if to say, See? I win. I can't argue with that.

While the hot vet rummages through cabinets, I press my back against the cool wall, trying to disappear. Ten cages line the room, seven occupied by hostile guests. One dog towers over the others. I know nothing about animals or breeds, but this one could devour me in a single bite if it escaped its cage.

Asshole-Superman returns with a bowl of what smells like cat food. "Here you go, kitty."

I roll my eyes at the tenderness he lavishes on the little beast.

His head turns toward me, and the transformation plays out before me. Eyebrows drawing together. Jaw setting. Nostrils flaring. Pupils dilating. In an instant, tender-animal-lover vanishes behind stern-imposing-man.

"So," he says as his gaze slides down my body. "What should we do now?"

"Huh?" My eyebrows lift. "What do you mean?" My voice pitches higher than usual.

"Were you going the speed limit?" Challenge radiates from every syllable.

Heat rushes to my cheeks. "Of course," I lie, guilt practically releasing from my skin.

For the first time, the corner of his mouth quivers. Almost a smile. He snorts. Despite the cat's protest, he removes the food bowl and places it in the carrier, then deposits the cat after it. After setting the cat and the carrier on a shelf, he rummages through cabinets again, producing a bottle of red liquid and a roll of paper like those in doctors' offices. He sprays the table, and a sharp disinfectant scent soon fills the air. He then wipes it down and unrolls a sheet of paper over the surface.

“Take off your pants.”

“Wait, what?” My jaw drops. Did I hear correctly?

“I can’t treat your knee otherwise,” he explains, as if requesting casual nudity is normal. His tone remains clinical and detached. “Listen, I don’t have all night,” he adds, glancing at the ornate wall clock. Already past nine.

I stare into his eyes while heat pools between my legs. He’s like a GQ model, one of those rugged, lumberjack types with his plaid shirt and unruly hair. Just enough beard shadow to accent that strong jawline. Oh, Superman, what have I gotten myself into?

I inhale deeply and fumble with my jeans’ buttons. Something about this man compels obedience. More than that, I want to submit, maybe drop to hands and knees and let him spank me for being bad.

I shake my head, banishing those images straight from low-budget porn. It’s been eight months since my last relationship, or better yet since Jake decided to find himself in Costa Rica with a yoga instructor named Amber.

Finally unfastening my pants, I slide them down my thighs. While hopping on one leg to pull them from my ankles, I lose balance, grab the exam table’s edge, and end up bent over it, making the paper crinkle underneath me. Mortification washes over me as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Everything all right?” His voice comes hoarser, deeper than before.

I nod without opening my eyes, lacking the courage to meet his gaze. Another deep breath. What a sight I must be with my stupid Little Caesars cap and orange jacket still on while my pants pool around my ankles, bent over an examining table in a vet’s office.

I stand and bend again to remove my pants when the monster dog erupts in barks. A small scream escapes me as I jump back, forgetting my ankles are still trapped in denim. Superman lunges for my hand but misses by milliseconds.

My ass hits the floor with a painful thud. Cold linoleum presses against my bare thighs, and I've just given Asshole-Superman a complimentary view of my plain cotton underwear.

Slowly, I raise my gaze to his face. He's got a hand over his mouth, stifling a burst of laughter. Those gorgeous green eyes crinkle at the corners, and his shoulders shake.

"Are you laughing at me?" Indignation floods my voice as I cross my arms and glare.

"No," he replies, amusement coloring each word. "Absolutely not." A dimple appears on his left cheek that I didn't notice before.

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“Jerk,” I huff, struggling to stand.

“Hold on, let me help you.” He grasps my elbow and lifts me as if I weigh nothing.

“Dylan’s really a good dog. You don’t need to fear him.”

My gaze darts involuntarily to the cage containing the giant beast. The good dog watches me like a potential meal.

“I’m sure you’re right,” I mumble without conviction.

“Here,” he says, kneeling before me.

A small moan builds in my throat as his hands brush my bare calves, sliding jeans from first one ankle, then the other. All I can focus on is the proximity of his mouth to my center. One small move, just a slight raising of his head, and he can slide my underwear aside, press his tongue against my?—

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Sorry, what?” I blink my eyes open, realizing I’ve been biting my lower lip hard enough to taste blood. No, I’m not all right. I’m lost in fantasy about the world’s biggest asshole right in his veterinary office.

Afraid of what might emerge if I speak, I nod.

One eyebrow rises as he studies me. Then he stands, holding my pants, and folds them over a nearby chair. “Get on the table.”

“What?” My gaze bounces between his face and the metal table. Surely he’s joking.

“Please?” he adds, voice dropping a register. “Can you please get on the table so I can check you?”

“But-but I’m not an animal!” My voice emerges as a squeak.

Taking a deep breath, I turn toward the exam table and climb up. Cold metal presses against my thighs despite the paper. Nervousness sets my legs swinging wildly as he approaches, like a child at a doctor’s appointment.

He retrieves a small tray of instruments from the cabinet and sets it beside me. Metal tools gleam under the harsh lights, looking more menacing than they probably are. He pulls on latex gloves with a snap that makes me jump.

Why am I doing this? Nobody’s forcing me. For all I know, he does plan to kill me. Maybe he’ll tie me to this metal surface, gag me, and dismember me. I wish I could speak to my parents and little brother one last time before heading straight to hell, where goldfish will nibble my flesh for eternity.

I swear, I didn’t want to kill them. It’s not my fault those dumb goldfish kept floating to the surface with their creepy little mouths open.

They chose to end their miserable, way-too-brief lives when they discovered their grave error: ending up in a bowl on a shelf above the dining room table in the house where I lived. Tiny red Samurai soldiers committing seppuku, except with food instead of swords.

Poetic, until that poetry got flushed down the toilet. The life of a goldfish is miserable. After the fish’s tenth suicide attempt, my parents gave up and told my younger brother that his pet had died.

My brother probably threw a thank-God-she's-gone party when I finally left for college. Now, he has a whole aquarium full of multicolored fish. Oddly enough, none have ended up in the toilet.

My lips begin to tremble. I don't want to die like all of those goldfish.

"Please, I didn't want to kill it!"

CHAPTER THREE

Logan

I've never met a more infuriating contradiction than her. By tomorrow, my forehead will be permanently etched with lines from trying to decrypt what the hell she's saying. She has like five different personalities crammed into one small frame. And it's fascinating and maddening at the same time.

I grab disinfectant and gauze from the cabinet, desperate for something to focus on. A few scratches mark her thigh, but nothing serious. The knee wound looks worse than it is. Lucky girl. Or maybe just stubborn enough to defy death.

Between her legs, my body aligns with hers too perfectly. What if my hands drifted up those thighs to the edge of her panties?

I shake this thought away and start dabbing disinfectant on her upper thigh. She flinches, and her lips quiver.

"I didn't want to kill it!" Her enormous doe eyes snap open, locking onto mine.

"What?"

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Her mouth opens halfway, then she closes it with a head shake. “Forget it,” she mumbles. “You’re not going to cut me into little pieces, right?”

A genuine laugh rips from me. This girl defies all logic. “If I planned to hurt you, wouldn’t I have done it already?”

“Right.” She inhales. “Hearing you say it helps, though.” Her face transforms with a genuine smile, brightening those eyes. My arms ache to pull her close, to crush her against me until neither of us can breathe.

“You’re strange,” I mutter, voice rough as I fight against the warmth spreading through me.

“Thanks... I think,” she whispers.

Silence falls between us while I treat her cuts. Only two need bandaging. The rest barely skimmed the surface. Her perfect skin should heal unmarred. Such beautiful legs deserve no scars.

“What’s your name?” she asks after an eternity.

“Logan,” I answer without meeting her gaze, afraid she’ll see too much.

“Nice to meet you, Logan.” I can hear the smile in her voice without looking up.

“Sure—”

“Emily,” she interjects.

“Emily,” I repeat. The name fits her. “Any other injuries needing treatment?”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m good. Thanks, Logan.”

My name on her lips sends blood rushing south, and I feel like a goddamn teenager. Shit. I move away abruptly, pretending to check on the cat, and it’s a pathetic excuse to create distance.

The cat. Fuck. I haven’t even addressed the main issue yet.

“So,” I say, trying to sound professional rather than affected, “about the cat.”

Emily’s expression falls like a stone. “Right. The cat.”

I move to the carrier and peer inside. The small black feline shrinks back, ears flattened. Street cats rarely trust easily. They learn early that the world just wants to hurt them.

“She’s malnourished but otherwise seems fine,” I explain, keeping my voice clinical. “Probably abandoned. Black cats often face the worst odds.”

“That’s horrible, but—” Emily shifts uncomfortably.

My phone vibrates for the third time this hour. I ignore it, recognizing that particular brand of harassment anywhere.

“Is everything okay?” Emily’s soft voice cuts through my thoughts.

“Fine,” I snap, harsher than intended.

The phone vibrates again, insistent, demanding. Just like him. My fist crushes the pen.

Emily watches me. “Your phone’s going crazy.”

“Nothing important.” The clipboard clatters against metal as I set it down too forcefully.

Another vibration. A text this time.

Need money. Emergency. You owe me.

I shove it back into my pocket. Ten years, yet nothing has changed. Always an emergency. Always my responsibility. Always my fault.

“Persistent caller,” Emily observes, curiosity brightening her eyes.

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“Someone who doesn’t understand boundaries.” I pass my fingers through my hair.

“Ex-girlfriend?” She blushes. “Sorry, none of my business.”

“No.” Something compels me to continue. “Family. The kind that only calls when they want something.”

Understanding softens her expression. “Ah. I’ve got one too. My cousin only remembers I exist when she needs a ride to the airport.”

I nod, grateful for her misinterpretation. Better she thinks it’s some distant relative than the man who was supposed to protect, raise, and love me. The man who stared at his eight-year-old son and hissed, “She’d still be here if it weren’t for you.”

The phone buzzes again. This time, I pull it out and power it off. Let him drown in his desperation for once.

“Won’t they worry?” Emily asks.

Bitterness escapes in a laugh. “He doesn’t worry about anyone but himself.”

My revelation surprises me. Something about this girl breaks my carefully constructed walls, brick by brick.

Emily nods, and her eyes linger on me, curious and somehow knowing, as if glimpsing something beneath my surface I thought well-hidden.

I turn away, uncomfortable with being seen so clearly.

She slides off the table, steadier now, and pulls on her pants. Her gaze weighs on me. “So I guess I’ll be on my way,” she says tentatively.

I finally allow myself to look at her. She isn’t my type at all. Too young. Small breasts. Narrow hips. Auburn hair, not that I care about that, but still. No makeup, unlike the women I date, who wear more cosmetics than a drag queen. She embodies the classic girl next door, dreaming of suburban houses, picket fences, devoted husbands, and a houseful of children.

Nope, not my type at all.

Serious relationships aren’t for me. I’m not that man. I can’t be that man.

Yet I hear myself say, “You can’t go.”

What the hell am I doing?

“No?” Those large, dark eyes fix on me as she shifts her weight.

“No,” I repeat firmly. “I need your information and the cat’s name. She needs a chip, and I’ll need insurance details for billing.”

Color drains from her cheeks. “It’s not my cat. I shouldn’t pay for its treatment. It’s not mine.” Her chest rises and falls rapidly. She puffs her cheeks and exhales. “I can’t—” Her stammering fades to inaudible.

“Pardon? What did you say?”

“I-I can’t pay,” she whispers. “And I-I c-can’t take the c-c-cat home. It’ll meet with

the s-same fate as the goldfish!”

Words fail me. What the fuck is she talking about?

“I don’t have insurance,” she continues. “I don’t have money for that stupid cat, and I don’t want to take her home!” Her voice rises as tears stream down her face. “I can’t.”

She seems smaller. Frightened. Lost.

Guilt pricks at me for pushing her. “It’s okay. Don’t worry?—”

She cuts me off. “No! It’s not okay! I couldn’t deliver my last pizza, I wrecked my scooter, and I don’t think begging my boss not to fire me will work!”

Without thought, I blurt, “You could work here.”

Regret follows instantly. The words escaped before I could stop them. I know nothing about this girl. She could be a psychopath for all I know.

“Here?” Her eyes widen to impossible proportions as she scans the room, taking in the animals in their cages. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she whispers conspiratorially.

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Her answer blindsides me and, frankly, pisses me off. I offered her a job, and she refused. Fucking unbelievable. “Fine, your choice. That doesn’t change the fact that I need your information. And this cat is going home with you.”

“Please, I really can’t take her.”

“Why not?”

“I’m terrible with animals. They hate me,” she insists, panic edging into her voice. “Plus, my landlord would flip.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Most buildings in Manhattan allow pets.”

“Mine doesn’t,” she responds too quickly. “And even if he did, I can’t afford a cat. I can barely feed myself.”

I study her then, really study her. The worn uniform, the scuffed shoes, and the shadows under her eyes speak of more than just tonight’s accident. She’s struggling. That much is obvious.

And I’m a jerk, I know it.

“Let me check something.” I sigh and walk to my office. I pull up the shelter contact list on my computer.

Three calls later, my suspicions are confirmed.

“The shelters are all at capacity,” I announce, returning to the exam room. “Two have euthanasia policies for unadoptable animals.”

That’s not an exaggeration. Black cats, especially adults with attitude problems, are among the least adoptable. This one would likely never make it out alive. Just another throwaway life.

Emily’s face pales. “What about... I don’t know... Can’t you keep her here?”

I gesture around the clinic. “We’re not equipped for long-term housing.”

“What about your home?” she tries, desperation creeping in.

“I already have Bob, my dog, who doesn’t play well with others.” That’s not entirely true. Bob is quite gentle, but it’s like I can’t help myself. Maybe I only need a reason to see her again. Fuck!

Emily chews her lower lip, and I find myself staring at her mouth longer than appropriate. She’s backed into a corner, and we both know it.

“Look,” I say, softening my tone. “I’ll help. I can provide supplies and basic care. Just take her until we find something better.”

“I don’t even know how to take care of a cat,” she protests, but her resolve is weakening like ice in spring.

“Feed her, give her water. That’s it.” I don’t mention the constant vigilance, the way pets embed themselves in your life until you can’t imagine existence without them.

She looks at the carrier again, where two yellow eyes stare back. “I don’t think she likes me.”

“She doesn’t like anyone yet,” I counter. “She’s scared.”

Emily sighs deeply, her shoulders slumping in resignation. “Fine. Just until you find somewhere else for her.”

Relief floods through me, though I mask it. “I’ll need your contact information. For the cat’s records.”

“My financial situation is...complicated right now. I can’t pay for all this.”

“We’ll figure something out,” I hear myself saying, surprising us both.

She looks up, eyes wide. “Really?”

“Really.” I pause. “Let me get you some supplies.”

I gather premium cat food, and basic supplies from our retail section. While I assemble everything, my mind races with self-accusation. This is unlike me. I don’t get involved. I maintain professional distance like religion. Yet something about Emily’s vulnerability mixed with her bizarre courage hooks into me. Or it’s just my body responding to her physical presence. Either way, I’m crossing lines I established years ago.

When I return, she’s tentatively poking a finger through the carrier grate. The cat hasn’t bitten it off, which seems promising.

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“Here.” I hand her the supplies. “This should get you started.”

“I can’t take all this,” she protests. “I can’t pay?—”

I cut her off. “Consider it a rescue donation. The clinic does charity cases from time to time.”

Her eyebrows rise. “And this qualifies because...?”

“Because I said so.” My tone leaves no room for argument. “Congratulations. You’re the new mom of a lovely kitten.”

I turn away as she collapses into a chair. She’ll manage. I stride down the corridor to my private office, shaking my head. The most maddening woman I’ve ever encountered. The door slams behind me as I enter. I need a minute to calm down and command my rebellious body to cool off. Never has a woman affected me this way. It must be the near-accident, the adrenaline. I almost hit her, after all. Normal to have chaotic emotions. Once she’s gone, everything will return to normal.

Adrenaline. That explains it. Today stressed me beyond measure, and tonight pushed me even further. Tomorrow, it will be water under the bridge. Tomorrow, both the kitten’s and Emily’s faces will fade from memory. I grab her paperwork with renewed resolve.

Emily will be forgotten tomorrow, but I love my work as a vet, so perhaps I’ll request she return for a kitten follow-up, just for the animal’s welfare. Professional.

Not.

Even the walls in my office know I'm full of shit.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emily

I'm about to puke. How the fuck did I end up adopting a cat? I'm still sitting on the chair in his exam room, the sharp antiseptic smell making my stomach clench. I don't have the strength to get up.

Logan sets some papers on it and pulls a pen out of his pocket. "Name?" Before I can open my mouth to respond, he shakes his head, his dark blond hair falling across his forehead. "Last name?"

I decide to remain silent. If I don't say anything and close my eyes, maybe all this will disappear. It's nothing more than a bad dream.

"Emily, I need you to give me your information."

I sigh and put my hand in my pocket to pull out my license, which I give him. The infernal little beast is staring at me from inside her cage with unblinking yellow eyes that follow my every movement, calculating and cold.

"I don't think it's a good idea," I murmur, my voice barely audible over the hum of the clinic's ventilation system. Not just because the cat so obviously hates me, but also because my landlord continues to breathe down my neck about the rent I'm already two weeks late on. He's waiting for the right moment to kick me out. I don't think he'll be too pleased when he finds out I brought a stray cat home with me.

And to think I was feeling almost optimistic about my future only a few hours ago. The pizza delivery tips had been decent for once, and I calculated that another good night might actually put me within reach of paying the water bill.

“You’re twenty-two,” he says after taking my license and looking at it. It’s not a question, yet he looks at me as if he wants confirmation. A flicker of surprise in his eyes makes me wonder what he’s thinking.

“Yep.” I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant despite the way my heart speeds up under his scrutiny. “How old are you?” The question slips out before I can stop it, curiosity overriding my brain-to-mouth filter.

Logan fixes his green eyes on me, his expression indecipherable but somehow softening around the edges. His lips part as if he’s about to answer, then press together in a thin line. A few moments pass, and the silence is broken only by the distant sound of barking from another room. When I think he’s about to answer me, he turns his gaze back to the forms.

“Thirty,” he finally murmurs so quietly I almost miss it. Then more firmly, “I’m thirty.” He clears his throat and returns to his paperwork without further elaboration, a slight flush creeping up his neck.

Silence fills the room as he continues to write. Meanwhile, the cat stares at me as if she’s trying to tell me she will put me through hell. You’ll never get rid of me. I’ll destroy everything you own, starting with those pathetic shoes.

“You can’t take the cat on your scooter.”

I blink, confused. It takes me a few seconds to understand what he’s saying. When I do, the only answer I can find to give him is a snort. Classy.

I'm stuck with that infernal little beast, like it or not. Though now that I think about it, I'm not even sure how I would have managed to balance a cat carrier on my scooter anyway, especially with the front wheel wobbling after the accident. "Fine. I'll take the subway."

"I'll take you," he says, gathering the papers on the table. "These are yours." He hands me two sheets. One has my information and his report on the condition of the little hell-spawn, and the other has numbers on it. "Those are my phone numbers and the one for the clinic," he explains, pulling out what appears to be cat food and something else I can't identify—medications, maybe, or supplements. "This will last you for a couple of days." He puts everything into a paper bag. "I'll need you to come back tomorrow for a follow-up appointment."

"I don't need it. I'm fine, thank you," I mutter, assuming he's talking about my scrapes and bruises.

He raises an eyebrow, and I see a hint of amusement. "For the cat. I meant, bring the cat back so I can look at her."

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My face flushes with embarrassment.

“Maybe you should also give her a name.”

“The cat?” I hit my forehead with my palm. I’m officially the stupidest person in all of New York City. “Of course, you were talking about the cat.” I spring to my feet, ignoring the twinge of pain in my knee. “I’ve got it!” I exclaim, a sudden burst of inspiration hitting me.

“What?” Logan looks genuinely curious, his professional mask slipping to reveal a flicker of interest.

I throw a sideways glance at the little black nose of the beast in the cage. So many names spring to mind, most of which include words not suited to a lady. Or at least, based on how Logan keeps referring to it, I guess it’s a female. So I settle on something more proper. “Demon,” I tell him, meeting his eyes with a defiant chin lift. “I’m calling her Demon.”

“What kind of name is Demon?” he asks. Still, his voice has a hint of amusement.

I shrug, warming to my theme. “She’s my cat, right? I can call her whatever I want. Besides, have you looked at her? Black as night with those unnerving yellow eyes? She looks like a demonic creature.” I peer into the carrier again, and for a moment, I swear the cat’s expression changes from malevolence to something almost... calculating. “Plus, she found me when I was at my lowest. At a crossroads! If that’s not a demonic summoning, I don’t know what is.”

“You’re crazy,” Logan says, but his words have no heat. In fact, if I didn’t know better, I’d say there’s a note of admiration in his voice.

“I’ve heard worse.” I walk up to him, close enough to catch a whiff of his aftershave. I take the bag from his hand, our fingers brushing, and stoop down to pick up the carrier with the little beast inside. The cat, Demon, hisses as if confirming her new name is appropriate.

At the door, I say, “So are we going or not?” and walk out without waiting for him to respond. He’s really fucked me, and not in the way I would have preferred. I have every right to be pissed off, even if a small part of me is stupidly grateful for his help.

Outside the clinic, I head for his SUV. My poor scooter is still in the back, leaning against the open back gate. I just hope it doesn’t fall out while we’re driving. I also hope that when I return it tomorrow to Tom, the manager of Little Caesars, I’ll still have a job.

My grandma always said you should never hope. Her motto was he who lives on hope dies desperate. I’ll admit she was a strange woman, but I’m beginning to think she wasn’t that off the mark. I mean, I set out tonight hoping I could even make enough to grab takeout instead of another frozen dinner. Instead, I’m standing outside a vet clinic with a diabolical cat that hates me and the world’s biggest asshole about to take me home.

Yeah, maybe Grandma was right after all.

I climb out of the SUV, slamming the door behind me. Logan doesn’t get out.

As far as I’m concerned, I would be perfectly happy never to speak to him again, though I’m almost certain—don’t ask me why—that won’t be possible.

I walk toward my building when a door opens and closes behind me.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

God, how I’m starting to hate that voice.

“What?” I huff, turning around and throwing my arms into the air.

He’s a few yards behind me with the usual expression on his face, one corner of his mouth slightly raised.

With a long sigh, I cross my arms over my chest. “Now what?”

His eyes drop from my face. Following his gaze downward, I spot the carrier in his hand.

“Shit,” I grumble, striding toward him. Grabbing it, I grunt something vaguely resembling a “Thank you,” turn around, and head for the lobby door of my apartment building. He doesn’t follow me inside. Thank God for small mercies.

I head straight for the elevator, but my gaze lands on a hastily scrawled note taped to the elevator doors. Out of Service.

“Oh, come on! Fucking end of a fuck-tastic night!”

An elderly man collecting his mail glances over with a disapproving frown. My apologetic smile morphs into a grimace. With a resigned sigh, I trudge toward the stairwell. Fourth floor. Only four flights. It could be worse.

By the time I reach my floor, my thighs burn, and I gasp for breath. The cat, meanwhile, has gone berserk inside the carrier, thrashing and catapulting herself from

one side to the other with surprising force.

My trembling fingers fish the keys from my pocket. As soon as I find it, I slide it into the lock, giving it the special wiggle-and-shove required to make the ancient mechanism cooperate.

The door swings open with a familiar creak, and I step inside, breathing a bone-deep sigh of relief once I'm finally within the sanctuary of my apartment. It's not much, just a cramped two-bedroom with peeling wallpaper and radiators that clank as though they're possessed, but it's mine. Or at least it's mine until the landlord makes good on his threats to evict me for being late with the rent.

After closing the door and engaging all three locks—this is still New York, after all—I shrug off my jacket and hang it on the wobbly coat rack by the door. The worn denim slides from my shoulders, taking with it some of the tension from my encounter with Logan.

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“Welcome to your new palace, Demon,” I mutter, setting the carrier down. The cat responds with a low, threatening growl.

I switch on the single lamp illuminating my living room, casting a warm glow over the space I worked so hard to make my own. It isn't much, but every piece means something. I rescued the threadbare couch from a sidewalk sale and covered it with a colorful throw my mother crocheted. I found the coffee table at a thrift store and refinished it myself. Now, it holds a small collection of paperbacks and my precious framed photo of my family.

Along the windowsill sit my proudest possessions, three small potted plants I've kept alive for six months. A miracle, considering my track record with living things.

My gaze drifts to the sideboard against the wall where my grandmother's fine china plates sit. Mom reluctantly entrusted them to me after extracting numerous promises about their care.

If anything happens to those plates, Emily Eleanor Baker, I swear to God...

Her voice still rings in my head. I arranged the plates on display, a reminder that I can be trusted with precious things and that I'm building a real adult life here in the city despite my string of ridiculous jobs.

My attention catches on the small porcelain cat figurine next to the plates. It was a gift from Kate when I moved in. Every apartment needs a cat, she said. Little did she know.

I bend down and extend a tentative hand toward the little carrier door. My fingers shake as I fiddle with the latch. “Please don’t bite me,” I whisper. “I’ve had enough trauma for one day.”

The cat has gone eerily quiet. Her yellow eyes gleam in the darkness of the carrier. Perhaps she’s scared and confused, thrust into a strange environment with a human who has no idea what she’s doing.

I hurriedly get to my feet, giving her space to come out on her own terms. The carrier door swings open, but she remains inside, watching me from her plastic fortress.

After a while, Demon pokes her head out, nose twitching as she processes this new domain. A strange flutter of pride rises in my chest as she surveys my tiny home.

“So, um, this is it.” I clear my throat. “Not much, but it’s home. The bathroom’s through there, kitchen’s basically that corner, and my bedroom’s behind that door. Mi casa es su casa and all that. Just... please don’t break anything?”

The cat steps fully out of the carrier, and I swallow, suddenly aware of how alone I am with this miniature predator. Her yellow eyes narrow as she stares up at me, sizing me up like a walking buffet.

“I know what you’re thinking.” I back up. “But I’m too stringy to eat. Plus, I’m pretty sure humans give cats indigestion. We’re basically junk food for your species.”

As if understanding my babbling, she licks her lips with deliberate slowness. Great, now I’m negotiating with a cat about whether or not I’d make a tasty meal. This is what my life has come to.

Wait—dinner! Right. I should feed her before she decides to sample the human cuisine.

I reach for one of the cans of cat food Logan gave me and look at the label. It features a smiling cartoon cat that looks nothing like the little devil I have.

I hunt through the cabinets in the kitchen, searching for a proper bowl. After exhausting all options, I'm forced to use one of the plates from my grandmother's fine china set. Mom would disinherit me if she could see me now, using Grandma's hand-painted porcelain to serve smelly cat food to a stray. A hysterical giggle bubbles up from my chest.

I plop the brownish, gelatinous mass onto the delicate floral-patterned plate. The pungent fishy aroma fills the small kitchen. Disgusting.

After setting the dish down in a corner, I take a step back and wait.

She doesn't approach.

Instead, she gives me a look of pure disdain, as if I offered her cafeteria food when she expected a five-course meal.

I shrug. "Suit yourself, Your Highness. I guess you'll eat when you're hungry."

Ignoring her royal attitude, I walk to the bathroom. The day's events cling to my skin like a film only hot water can wash away.

Closing the door behind me, I turn on the shower. The pipes groan in protest before releasing a stream that gradually transitions from ice-cold to barely warm.

As I pull my T-shirt over my head, Logan's image intrudes. Those penetrating green eyes, the strong line of his jaw, the way his dark blond hair falls across his forehead when he concentrates...

How would it feel if he were undressing me instead?

I shake my head. What the hell? The man is an arrogant, insufferable jerk who's done nothing but complicate my already complicated life.

And yet...

I step into the shower, letting the warm water cascade over my shoulders and down my back. My nipples harden under the spray, and I bite my lower lip to suppress a moan. One hand braces against the tiled wall for support while the other slides down my stomach. I teeter on the precipice of release when?—

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Meow!

“What the fuck?” I gasp, eyes flying open.

I jump out of the shower, water streaming down my naked body. My foot slips on the wet tile, and I grab the towel rack to steady myself.

As I fling the door open and take in the scene beyond, a cry of dismay tears from my throat.

The cat gazes at me from her perch atop the sideboard, yellow eyes filled with smug satisfaction. Around her, chaos reigns. Picture frames and knickknacks lie in pieces on the floor. The sofa upholstery gapes in several places, stuffing protruding from the wounds like white intestines. And my grandmother’s china plates? Shattered on the floor, the food smeared across the linoleum.

Fury surges through me. I stride toward the cat, water still dripping from my hair and body.

“You little demon!” I seethe, reaching out to grab her.

Before my fingers can close around her, she bares her fangs in a terrifying grimace, and her paw shoots out with lightning speed. Her claws rip into the tender flesh of my forearm.

“Ow! Shit!” I yelp, yanking back my hand.

Not satisfied with merely drawing first blood, the feline fury hurls herself at me. Hissing and growling, she attaches herself to my leg, digging her claws into my thigh.

I scream, and with desperate hands, I pry the creature off me, collecting several more scratches in the process. Once free of her clutches, I do what any rational person would do in this situation. I run for my life.

Taking refuge in my bedroom, I slam the door shut and turn the lock.

“Fucking hell!” I gasp, pressing a hand to my mouth.

I slide down to the floor with my back against the door. My chest heaves with each breath, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

After drying off with yesterday’s towel, I slip into my pajamas, wincing as the fabric brushes against my various cat-inflicted wounds. I grab a tissue from the box on my nightstand and hold it against my clawed arm to stanch the blood.

Then, defeated, I sink onto my mattress. The springs creak beneath my weight, a familiar sound that offers a small comfort in my life’s chaos.

“Just a nightmare,” I whisper, willing sleep to come.

Oh, Superman, make it not be true. Please, just let this all be some weird dream.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emily

Against all odds, I must have drifted off because the next thing I know, a persistent scratching sound is dragging me back to consciousness.

I feel for my cell phone on the bedside table, but my fingers encounter only dust bunnies and an empty water glass.

“Shit!” I mutter, suddenly more alert. I must have left my phone in the other room last night, and that room is currently under hostile occupation.

The scratching sound continues unabated, a rhythmic scritch-scratch-scratch that sets my teeth on edge. Every few seconds, it’s interrupted by a plaintive meow that somehow sounds both demanding and pathetic.

I pull the pillow over my head and press it down, trying to block out the noise.

The meowing becomes more persistent, rising in both volume and pitch.

With a sound halfway between a groan and a battle cry, I throw off the covers. The architect of my misery awaits beyond the door. I approach it cautiously, aware that one wrong move could trigger a catastrophe. The knob turns under my hand, and I swing the door open.

“Was destroying my living room not enough for you?” I ask, meeting those unblinking yellow eyes.

She’s sitting on the floor at my feet, looking up at me with the most vulnerable expression I’ve ever seen on a nonhuman face. Her ears are slightly flattened, and her tail is curled around her paws. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear there’s an apology in those creepy eyes.

“You don’t fool me,” I say, hardening my heart against her Oscar-worthy performance. I step over her and head for the kitchen, aware of her following close on my heels.

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I see my cell phone sitting on one of the shelves next to the bag containing the cat stuff Logan gave me.

Reaching for it, I notice something that makes me frown. “Uh-oh.”

There’s another bag inside the one Logan gave me last night: kitty litter.

My heart sinks. “Shit.”

I don’t even want to think about where she may have peed during the night. Visions of yellow stains on my sofa and puddles in my shoes flash through my mind.

I open another can of cat food and put it on the floor. “If you want to eat, you can do it from the can. Consider yourself lucky I’m feeding you after the stunt you pulled last night.”

She looks at the can, then at me, then back at the can. Her whiskers twitch, and for a moment, I think she might turn up her nose and leave. But hunger wins out over pride because she approaches the can and begins to eat.

I unlock my cell and see the screen light up with notifications. Ten missed calls from Tom. My boss, the manager of Little Caesars, has called me at least ten times and left ten voicemails. The most urgent thing on my plate right now is to go to him and beg him not to fire me.

“At least one of us is enjoying breakfast,” I mutter, heading for my bedroom.

Pulling on my clothes, I try to think of the best words to use with Tom when I see him. What excuse could cover missing a delivery, wrecking a company scooter, and disappearing without a word?

The truth is out of the question.

Of course, I haven't done laundry in what feels like weeks, and the only clean outfit I can find is a pair of jeans with a mysterious stain on the thigh and one of those awful Christmas sweaters that no one wears willingly. It was a gift from my mom, featuring a smiling Santa with a pom-pom on his hat that lights up if you press it. Perfect professional attire for begging to keep my job.

With a sigh of resignation, I head for the door and grab my Little Caesars uniform jacket from the hall closet. It might smell of pepperoni and disappointment, but at least it'll cover up Santa's flashing face.

I cast a quick look around for the cat but don't see her. Given her previous behavior, I have no doubt she'll find at least twenty new ways to make my life even more hellish by the time I get back.

Closing and locking the door behind me, I step out onto the landing, uttering a silent prayer that I won't run into my landlord. The last thing I need is another lecture about being late with the rent.

The stairwell is mercifully empty, and I manage to make it out of the building without anyone yelling at me or threatening to throw me and my meager possessions onto the street.

I heave a sigh of relief when I see my scooter parked next to the curb, right where Logan must have put it. It's not in that badof shape, considering what it's been through. Sure, it's got a few scratches and dents, and the Little Caesars' logo on the

side is partially obscured by a scrape, but overall, it looks better than I remember.

I switch on the ignition, sending a hopeful prayer to whatever deity might be listening.

Nothing. Not even a sputter.

I try again, turning the key with more force, as if that might convince the engine to cooperate. Still nothing but silence.

“Come on, don’t do this to me,” I plead, patting the handlebars. “I really need you right now.”

But the scooter remains obstinately lifeless.

Defeated, I climb off. I’ll have to push it the five blocks to the pizza place. Uphill. Because, of course, it is.

By the time the garish yellow and orange sign comes into sight, I’m drenched in sweat and exhausted, and the Santa on my sweater is mocking me with its cheerful expression.

Tom comes running out of the store like a man possessed. His face is an alarming shade of red, and the vein in his forehead is throbbing visibly.

“What the hell happened?” he yells, his voice carrying across the parking lot. “Why did I have to deal with a pissed-off customer last night?”

“I’m sorry, Tom,” I hasten to say, holding up my hands. “There was an accident and?—”

But his attention shifts from my face to the scooter I'm still pushing. His eyes widen, and if possible, his complexion darkens further.

"What the hell?" he shouts, gesturing wildly at the vehicle. Spittle flies from his mouth. "How did you manage to ruin the scooter? Not only did you lose us a customer, you destroyed one of our scooters!"

"It's not that bad," I say weakly, giving the handlebars a little pat.

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His laugh is a harsh, bitter sound that doesn't contain a shred of genuine amusement. "You're fired!"

The words hit me like a physical blow, even though I braced for them since seeing his face. My stomach plummets, and for a moment, I feel like I might be sick right here in the parking lot.

"No, wait, please, Tom," I beg, my voice breaking. "I'm so, so sorry! I promise it will never happen again."

"You're damn right it won't happen again, Emily. It won't happen again because you won't be working here."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I blink, desperate not to add the humiliation of crying to my already impressive list of indignities. "Please, Tom, I really need this job."

"You should have thought of that before, missy." He crosses his arms over his chest.

"Can I at least get my last paycheck?" I hate the pleading note in my voice, but I'm too desperate to care about my pride.

Tom laughs again, louder this time. "You're kidding, right? That won't even cover the cost of the repairs on the scooter. Now get out of my sight before I change my mind and make you pay for the whole thing!"

My head droops as I turn to leave, the scooter abandoned like a shipwreck on the

shore of Tom's fury. Mortification courses through me in hot waves, my cheeks burning with a combination of shame and anger.

"Wait!"

Thank God! He's changed his mind.

"Yes?" I turn around and show him one of my most effective smiles. The kind that makes all your face hurt. But fuck if I care.

"The jacket. You have to give it back."

And this is when I finally realize that, yes, things can always be worse.

"Well, that went spectacularly terrible," I mutter to myself, trudging up the four flights of stairs to my apartment.

My stomach growls, reminding me that I skipped breakfast, again. The twenty dollars in my wallet has to last until Friday, and rent is already two weeks overdue. If I add up every cent I have to my name, it still won't cover next month.

My now-former boss's face still burns in my memory with that particular shade of purple he turned. He could probably be patented as a new Crayola color, Unemployment Red or You're So Fired Fuchsia.

I fumble with my keys, dropping them twice before managing to unlock my door.

"Honey, I'm home," I call out sarcastically to the empty space. "Oh wait, not for long!"

A black blur shoots out from under the couch and wraps itself around my ankle, tiny

claws digging in with surgical precision.

“Ow! Demon! What the hell?” I hop around, trying to dislodge the furry terrorist from my leg. “I’ve had a bad enough day without you turning my ankle into a scratching post!”

The cat releases me, then sits back on her haunches, yellow eyes narrowed in what I can only describe as smug satisfaction.

My gaze catches those abandoned papers on the coffee table as if they’re fucking taunting me. Asshole-Superman’s number sits there, mocking my situation. No way in hell am I calling that smug bastard. The cat’s fine. Totally fine. Better than me, that’s for sure. And I don’t need to see Mr. Perfect Veterinarian with his stupidly charming smile again.

Famous last words, since I notice the blood as soon as the thought crosses my mind.

“Oh my God, are you hurt?” I drop to my knees, all irritation forgotten. There’s a thin red line across Demon’s front paw, not deep but bleeding. “What did you do? Break into the knife drawer?”

Demon licks her paw.

“Great. Just great.” I run my fingers through my hair. My gaze falls again to the papers sitting on my coffee table. “No. Absolutely not.” I pace the small living room. “I am not going back there. He probably thinks I’m a complete disaster. Which, fair point, I am, but he doesn’t need that confirmed.”

Demon meows, holding up her injured paw with dramatic flair.

“Oh, don’t you play the wounded victim with me!” I point an accusing finger at her.

Another pitiful meow, accompanied by the saddest cat eyes I've ever seen.

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“Fine! Fine. We’ll go see Dr. McJudgy. But I’m only doing this because I’m a responsible pet owner, not because I want to see him again.”

And that’s how, thirty minutes later, I’m standing in front of Price Veterinary Services. Demon, in the meantime, has recovered from her life-threatening injury, and she’s squirming in the carrier.

“Be cool,” I whisper to myself, then cringe because talking to yourself outside a vet clinic is not cool. “Just get in, get the cat checked, get out. Do not mention that you got fired. Do not mention that your landlord is threatening eviction. And for the love of all things holy, do not stare at his ass.”

Inside the spacious waiting room is at least a dozen people with various pets. There are women of all ages, each with some type of animal. One lady cradles what appears to be a ferret wearing a tiny sweater. Another has a parrot perched on her shoulder, its eyes following my every move. They all belong to some exclusive club I haven’t been invited to join.

I swallow, a shiver of fear running up my back. The poodle in the corner bares its teeth at me. Of course it does.

“Is everything all right, dear?” a woman with a Persian cat asks, not sounding at all concerned.

“Just peachy,” I reply with a forced smile. “My cat’s looking forward to her appointment.”

The woman's gaze shifts to Demon's carrier, from which a low growl emanates. "What breed is... it?"

"Demon is a... domestic cat," I say lamely.

"Hmm." She purses her lips. "Our Duchess is a Silver Persian. Her grandfather was Best in Show at the Cat Fanciers' Association championship three years ago."

"How nice for you," I say, struggling to maintain my smile. "Demon's grandfather was probably a stray who lived behind a dumpster, but we can't all be aristocats, can we?"

The woman's eyes widen, and she shifts her chair away from me.

I approach the desk where a gray-haired woman is typing with painfully slow, one-finger precision. The keyboard clacks loudly as she pecks at it.

"Good morning, dear," she says in a voice so high and shrill it's almost painful. "What can I do for you?"

"Good morning." I look at her name tag that reads Mrs. Moore. "I've brought my cat?"

"What's that, dearie?" she yells, leaning forward across the desk. "Can you please speak up?"

I snort. What parallel universe have I ended up in? "I said," I respond in an equally loud voice, "that I brought my cat for a checkup."

"You don't need to shout," the old lady mutters, looking at me with a frown. She taps her hearing aid. "This works just fine when people speak normally."

I'm about to leave when the door behind the reception desk opens, and those mesmerizing green eyes meet mine. The air goes out of my lungs with a whoosh, and my throat closes up. I bite my lower lip.

Logan is dressed in a blue button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular forearms. His dark blond hair is slightly tousled as if he's been running his hands through it. His expression shifts from surprise to neutral when he sees me.

"Hi," I squeak.

"Why are you shouting?" His deep voice carries across the reception area, making several heads turn in our direction.

No "hi" or "how are you?" Of course not. His voice is the same low growl as last night, grumpy and not friendly. Now I remember why I was so frustrated with him despite his incredible looks.

He goes on. "Have a seat. I'll talk to you when I finish attending to my other patients."

I open my mouth to reply, but he's already turned toward one of the ladies sitting in the waiting room, his lips curved in a sincere, heartfelt smile. The transformation is startling, from grumpy to charming doctor in the blink of an eye.

"Mrs. Miller, if you'd follow me, please?"

Mrs. Miller jumps to her feet, pulling down her shirt to display her abundant bosom to better advantage. She almost forgets her enormous designer handbag with the odd little dog in it.

I immediately look away and find a chair as far away from the doctor's patients as

possible, wedging myself in a corner near a ficus tree that's seen better days. Its leaves are yellowing at the edges, much like my hopes for this day to go smoothly.

I don't know how long it's been since I got here, but I've counted thirteen snide looks, seven wrinkled-up noses, and nine frowns. The dog in the sweater vest—yes, a dog in an actual sweater vest—keeps side-eyeing me from its owner's lap. The parrot has squawked "Pretty girl" at every woman who entered but remained suspiciously silent when I arrived.

After what seems like an eternity, the waiting room empties. Logan leans against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest. His white lab coat is open, revealing that blue button-down shirt and jeans underneath.

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“I was starting to think you’d forgotten me,” I say, trying to keep my voice light.

“I had back-to-back appointments,” he replies without a hint of apology. His eyes drift to the carrier. “Is that the cat from last night?”

“The one and only,” I confirm.

“Follow me.”

I follow Logan down the corridor to the same exam room from last night. The hallway feels narrower in daylight, and I can’t help but notice the framed diplomas on the wall. Dr. Logan Price graduated with honors from Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine.

“Emily?”

“Yes?” I give him a brilliant smile, hoping he doesn’t notice how my heart is racing.

“Your cat,” he reminds me, gesturing at the carrier I’m still holding in a death grip.

“So, I kind of have an emergency. Well, not exactly an emergency-emergency,” I babble, suddenly feeling foolish. “More like a minor situation. A situational emergency. An emergent situation?”

One dark blond eyebrow lifts slightly. “Are you okay, Emily?”

“Yes! I’m fine. Peachy, really. It’s the demon. Er, I mean, my cat. She has a cut on

her paw.” I thrust the carrier forward like an offering. “It’s probably nothing, but I thought better safe than sorry, right? I mean, what if it gets infected? Or what if she needs stitches? Or what if?—”

“Why don’t we take a look?” he interrupts, mercifully ending my verbal diarrhea. “Can you put the crate on the table and open it so I can check her out?”

“Sure.” My hands tremble as I set the carrier down and fumble with the latch. The moment I open the door, Demon begins to hiss like a pressure valve on the verge of explosion and shoots out a paw, scratching me across the back of my hand. “You little shit,” I hiss back, jerking my hand away.

Behind my back, Logan laughs. The sound is deep and rich, oddly attractive despite being at my expense.

“There’s nothing to laugh about.” I suck on the scratch to ease the sting. “That little monster has been trying to kill me since the minute I met her.”

He steps up to the exam table and puts his hand into the carrier, his movements sure and confident. I half expect Demon to take his arm off at the elbow, but instead, she allows him to remove her from the carrier. She even has the audacity to start purring. Traitor.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs, stroking her fur with practiced hands. “She’s just scared and needs some time to adjust. She doesn’t know you yet, Emily.”

“If you say so.” I don’t believe him, not even a little. “Um, about yesterday?—”

Don’t do it, Emily. Do. Not. Say. It.

“What about yesterday?” His brow furrows, his focus still on examining the cat.

“Your... offer,” I murmur. Shit, I did it. I clear my throat, which has suddenly gone dry. “Last night, after you treated my cuts, you mentioned something about needing help at the clinic?”

“What offer? Could you be more specific?” He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at me with a tentative smile.

“Okay,” I burst out, my words tumbling over each other. “I just wanted to know if you were serious about offering me a job here... with you.”

He taps his chin with his index finger, regarding me thoughtfully. “I seem to remember you definitely didn’t want this job.”

Heat rises to my cheeks. He’s right. I scoffed at the idea last night, too proud and stubborn to accept what seemed like charity. “Well, um, things are a little different now.”

“I understand, but tell me, why should I give you a second chance?” His voice isn’t unkind, but there’s a challenge in it. “What makes you think you’re qualified to work in a veterinary clinic?”

“I—” I gulp, swallowing my pride. “I’m desperate, Logan. I know you don’t know me, but I saw your receptionist, and I think you need someone a little less”—I struggle to find a polite word—“someone a little younger.”

“Mrs. Moore has been with me since I opened this clinic,” he says, a note of loyalty in his voice. “She’s practically family.”

“I didn’t mean—” I begin, but he holds up a hand.

“But,” he continues, “she has been asking to retire for years. I just haven’t found the

right person to replace her.” His eyes sweep over me, assessing. “You’d need training. The software we use isn’t complicated, but there’s a learning curve. The filing system has its quirks. And the clients?—”

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“I can handle difficult people,” I assure him. “I’ve waited tables in Times Square. Nothing is scarier than a hangry tourist who’s been told there’s a forty-minute wait.”

He smiles. It’s not a reassuring smile, though. It seems more challenging, as if he’s daring me to prove myself. “One week,” he says finally. “I’ll give you a one-week trial period. You can assist Mrs. Moore in her duties, learn the ropes, and we’ll see if it’s a good fit.”

Relief washes over me, so strong I nearly sag against the exam table. “I won’t let you down,” I whisper, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

“I hope not.” There’s something in his eyes, something different from the usual annoyance or clinical detachment. A warmth or a curiosity. We stare at each other for a few seconds, the air between us charged with something I can’t quite name.

“I should go now,” I say, my voice quavering slightly. “When do I start?”

“Tomorrow morning at eight.”

“Okay.” I hurriedly stuff Demon back into her carrier. She manages to scratch me again, but I ignore the pain, latch the little gate, and clutch the carrier to my chest.

I have no idea what new challenges I’ve gotten myself into, but from tomorrow on, I vow to be a new Emily. An Emily who works at a veterinary clinic. Someone who will stop at nothing to keep from failing again.

I take a deep breath as I step outside into the crisp winter air. Maybe, just maybe, this

is the change I've been waiting for. A new job, a new challenge, and a very handsome, if somewhat grumpy, boss.

Everything will go terribly wrong, but for once, I'm looking forward to finding out how.

CHAPTER SIX

Logan

The concierge at my building gives me this slight, respectful smile as I drag myself through the lobby, clearly exhausted from work.

"Good evening, Dr. Price." He clears his throat. "You have a guest." His voice drops to this hesitant murmur, and something in his tone makes my muscles tighten. "Your father is waiting in your apartment."

My jaw locks until my teeth grind together. I give him nothing but a curt nod while acid burns up my throat. Of course he's here. Almost two months since he last showed his face. His money must've run out. Same old shit, same old dance we've been doing since I turned twenty-one and got my hands on my inheritance.

What does the old man want this time? Cash, probably. Always fucking money.

I sigh and punch the elevator button harder than necessary, as though that'll make the damn thing come faster.

I own half the top floor, a massive penthouse with more space than I know what to do with. I could afford the whole floor. Hell, the whole damn building, but what's the point of all that room?

The elevator climbs with barely a sound, just a soft hum as it moves. My stomach knots with each floor we pass. I should've gone straight to Stephen's after the clinic. Or anywhere else. A bar. A hotel. Anywhere but here.

The elevator announces my arrival with this fake cheerful sound that makes me want to break something, and the doors slide open to the short hallway that leads to only two apartments. As I step out, the door across from mine opens, and Nathan appears, his tall frame filling the doorway before he stops dead.

He gives me a quick, polite nod. I like Nathan, even if we've never hung out, never crossed that line between neighbors and friends.

I hold the elevator for him. "Have a good night."

His "You too" follows me as the doors close, taking my last excuse to avoid the shitstorm waiting behind my door.

My apartment door is still closed. At least the old bastard didn't leave it wide open like last time.

I find the cold metal key in my pocket, then freeze. Everything in me screams not to face my dear old dad. But this is my home. Why should I let him keep me out of my own fucking apartment?

Anger flares up from the base of my spine. With sudden resolve, I turn the key and burst in, slamming the door behind me hard enough to shake the walls.

The jerk's sitting on the floor, with his back against my couch and his eyes closed. One hand hangs limp; the other clutches a bottle of my expensive whiskey. Half gone already.

I reach him and kick his leg, not gently. “Wake up.” Part of me hopes he stays passed out so I can call someone to haul his ass out. Like garbage.

“What?” His eyelids flutter before opening. He's so wasted it takes forever for him to register who I am. “Son,” he slurs. “How are you?”

He struggles to get up, all clumsy and uncoordinated. He staggers and falls back onto the couch while the whiskey spills all over his shirt and my cream-colored sofa.

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“What do you want, Daniel?” I refuse to call him Dad. This man hasn't been a father since I was eight, and they put my mother in the ground. Not since he looked at me with those haunted eyes and said, “She'd still be here if it weren't for you.”

“Come on, Logan, that's how you greet your old man?” There's wounded pride in his voice, as if he deserves better and earned my respect. As if.

I turn away toward the kitchen, grab a crystal tumbler, and pour from a different bottle, one he hasn't contaminated. Liquor burns good down my throat.

“I missed you, son,” he calls. “Wanted to see how you were doing.”

The lie hangs between us. He didn't miss me. Doesn't give a shit how I'm doing. He needs something, and we both know it.

“You've seen me. I'm fine. Now go.” I turn to head to my study.

He lunges forward and grabs my wrist. “Wait, Logan, please.”

I stare at his hand, then his face. “Don't. Touch. Me.” My voice drops low and dangerous.

Fear flashes in his eyes. I'm not that scared kid anymore, cowering while he rages and throws shit and swings at me. Not anymore.

He lets go fast and steps back. His lips twist in this fake smile as he tries to ease the tension between us. “Logan, son?—”

“What do you want, Daniel?” I cut him off. I'm so done with this game. I'm not eight anymore.

“Nothing, really. Just a few bucks to help me get by,” he rambles. “Times are tough, you know? The economy and all that.”

“No.”

His mouth opens and closes before his face twists with anger. “Wait! What? What the fuck do you mean, no?” His smile vanishes, replaced by that ugly sneer I know too well. His lip curls as he steps up, getting in my face. “You can't do this to me!”

“I can and I will.”

“You ungrateful little bastard!” Spit hits my cheek as he screams in my face. His eyes bulge, and his face turns red with rage. A vein pulses at his temple. “After everything you did to me, you owe me! I should've dumped you on the streets! Instead, I kept my promise to your mother and raised you the best I could!”

The mention of her stops me cold. A roar fills my ears, drowning everything else out. “Don't talk about her.” My voice turns deadly. He has no right to speak her name. She was everything good and light, while he's nothing but a parasite feeding off what she left behind.

But just thinking of my mother cracks my resolve. Her face rises in my mind, trapped in old photos and fading memories. Her smile, her gentle touch on my cheek, her soft songs at night. Would she want me to kick him out? Would she forgive me if I did?

He senses my weakness and moves in. “Your mother would be ashamed of you for turning your back on family.”

My hand twitches, but instead, I take a deep breath. "I'll give you what you need, but this is the last time. I never want to see you again." I grab him by his collar and pull him closer. "Do you understand? This ends tonight."

He nods quickly, and I let him go. He drops to the floor like the useless sack of shit he is.

After a second's hesitation, I pull out my wallet and take out all the cash. Five hundred bucks. Nothing to me now, a drop in the ocean. But more than he deserves.

I drop the bills beside him, watching his eyes light up. "Now get out before I call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing."

He scoops up the cash and struggles to his feet. After one last look, he scurries toward the door, money clutched in one hand, my whiskey bottle in the other.

As soon as the door closes behind him, I lose it and start throwing punches at the wall. I know I'll regret it later, but I just need to hit something. That man ruins everything he touches, including me. He's toxic, but as much as I try to get rid of him, he always comes back.

I lean against the wall, breathing hard, waiting for the rage to subside. It never entirely does after he leaves. That's the problem, he's always leaving something behind. A shadow. A stain. Something I can't scrub out.

This is what he does to me. Every. Fucking. Time.

The worst part is knowing I let him. I could've slammed the door in his face. I could've called security. But I didn't. Some twisted sense of obligation keeps that door cracked open just enough for him to wedge his way back in. Is this what I'm destined to become? An echo of his bitterness? A man so damaged he can only harm

others in return?

I think about Valerie. About what it means to truly love someone. To put their needs before your own. To sacrifice. Even now, years later, the memory of her hurts like a physical wound. But I never let that pain turn me into him. Never used it as an excuse to become a monster.

That's what separates us, what will always separate us. My father took his grief and turned it into a weapon aimed at an eight-year-old kid who just lost his mother. Made me carry the weight of her death like it was mine to bear.

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I didn't do that when I lost Valerie. I retreated, sure. Built walls. Kept people at a distance. But I never became cruel.

Except...

Emily's face flashes in my mind.

In my bedroom, I open the door to my private bathroom. Stripping my clothes off, I leave them on the floor. Usually, I hate mess, but right now, I couldn't care less.

As steam fills the glass enclosure, my thoughts drift back to Emily. My cock stirs at the thought of her, and I hate myself for it. For reducing her to just physical release when she deserves better. She's not Valerie, could never be Valerie, but she's not nothing, either.

Heat pools in my groin at the thought of her body, her skin against mine. It's inappropriate, disrespectful even, to want her this way. But my body doesn't seem to care about what's right. I close my eyes and picture her face. The image is so vivid that it's like she's standing before me.

I wonder how her lips would look stretched tight around my cock, which twitches at the mere thought of it. My body betrays me, responding to the fantasy even as my mind knows it can never be reality.

My hand slides down, squeezing until precum beads at the tip. In my mind, Emily's big eyes stare up at me, filled with desire and something dangerously close to affection. I can almost feel her moan around the thickness of my shaft, the vibration

traveling through my entire body. My hand moves faster, my breathing becoming ragged as I chase release. The water continues to beat down on me, mingling with the sweat that breaks out across my skin despite the heat.

I'm close, so close. Pressure builds at the base of my spine. I come with a strangled groan, my body tensing and then releasing in waves of pleasure that leave me momentarily weak-kneed.

But the orgasm doesn't satisfy me. If anything, it makes my need greater, deepening the hollow ache in my chest that physical release cannot fill.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Emily

I let out a pathetic noise as I fumble around for the stupid clock. Six a.m. The only thing dragging my ass out of bed is knowing I can't blow my first day. My apartment is a freezer, but whatever. Logan's waiting for me to crash and burn. That look in his eyes said it all. His smug smirk when he handed me the job still pisses me off. But underneath all that, there's something about him that gets under my skin in ways I don't want to deal with. Screw him. I'm gonna be so good at this job he won't know what hit him.

I kick off the covers. Jesus Christ, it's freezing in here. Heat? Yeah right. My bank account's emptier than my fridge. But today's the day everything turns around. New job. Money. A life that doesn't totally suck. It has to work because there's no way in hell I'm crawling back to Mom and Dad's to live with my dork brother and his stupid goldfish. Just thinking about slinking home like a loser makes me shiver worse than the cold in this apartment.

Outside, the city's already losing its mind, with horns blasting, garbage trucks

making a racket, and people yelling like they've got something important to say. It's so different from my boring hometown. I now have a bathroom next to my bedroom, which sounds fancy until you realize my entire "two-bedroom" is barely three hundred and twenty-five square feet. Pathetic! But hey, it's mine, at least until the landlord comes knocking for rent I can't pay.

This bathroom's a joke. I have to leave the shower door open just to turn around. When I crank the water on, the freezing blast knocks the air from my lungs. These old pipes sound like they're dying, banging and moaning as if they're being tortured. I soap up and rinse faster than humanly possible, trying to remember Kate's bullshit meditation crap. Find peace in discomfort. Embrace the cold. Yeah, it's easy for Miss Trust Fund in her heated luxury condo with the doorman.

Shut up, Emily. You've got a roof. Running water. So what if everything smells like mildew and the faucet's been dripping since the Stone Age? That's the price of not living under Mommy and Daddy's thumb. But sometimes, in my darkest moments, I wonder why I'm putting myself through this hell. Why not go home? Hot showers. Actual food three times a day. Working heat. Not having to pile on every blanket I own just so my toes don't fall off overnight.

I shake my head, sending water flying against the cracked-to-hell mirror. I'm a grown-ass woman, not some kid who needs to be taken care of. Like a baby bird trying to fly with one wet, frozen, half-broken wing. But at least I'm still in the air and not smashed on the pavement. Not yet, anyway.

Thank God the water torture's over. At least the cold shocked me awake. I wrap a threadbare towel around me and shuffle back to what passes for a bedroom, leaving wet footprints on the sad excuse for hardwood. My room is basically a closet someone shoved a bed into, with shelves that couldn't hold a damn paperback. That's why my romance novels pile up everywhere but on those shelves.

I squeeze into jeans and yank on a dark blue blouse that screams Take me seriously, please, then layer with a sweater and brown boots. The jeans dig into my waist, thanks to the Cup O'Noodles diet I'm on, but whatever.

No sign of Demon the hell-cat. For a hot second, I'm thrilled she might've escaped, then I feel like shit for thinking it.

I throw some cat food in the corner of my pathetic kitchen, making empty promises about buying a real dish tonight. At least I remember to fill up his water bowl—that's something. Gotta get a litter box, too, though my ficus tree's never looked so damn green. My nose crinkles in disgust. I'll buy whatever the demon cat needs, even if it means skipping breakfast. My stomach rumbles as if it's staging a protest.

I double-check the lock on my crappy door before leaving. The hallway reeks of last night's curry, and some kid is screaming its head off somewhere. Mrs. Rodriguez sticks her head out from across the hall, those gray curlers looking like they've been fighting with her hair all night.

"Hey, mijita," she says with that sugary grandma smile. "Where are you rushing off to at the crack of dawn?"

"Got a new job." I flash her a smile that doesn't feel fake for once.

"Dios mío! That's fantastic news! Good luck out there, mijita!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Rodriguez. Pretty sure I'll need all the luck I can get, plus a miracle or two."

At least somebody in this world thinks I won't crash and burn.

I head for the subway, wrapping my scarf tighter as the cold air slaps me in the face.

The streets are packed with people rushing to jobs they probably hate, with steam pouring from their overpriced coffee cups. Back home, you could walk everywhere in like, ten minutes. No need for trains or buses. But this city, it's got its hooks in me, even the nasty subway. Well, maybe not right this second with my face shoved into some dude's sweaty armpit. But most days. This place has a pulse, you know? Millions of stories all crashing into each other. I'd rather die than go back to my boring hometown, which is why I absolutely cannot screw up today.

The subway jerks violently, and I grab the pole before I end up face-first in some Wall Street guy's lap. As we rattle through these grimy tunnels, I try to figure out what to say to Logan. Can't sound too eager. Can't sound like I don't care. Maybe just a good morning with a smile that doesn't look fake as hell? Even in my head, it sounds stupid and forced.

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I make it to the clinic at 7:59. It's a small win, but I'll take it. One last deep breath. Quick check, hair, teeth, no toilet paper stuck to my shoe. Here goes nothing.

No one's at the front desk when I enter, but the door to the back rooms is open. I hear a dog bark from somewhere inside, then Logan's voice all low and quiet. My heart does this weird, jumpy thing. It's just nerves. Nothing to do with him.

"Hello? Anybody here?" Nothing but silence. I stand there like an idiot for a second before saying screw it and heading through the door behind the desk.

I can hear people talking in one of the exam rooms, not the same one where Logan patched up my legs. God, don't think about that now. Don't remember his hands on my skin, how gentle they were?—

Shit. My face heats up. I shake my head hard and knock on what I pray is his office door.

"Come in!" When he's not bitching at me, his voice is actually kind of nice. Deep with this little rough edge to it. I mentally slap myself for even noticing it and push the door open.

Logan hangs up the phone as I walk in. He's wearing another blue button-down with the sleeves rolled up. I drag my eyes away from his forearms. What the hell, Emily?

His office is precisely what I figured, obsessively neat, clean as an operating room, and white enough to give you a headache. There's no personal thing anywhere, no photos, and nothing that says an actual human works here. The only thing that doesn't

scream sterile is a steaming coffee mug in his hand.

“How cute.” I nod at the cup.

His eyebrows scrunch together as he turns the mug around as though he forgot what was on it. For a split second, he looks confused, almost less like some untouchable god and more like a regular dude.

“It was a gift,” he says, ice returning to his voice. He puts the mug down and yanks some papers from a drawer. “Sign these.”

The cup says, “Leave me alone, I only talk to my dog.” Perfect for Mr. Personality over here.

I bite my tongue and flip through the paperwork. Getting canned before lunch isn’t part of the plan. Boring legal crap until I hit the salary part. Holy shit. After my trial week, I’ll make actual decent money. Enough for rent, bills, and maybe even that cheap bottle of wine I’ve been eyeing for weeks. Might even crank the heat up sometimes. Imagine that not freezing my ass off 24/7.

I let out this embarrassing little squeak. Logan’s eyes lock onto me, lingering way too long on my face.

“So.” I clear my throat and look anywhere but at him. “When do I start?”

He gives me this look like I’m some complicated math problem he can’t solve. His eyes move over my face, stopping at my mouth before meeting my eyes again. A shiver runs through me that has nothing to do with the temperature. I squirm in my chair, feeling like I’m under a microscope.

“Right away,” he finally says. “Mrs. Moore will train you this week. If you don’t

screw up, you're on your own next week."

"Wait, what?" I jump up as though my chair's on fire. "You're not firing your admin because of me, are you?"

His forehead gets all crinkly. "Amelia's pushing eighty," he says like I'm an idiot. I cross my arms and give him the side-eye. He sighs, and something almost human flashes across his face. "She's been begging to retire for years. I couldn't find anyone to replace her. You... just happened to show up when I needed someone."

"So basically I'm saving your ass." I can't help the smirk that spreads across my face. Something weirdly satisfying about the idea that Mr. Perfect might actually need my help.

"Don't push it," he mutters, flipping through his appointment book. His fingers are long and weirdly elegant for a guy, though there are calluses on his palms. Working hands that don't match his fancy-doctor vibe. He's ignoring me now, but I catch this tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth, almost like he wants to smile but forgot how. I take it as my cue to get the hell out.

I head back to the front desk, feeling weirdly good about myself. He needs me, even if his ego won't let him admit it. The thought gives me this rush, and I probably shouldn't analyze it too closely. I tell myself it's just relief at having a job, but yeah, that's bullshit.

I stash my bag under the desk and plop down. There are two chairs here. Logan must've dragged one in for me. The idea that he thought about me sends these stupid butterflies through my stomach. Did he pick it out special? Move it from somewhere else in the clinic? God, why am I obsessing over a freaking chair?

Get a grip, Emily. It's a chair, not a marriage proposal.

I check out my new workspace. A new computer and this massive desk calendar with so much scribbled crap on it you can't even tell what month it is. Looks like Mrs. Moore and technology aren't exactly on speaking terms.

As if I conjured her with my mind, the lady materializes in the doorway. She stops dead, staring at me with her lips all pinched together. She's so tiny, she barely comes up to my shoulder, with this explosion of white hair and thick glasses that make her eyes look massive. Purple sweater with cats embroidered all over it, orthopedic shoes that scream I've given up on fashion. I'm frozen in place with this stupid fake smile plastered on my face. The theme from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* plays in my head. My hands are sweating like crazy. Please, universe, don't make me fight a senior citizen for this crappy job.

"Finally!"

I nearly fall out of my damn chair. "Um... what?" I manage to squeak out.

The old woman slaps her hands on her hips and breaks into this huge smile, flashing teeth so perfect they've gotta be fake. Her eyes get all crinkly with what looks suspiciously like happiness. "I've been nagging that stubborn boy to hire somebody new for damn near a decade."

My mouth hangs open as if I'm catching flies. Not the territorial catfight I was bracing for.

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Mrs. Moore lets out this laugh that sounds way too young for her face and practically skips over to me. “I’m Amelia Moore.”

She sticks out her hand. Her skin feels like tissue paper against my still-frozen fingers. I stand up too fast and slam my hip into the corner of the desk. Motherfucker.

I bite my tongue. “We actually met yesterday. I’m Emily Baker,” I say through gritted teeth, trying not to hop around screaming while my hip throbs like it’s been hit with a baseball bat.

“Lovely to meet you, Abigail.”

“Um, actually, it’s Emily,” I say extra slowly and loudly, remembering she told me not to yell yesterday. Would it be such a horrible thing to roll my eyes at this nice woman? Yes, it would.

“Of course. Such a pretty name.” She pats my cheek like I’m five years old. Her hand smells like old lady lavender as she plops down in the other chair. She looks me up and down, nodding as if she’s checking items off a mental list. “Let’s get started, Abigail.”

I start to correct her again, but what’s the point? The woman is as deaf as a doorknob. I glance toward the hallway and catch Logan watching us with that blank face of his. Is he already thinking he made a mistake? Screw that.

I lift my chin, determined to prove him wrong. “Here, let me help with that,” I say, jabbing the computer’s power button.

“Thank you, sweetie,” she mumbles, hunching over the keyboard as though it might bite her. She pecks at it with one finger, her tongue sticking out. No wonder Logan needs someone new. At this rate, we’ll be lucky to have our email checked before summer.

After taking approximately a decade to unlock the computer, she turns to me with a triumphant grin. I force a smile that feels like it might crack my face. That little voice in my head screams that “training” with Mrs. Moore will be a special kind of hell. Her old lady perfume reminds me of my grandma as I sit next to her. I mean, how freaking hard can it be to answer phones and schedule dog checkups?

While Mrs. Moore shows me her system, which seems to involve ignoring the computer and scribbling illegible notes everywhere, our first victim walks in, some lady in her fifties carrying what sounds like a pissed-off mountain lion in a carrier. Even though every animal I’ve ever met has tried to maim me, I straighten up and get ready to play receptionist. I can handle this. I will handle this.

Showtime for Receptionist Emily.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Emily

My first week at Logan’s veterinary clinic is a total shit show of questionable life choices. I’m dumb enough to think this would be easy: answer phones, schedule appointments, rake in cash. Low effort, fat paycheck.

The universe, being the twisted bitch it always is, has other plans.

My first clue that this job isn’t the easy money grab I imagined hits me when the waiting room packs with Manhattan’s loaded female population, all hugging carriers

with pets that barely have a sniffle.

“Why the hell are there so many women here?” I whisper to Mrs. Moore.

She adjusts her glasses and smirks. “Dr. Price has quite the following.”

The daily female parade that storms through this clinic is as subtle as a brick to the face. I’ve sorted these women in my head. There are the Designer Damsels who roll up in clothes worth more than my whole damn life, carrying yappy little rats in bags that match their stupid outfits.

Then the Leaning Ladies, masters of theoops, I just need to bend all the way over this tablemove, making sure Logan gets a full view of whatever they’re flaunting that day.

And in the end, we have the Touchers. They can’t make it through a five-minute appointment without finding a million excuses to put their fancy nails on Logan’s arm, shoulder, or, for the extra thirsty ones, his lower back.

In the meantime, Mrs. Moore has been training me all week, if you can call it that. She’s half-blind, deaf when convenient, and dead set on calling me Abigail no matter how many times I correct her. She wastes three frickin’ hours showing me the filing system—spoiler alert: it’s the alphabet—and another two drilling me on how to answer a damn phone.

“Price Veterinary Clinic, it’s Amelia speaking. How may we help you today?” she recites for the millionth time.

I nod, fighting to look interested instead of ready to slip into a coma.

“Now you try,” she pushes.

“Price Veterinary Clinic,” I copy like a robot, “how may we?—”

The phone blasts, making us both jump. Mrs. Moore waves at me to grab it.

I clear my throat and snatch it up. “Um, er, hi!”

Mrs. Moore’s eyes bug out like they might pop. Logan glares from his doorway, radiating enough disapproval to power a small city. The caller just wants to reschedule, thank God.

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After I hang up, Mrs. Moore pats my hand like I'm some kind of special case. "We'll keep practicing, dear."

By Tuesday, I've mastered the correct phone greeting but still struggle with what Mrs. Moore calls spatial awareness. Translation: I keep knocking shit over.

The reception desk is a minefield of precariously balanced items. Stacks of folders, ceramic pet figurines—God, why?—and a large water pitcher positioned in my elbow's trajectory.

I juggle an armful of patient files while filling the fish tank with my other hand.

Mrs. Donovan, our first appointment, approaches the desk to fill out paperwork. As she signs her name, her diamonds catch the light, momentarily blinding me. The Siamese in its carrier gives me a look of pure disdain.

"Just sign the last page." I turn to set down the files.

My elbow connects with the water pitcher, sending it crashing to the floor. Water splashes everywhere, across the desk, over the files, and directly into Mrs. Donovan's open designer purse.

"I'm so sorry!" I scramble for paper towels as Mrs. Donovan yanks her dripping bag off the counter.

"This is Italian leather," she hisses, dabbing at it frantically. "It's hand-stitched Prada!"

A guy with a hyper Jack Russell in the waiting area snickers. “Graceful.”

I shoot him a death glare while mopping up the flood with inadequate paper towels. My face burns hot enough to evaporate the water. “I can help clean?—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Mrs. Donovan’s voice could flash freeze lava. “Just finish my paperwork so we can get this over with.”

Logan materializes from his office, surveying the disaster zone with those piercing green eyes. He takes in the wet floor, my tomato face, and Mrs. Donovan’s rigid posture.

“Problem?” he asks, his voice calm but tight.

“Small spill. All fixed.” The words tumble out too quickly.

“It soaked my handbag,” Mrs. Donovan interjects.

Logan’s jaw twitches. “Be more careful,” he tells me, then turns to Mrs. Donovan. “We know a good leather cleaner if you need a recommendation.”

When they disappear into the exam room, I continue mopping, dignity in puddles around my feet.

Mrs. Moore appears at my side and helps me organize the damp files. “Don’t sweat it, honey,” she whispers. “I knocked that pitcher over twice last month. Why do you think Dr. Price switched from glass to plastic after the third one got smashed?”

I appreciate the attempt at comfort, but she moves the patient files to a lower shelf afterward—safely out of my disaster zone.

I've gotten the hang of the filing system and phone routine by Wednesday.

What blindsides me is the clinic's... specialized protocols.

Mrs. Moore shows me the supply drawers when she pulls open the bottom one to reveal an odd collection: smelling salts, cold compresses, a first aid kit, and a bottle of Macallan 12.

"What's with the whiskey?" I ask.

"For emergencies only," Logan interjects, appearing behind us. He shoots Mrs. Moore a warning look.

Mrs. Moore winks at me. "The time Mr. Hoffman's iguana escaped into the air duct was an emergency."

"What kind of place is this?"

Logan's mouth curves into a rare half-smile. "Welcome to veterinary medicine, Emily. Where every day brings something you couldn't prepare for." He glances at his watch. "I've got surgery in ten minutes. A Scottish fold with bladder stones."

"Which reminds me," Mrs. Moore says, pulling out a drawer and extracting what looks like a padded oven mitt. "You'll need this after lunch."

I take it gingerly. "For what?"

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“The feral cat appointment at one thirty. You’ll be on bite-guard duty.”

“I’ll be what?”

Logan’s eyes twinkle with amusement. “Mrs. Moore will show you where the tetanus shots are, just in case.”

“That’s not funny,” I protest.

“Who’s joking?” Mrs. Moore asks with perfect innocence.

That afternoon, the feral cat, with murder in its eyes, takes one look at me and decides I’m its eternal enemy. The thing twists in my grip like a furry Houdini, somehow managing to sink its teeth through the supposedly bite-proof glove.

Logan doesn’t laugh when it happens, which somehow makes it worse. He extracts the cat’s teeth from my hand with practiced efficiency, cleans the wound, and gives me a tetanus booster with the calm of someone who’s seen it all before.

“Animals sense fear,” he tells me while bandaging my hand. “Try to project confidence next time, even if you don’t feel it.”

Next time? I’ll be lucky if I survive until Friday.

Thursday introduces me to the clinic’s more dramatic clientele.

“Mrs. Kensington and Precious at three o’clock,” Mrs. Moore announces, tapping the

appointment book. “You’ll need to be ready with the smelling salts.”

“What?”

She nods grimly. “She faints when her dog gets vaccinations. It’s not the dog we worry about. It’s the owner.”

Sure enough, Mrs. Kensington arrives at three, clutching a perfectly groomed Pomeranian. The moment Logan appears with the vaccine, she begins to sway dramatically.

I catch her as she collapses backward while Logan administers the shot to Precious, who seems embarrassed by his owner’s theatrics.

“Is she okay?” I whisper to Logan as we fan Mrs. Kensington with a magazine.

“She’ll be fine,” he mutters. “She does this every time.”

I’m not sure if he’s joking until I notice a small business card in Precious’s file for “Dr. Barkley, Pet Behavioral Therapist.”

The rest of the day brings a parade of equally memorable clients.

First, Mr. Jenkins, whose parrot has learned to mimic the smoke detector, resulting in the fire department being called to their apartment three times last month. Then Mrs. Albertson, who is convinced her perfectly healthy Labrador has caught depression from watching too many commercials.

By closing time, my feet ache, my hand throbs where the cat bit me, and I have a newfound appreciation for Logan’s perpetual scowl. If I had to deal with this level of ridiculousness every day for years, I’d be grumpy too. But it’s almost Friday, and

I've survived the whole first week.

Then Friday afternoon comes, and I already feel nothing worse could happen. And yet, when I think I might survive my first week, Amelia sits down, and the first client of the afternoon comes in.

"Perfect timing!" I babble as what I swear has to be the hundredth woman in her forties to come in today sashays toward the desk.

She's got some kind of miniature dog in her bag. Why do people do things like that? I would hate being carried around in some knock-off leopard bag if I were a dog. But it's none of my business.

All I need to be doing is writing down general information about the woman and her dog.

It turns out, little Brutus needs to have his temperature checked. Mrs. Summer comes into the vet clinic with her little darling at least twice a week. You might think it's because she genuinely loves and cares for the hideous little creature, but the truth is, while the poor little thing's got a thermometer stuck up his butt, Mrs. Summer's shamelessly flirting with the sexy vet. No wonder the poor beast's got that expression on his ugly little face. If I were him, I would jump out of that stupid leopard bag and run for my life, as far away as possible.

The afternoon passes slowly as I make appointments and receive clients. They're all women, of course. Toward the end of the day, a boy comes in. He's the only male I've seen in this place besides Logan. His eyes are shiny with tears as he rushes up to the reception desk.

"Good afternoon, dear. Do you have an appointment?"

The boy, who must be thirteen or fourteen, shakes his head. “No,” he says with a sob, “but I need to see the doctor. Rico ate something, and now he’s sick.” He stops talking and bursts into tears.

I try unobtrusively to scope out whatever’s in the carrier the boy’s holding. I’m curious as to what Rico is. The crate’s pretty big, so I imagine there’s something big in there.

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On second thought, I don't think I want to know what Rico is.

“Abigail, go ask Logan if he can see this young man and his pet.”

I nod and go through the door behind me, walking swiftly toward Logan's office. He asked not to be disturbed—I think he had an important phone call or something like that—but this seems like an emergency.

“I don't care. You're not getting another cent from me!” I hear him shout from behind his office door. “You'd better not threaten me, you old bastard!”

I tap hesitantly at the door, and Logan stops talking. The door is abruptly wrenched open by a scowling Logan. If looks could kill, I'd be dead.

“What?” he barks.

“Um... ” I clear my throat. “There's an emergency,” I manage to get out, nodding toward the waiting room.

Logan seems to calm down. Taking a deep breath, he nods. “Fine. Thank you, Emily.” He walks down the hall, leaving me standing there like an idiot. A second later, he's back with the boy behind him. “Emily,” he says, “can you come in, please? I might need your help.”

I don't know why, but I have this sinking sensation that I'm about to make a big mistake. But I follow them into the exam room, stepping over the threshold. I have an awful feeling about this. I just don't know how bad it is yet.

The boy sets the carrier on the table with care. Logan washes his hands thoroughly at a small sink, then turns to the carrier.

“Okay, let's see what we've got here,” he says, his voice calm and reassuring.

Mark steps back, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “Be careful. Rico's really scared.”

Logan nods, then unlatches the carrier door. I hold my breath, still unsure what's going to emerge. Please be a rabbit. Please be a rabbit...

It's not a rabbit.

CHAPTER NINE

Logan

I'm in a black mood. It's not Emily's fault. She has nothing to do with my problems and my fucked-up life. Yet only looking at her makes me snap. There's something about her earnest, unpredictable nature that both fascinates and frustrates me. I'm caught in a constant battle between wanting to keep her at arm's length and wanting to pull her closer.

My dad called me today. He wants more money, of course. The old bastard threatened me when he realized I had no intention of giving in to him. I'm sick to death of his shit and the mess he's gotten himself into. Ever since I've known him, he's been one disappointment after another, a constant reminder of everything I refuse to become. When I was younger, I'd watch him stumble home drunk, and I'd promise myself that I would find my path and establish a sense of purpose. That's what my work gives me, something tangible I can point to and say, This is mine. This matters.

As if this isn't enough, I also have to figure out how to deal with the most beautiful and mouthiest girl I've ever met. Right now, she's standing in the doorway, and her face has gone pale.

"Um..." She clears her throat, looking uncomfortable. "There's an emergency."

The boy, Mark, doesn't look much better. I know him and Rico well. The pet has been my patient for a couple of years now. He's got the terrible, unhealthy habit of devouring just about anything that crosses his path. I wonder what it was this time.

I open the carrier, ensuring Rico doesn't slither out. The poor little guy is making hissing sounds and writhing around in the carrier. With a quick, firm movement, I grab him behind the head just below the jaw and pull him out of the crate. Emily gives a violent start behind me, but at this precise instant, I can't turn around to see what the hell's going on with her.

"Mark, buddy, I'm going to need you to give me a hand to help me hold Rico. You too, Emily."

Behind my back, I hear a strange choking sound, almost like someone trying to swallow a scream.

Mark comes up to me, his face a mixture of concern and determination despite the tear tracks on his cheeks. "What should I do?" he asks between sobs.

The kid loves his snake. I remember that feeling, the first time one of my pets was sick when I was a kid. It changes something in you and makes you realize how fragile life can be. It's what pushed me toward veterinary school.

"Keep his tail still." I maneuver the snake's body so Mark can reach it. The boy's small hands grip Rico with the right amount of firmness. Turning my head slightly, I

say, “Emily, move! I need you here.”

Her face is as white as a sheet. I don’t understand what her problem is, but this isn’t the time for a meltdown.

After hesitating a few more seconds, she walks unwillingly to my side. “It’s not a rabbit.” The sound is so low, I’m pretty sure she didn’t want to say it out loud.

My brow creases into a frown, and I sigh. She’s an odd duck. “Put your hands where mine are and hold Rico as firmly as possible.”

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She nods hesitantly but extends her hands, placing them next to mine. Her fingers tremble.

“Don’t worry,” I add, trying to reassure her. “His jaw is dislocated from whatever he’s swallowed. He couldn’t bite you even if he wanted to.”

I let go of Rico and run to the cupboard for a sedative and a scalpel. From the bump under Rico’s skin, he must have tried to eat a tennis ball this time. The irregular protrusion is visible about two-thirds of the way down his body. With a sigh, I realize I must talk with Mark later about feeding his pet and ensuring his habitat is secure. I pull on a pair of latex gloves, and once I find everything I need, I return to the table.

The snake’s writhing, and Emily’s having a hard time not losing her grip on him. Despite her fear, she’s holding on. There’s something admirable about that, facing your fears head-on. As quickly as I can, I draw up the ketamine in the syringe and check the dosage twice before proceeding. I slide the needle into Rico’s body, finding the intramuscular site with practiced precision. He goes still almost immediately, his muscles relaxing under Emily’s grip. Good. The medication is taking effect.

“Now comes the tricky part,” I explain, partly for Mark’s benefit and partly to keep Emily distracted from her fear. “I need to make an incision to remove the obstruction without damaging any of Rico’s internal organs.”

I make a small, precise incision along the bulge, carefully avoiding the major blood vessels visible beneath the translucent scales. Slicing the snake’s throat open under Emily’s hands, I draw out the tennis ball with no problem and quickly close up the wound. The yellow felt of the ball is spotted with digestive fluids but otherwise

intact.

“You can let go of him now,” I whisper to Emily when I realize she’s still got her fingers clenched around the boa. She nods and lets go but doesn’t step away from the table. Her wide eyes are fixed on the serpent, and tiny droplets of sweat pearl on her forehead.

“Is he going to be okay?” Mark asks.

“Sure he will, buddy.” I smile, completing the last small sutures. “But you need to be more careful about Rico’s eating habits. Tennis balls aren’t on the recommended diet for boas.” I keep my tone light and educational rather than accusatory.

“Yes, sir,” Mark whispers. I should lecture him about this, but I don’t want to. The poor kid’s upset. “Can I take him home?”

“Yes, but you’ll need to watch him. The incision will need time to heal,” I explain, applying an antibiotic ointment to the stitched area. I’m going to give him an antibiotic, and tomorrow, you need to bring him back for a follow-up. Can you do that, Mark?” I write out detailed care instructions on a sheet of paper, emphasizing the need for a clean, quiet environment and monitoring for signs of infection.

He nods, and finally, the corners of his mouth turn upward in the ghost of a smile. “Thanks, sir.” There’s genuine gratitude in his voice that makes this job worthwhile. For all the difficult clients, demanding paperwork, and long hours, moments like these are why I became a vet.

“Just doing my job, buddy.” We put Rico back into his crate, and I walk Mark to the door. The waiting room is quiet now, the afternoon lull before the evening rush. “See you tomorrow, kid!”

I close the door behind him and turn back to Emily. She's still standing next to the exam table, her eyes fixed on her hands, which are bloody.

"Are you all right?" I ask, coming up to her.

"Uh-uh." She looks like she's on the edge of a hysterical breakdown if she's not already in the middle of one. Her face is so pale, I'm afraid she may faint at any second.

"Emily," I murmur, putting my hand on her back. Her spine is rigid under my touch, tension evident in every line of her body. "Are you sure you're okay?" I move to the sink and wet a paper towel, bringing it back to her so she can clean the blood from her hands.

She turns to face me, fixing her enormous doe eyes on me. "That was a snake," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the hum of the building's ventilation system. "I was just holding an enormous snake in my hands!"

I try to control myself but can't hold back my laughter. It bubbles up from somewhere deep inside me, releasing the tension that's been building all day.

"It's not funny!" she shouts, her voice breaking.

I shake my head, trying to wipe the smile from my face. I struggle to compose myself, though it may be impossible. "No, you're right. Forgive me."

"You're a jerk," she mutters, scrubbing at her hands with the damp paper towel I provided as if trying to erase any trace of her contact with Rico.

"Truly, Emily." I sigh, leaning against the counter of the exam room. "I didn't think it would be a problem for you. Since you took a job at a veterinary clinic, I assumed

you'd be comfortable with all kinds of animals." It's a reasonable assumption, though clearly I was wrong.

"You didn't think it would be a problem? I just had a fucking serpent in my hands! What's normal about that?" Her cheeks flush with color as she speaks.

"You're working in a veterinary clinic. It's normal to deal with animals," I protest, still trying to hold back my laughter. "Besides, Rico is one of our gentlest patients. You should see some parrots we get in here. They'd take your finger off as soon as you look at them."

"Really, Logan? Who wants a long, slimy thing like that as a pet? It's not a puppy, for God's sake!" She tosses the bloodied paper towel into the trash can with unnecessary force.

"Mark, that's who." I shrug. "And for the record, snakes aren't slimy. Their scales are actually quite dry and smooth. The sliminess is a common misconception."

She stares at me, open-mouthed. I'm sure she'd like to say plenty of things to me right now. Not very nice things. Instead, she surprises me. Closing her eyes, she takes several deep breaths until she's calm, or at least I hope she is. Once she's composed, she turns her back on me and leaves the room. The door swings shut behind her with a soft click.

My brow creases into a frown, and I sigh, running a hand through my hair. She's definitely an odd duck. The exam room feels empty without her presence.

I turn to clean up after the procedure. The tennis ball goes into the trash. I dispose of my gloves and disinfect the table, preparing it for the next patient. And yet, I can't stop thinking about Emily.

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She is a puzzle I can't seem to figure out. On one hand, she's intelligent and capable. Mrs. Moore speaks highly of her organizational skills and her way with the clients. On the other hand, she seems entirely out of her element when it comes to animals. It makes little sense.

The afternoon wears on with no further incidents. The typical parade of checkups and vaccinations keeps me busy in the exam rooms while Emily manages the front desk. I can hear her professional and cheerful voice through the open door as she greets clients and schedules appointments. Despite the brief interlude with the snake, she's doing very well.

Between patients, I check my phone. Three missed calls from the old man. My father continues to call me all afternoon. I know he'll be there waiting for me when I get home tonight. I can picture him slumped on my couch, reeking of cheap whiskey and self-pity. He's always been a lousy dad, even though I tried my hardest to be a dutiful son.

I guess my efforts weren't enough, though. The only thing he's ever been interested in is the inheritance my maternal grandmother left me. The son of a bitch wasted my money on alcohol, drugs, and women. He never cared if my shoes were so old and worn out that my feet would be soaked if I went out in the rain. There were nights I'd go to bed hungry because he spent our food money on booze. Those memories are still fresh, even years later.

When I turned twenty-one, though, I finally got to be in charge of my money. My friend Stephen's parents helped me manage it and taught me about investments and financial planning. With their help, I made good investments and tripled the trust

fund my grandparents left me. The financial independence it gave me was like breathing fresh air after years of suffocation. I no longer need to work, but I love what I do. Without my clinic and my animals, what would I be? Just another rich asshole in Manhattan with nothing meaningful to contribute to the world.

I finish updating the charts for my last patient of the day and head out to the reception area. Mrs. Moore is gathering her things, her movements slow but purposeful after a long workday. Emily is shutting down the computer with her back to me as she completes her end-of-day routine.

“Good night, Logan!” Amelia calls, picking up her purse and heading for the door.

Emily’s close behind her. She doesn’t deign to say good night or even look at me as she leaves. However, as she passes by, there’s a slight hesitation in her step, as if she’s considering turning around. It’s better this way. She’s my employee, and she doesn’t have to like me. The professional distance keeps things straightforward.

As she closes the door behind her, I can’t keep myself from thinking about how much I’d love to have her beneath me, moaning with pleasure and screaming my name. Her skin would be soft under my touch, those big brown eyes looking up at me with need and want, her auburn hair spread across my pillow...

Christ. I need to get a grip. This kind of thinking leads nowhere good. I’ve got enough complications in my life without adding Emily Baker to the mix. Pushing the thoughts aside, I lock up the clinic and head out into the evening, bracing myself for whatever awaits me at home.

CHAPTER TEN

Emily

Jerk.

Bastard.

Asshole.

How dare he?

“Anybody home? Emily?”

“Huh? Sorry,” I mumble when I finally focus on Kate, who’s waving her hand in front of my face as if I’m having a damn seizure. I take a deep breath, letting the aromas of fried food and alcohol pervade my nostrils. We were supposed to meet up at my house, but when I got home and found the place even more destroyed by my psycho cat, I thought it would be a better idea to go out. I need a change of scene anyway, even if my bank account doesn’t approve of my decision to go out drinking with my girls.

Chimera has always been our place to meet up. Total dive bar. The walls of this old English-style pub have heard our most intimate secrets. However, if truth be told, the place is a pit. The floor’s covered with strange stains that probably have FBI case files. Using the bathroom puts you at risk of contracting hepatitis, and the house brands of alcohol taste like someone filtered them through a sweaty sock. The yellow lights make everyone look like they’ve got liver failure, and the ancient jukebox bounces between hair metal and pop divas without warning. But it’s cheap, and the hamburgers are killer. You can’t have everything, right?

“Where’d you go?” Kate continues to wave her hand in front of my face. Her fingers are stained with different colors of bright paint. She’s an artist. An artist with a six-figure bank account who doesn’t have to worry about making rent.

I give a disgusted snort. “I got a new job.”

“Where? At a funeral home?” she teases. “You look like death warmed over.”

I roll my eyes. “Worse,” I say, unable to keep a hint of irritation from creeping into my voice. I feel my best friends’ eyes on me. I know they’re waiting for every juicy detail. “I’m too fucking sober to even talk about it yet,” I mutter as I pull my wallet out of my purse. As soon as I open it, I remember I’ve only got two bucks in there. I can’t even afford a damn drink. If this isn’t poverty, I don’t know what is.

“I got it.” Kate puts her hand over mine with a smile.

“Next time, it’ll be on me.” My voice doesn’t sound convincing. We all know that of the three of us, Kate’s the only one who can afford to go clubbing. Or at least she’s the only one of us who doesn’t have to work at humiliating jobs to have a roof over her head.

Debbie, our server for the night, slams down three pink cocktails. I toss mine back without even thinking about its toxic ingredients, wrinkling my nose when the cheap drink hits my stomach and sets it on fire. I’m not picky about alcohol. I just need something to take the edge off. If I close my eyes, I can still feel the slimy skin of the boa constrictor. My stomach twists and I swallow hard, fighting down the urge to vomit, and not just because of the gross drink I just ingested.

I tip the glass to my lips, swallowing the last drops. “Let me give you a hint about my job. It involves things with more than two legs.”

“You’re working at a bug farm?” Sarah squeaks.

“A zoo?” Kate’s eyebrow shoots up. “After last time? Hell no.”

“Definitely not a zoo. Never fucking again.” My hand jumps to my hair as though those tiny monkey fingers are still tangled in it.

“Oh! A pet store?” Sarah tries.

“Getting warmer.”

Kate narrows her eyes. “Just spill it already!”

I take a deep breath and blurt out, “I’m working as a receptionist at a veterinary clinic.” Instead of waiting for their response, I snatch Kate's drink from in front of her and take a long sip, needing the liquid courage after dropping that bombshell.

As if in slow motion, their smiles falter. A second later, their lips open in a big O, and their eyebrows shoot up to their hairlines.

Kate’s the first to compose herself, closing her full lips in a prim line. Her big blue eyes are still wide, and she has a deer-in-the-headlights look on her face, which tells me she’s having a hard time figuring out the correct response. A lock of blond hair falls over her face, but she doesn’t seem to notice. Instead, she reaches out for the glass I just stole and brings it to her lips. She frowns when she finds it empty. I told her I needed a drink. I’d probably burst out laughing if I weren’t still so shaken up by my recent close encounter with a monstrous reptile.

Meanwhile, Sarah clears her throat. She also has a constipated look, and her naturally pink complexion doesn’t help hide the flush on her cheeks. Jeez, it’s as if I’d told my best friends I went out naked in public or picked up some random guy just to show him my new Star Wars panties. Sarah’s having the kind of reaction a virgin has if you talk to her about sex. Now, I really do have to work hard to keep from laughing at how shocked they are.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Sarah ventures, destroying a napkin with nervous fingers. “I’m glad you have a new job, but?—”

“Are you fucking serious?” Kate interrupts her, slamming her palm down and making our glasses jump. My two best friends are exact opposites. Where Sarah’s quiet and timid, Kate’s like a tornado with a megaphone. Her language is worse than a sailor’s, and she can’t walk into a room without attracting everybody’s attention.

Sarah is your classic girl next door, small, with brown hair and enormous dark green eyes. Since kindergarten, when Kate threatened to beat the crap out of a kid for stealing Sarah’s crayons and I offered to help bury the body, we’ve been stuck together like glue. We’ve done everything together, including moving from our little town to New York.

“Have you forgotten what happened that time at the zoo?” Kate goes on, raising her voice to a level that makes the people at the tables around us turn to look. Some tattooed mountain man glares at us.

I sigh. The mere memory makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. The zoo fiasco, as Kate has immortalized it, took place on my tenth birthday. My little brother was four at the time and kept whining to my parents about going to see the animals at the zoo. I guess my parents thought they could kill two birds with one stone, so we all went to the zoo for my birthday. Sarah, Kate, and my little brother were excited about it, and for a while, I thought it might even be fun.

To be fair, it wasn’t that bad at the beginning. The animals were all in cages, after all, and if I kept a certain distance, I could keep them from noticing me. But it all fell apart the moment we set foot in the primate section. My mom insisted we take a group picture in front of the adorable little monkey’s cage. As soon as the creepy creature saw us posing in front of his cage, he showed his true colors, coming up behind me and grabbing my hair with his wrinkled fingers. It took two guards and a

pair of scissors to free me from the death grip of that adorable beast.

Since then, every animal has had it out for me. As though they've got some secret group chat: target gained.

"It's not like I have that many jobs to choose from," I protest. Kate doesn't need to work, and Sarah is a teacher, but I have to take whatever comes along. Even if it is working with a grumpy vet and a room full of demonic cats, dogs, and other things.

"Are you sure it's a good fit for you?" Sarah asks hesitantly, her perfect pink nails squeezing my bitten ones. "It didn't go so well with the dog-sitting job."

"This time, it's different," I mumble. "I don't have much contact with the animals. I answer the phone, make appointments, and greet the clients when they arrive. That's about it."

My best friends gaze at me in silence. They've got that sixth sense only friends have, the one that enables them to see bullshit from a mile away. Okay, they're right. My experience with animals is pitiful. That time I worked as a dog-sitter, for example, well, let's just say I've still got teeth marks where the sun doesn't shine, and I'm pretty sure the emergency room staff is still laughing at me. It's not my fault that every furry bastard I run across seems to have a personal vendetta with my ass.

"I can do this!" I insist, aware that I'm trying to convince myself more than I am them.

"Of course you can," Sarah says. Her smile looks forced, faker than a three-dollar bill.

Kate offers no words of encouragement, but she rolls her eyes so hard they might get stuck. "I'll bet the emergency room staff will have even more hilarious stories to tell

by the time you're fired from this one," I hear her mutter. "ER staff's probably prepping your chart already."

I snort. Really? She's my best friend. Isn't she supposed to support me?

Sarah lays a hand on mine and smiles sweetly. "Oh, come on, tell us how your first day of work went. We're curious."

"It's been a week already."

Their eyes grow huge at my confession, but I brush it off. Friendship, my ass. I really need some moral support right now. Especially after...

"My boss forced me to touch a fucking snake."

"What?" Kate bursts out laughing, spraying her drink everywhere. People stare.

"Yep, I touched a snake." I shrug. "Not just any snake. A monster. Like nothing I've ever touched."

"I'm sure what Emily's trying to say—" Sarah puts in, but Kate keeps talking right over her.

"I just hope your boss has a nice big snake!" She wags her eyebrows like a cartoon villain.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:38 pm

My face burns. “What? No!” I fix an if-looks-could-kill stare on Kate. “A kid brought in his pet, which just happened to be a boa constrictor. You know, actual reptile? With scales and fangs?”

“Gross!”

“Yeah, gross. My asshole boss forced me to hold on to the damn thing while he was doing surgery on it. It was horrible.” Not to mention how he stood behind me, his hands over mine. The heat of his chest against my back.

Kate reads my damn mind. “But is he hot? This boss guy?”

“So not the point.” Blood rushes to my face like a fire hose.

“That’s definitely a yes!” She looks ready to high-five herself.

“Are you sure you want to keep working there?” Sarah looks worried about me. About me and probably about all the poor, defenseless animals that will come into contact with me.

But it’s not like I had a choice, right? And I still haven’t told them that my asshole boss looks like something out of GQ, even if he does have a stick up his ass. All I can do is drink. I’m going to get so drunk I’ll still be feeling the effects on Monday morning when I go to work. Either that or I could bring a flask of whiskey and drink it whenever I have a break. One thing’s for sure, though, I’ll do whatever it takes to hang on to this job.

“So”—Kate raises her glass—“to Emily’s new job! May it last longer than the chicken suit gig!”

Sarah giggles. “Or the dog walking disaster!”

My empty glass clinks against theirs. Does that show determination on my part? Nah, it’s more about the two bucks in my wallet and the pile of bills I have to pay. Desperation, not determination.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Logan

Aweek. She’s stuck it out a whole damn week. After that mess with Mark and his boa, Rico, I figured she’d be long gone. Gotta hand it to the little kitten, she’s got bite.

The clinic feels different since Emily showed up. Maybe it’s how she hums while filing or those flowers she keeps dragging in for the front desk.

Mrs. Moore’s finally bailing today. I’ll miss her, but she’s earned her retirement. Weird how she keeps calling Emily Abigail, though. They’re huddled at the desk now, Mrs. Moore’s glasses sliding down her nose while she shows Emily that scheduling program for the millionth time.

“You two won’t burn the place down without me,” Amelia says, wandering over to pat my cheek. Her hands still smell like that lavender crap she’s used forever since I was that stupid kid who fell out of a tree at my grandparents’ place and she patched me up.

“Take care, Amelia.” I pull her in for a hug. God, she feels small. Time’s a bitch.

She tugs her sweater straight and heads for Emily. “Call if you need help, Abigail.” She pinches Emily’s cheek hard enough to make her yelp. The spot turns bright red.

“I’ll figure it out somehow, Mrs. Moore.”

Amelia scowls. “No booze at work, missy. We talked about this.”

Emily turns tomato-red, a blush crawling down her neck. “I meant I’ll be fine. I wasn’t saying I’d need to drink...” Her voice dies. “Nothing. I’ll miss you, Mrs. Moore.”

Amelia gives her the death stare before sighing and bear-hugging her. Over Emily’s shoulder, she mouths at me, “Watch her.”

I nod automatically. Never argue with Amelia’s weird sixth sense about people.

The bell jingles as she leaves, and suddenly, it’s just Emily and me in dead silence.

“Never seen Amelia go soft like that,” I mutter, grabbing some files. Paperwork is the world’s best shield when shit gets awkward.

“She’s cool,” Emily says, then drops her voice. “Kind of a weirdo, though.”

“What was that alcohol comment about?” I shouldn’t ask, but my mouth moves faster than my brain.

Her face goes red again. “Nothing,” she mumbles, suddenly fascinated by the appointment cards.

“Come on, now I’m dying to know.” None of my business, but something about Emily makes me want to peel back all her layers.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:39 pm

“Just...” She twists her shirt between her fingers.

“Emily.” My voice drops as I grab her chin. Her skin’s so soft it’s ridiculous. “Tell me what Amelia meant.” I let go fast, backing up when I realize how out of line that was.

“Fine.” She closes her eyes, trembling.

My body reacts instantly, blood heading south. I want to kiss her so bad I can taste it. No. Bad idea. Terrible idea.

Valerie’s face hits me like a punch. Her laugh, her big plans, all that life snuffed out too early. After her, I swore off young women with futures. Too damn risky for them, not me. I’m damaged goods and know it.

“Well?” My voice cracks like I’m thirteen again. I clear my throat twice.

“She asked what I did on the weekend,” she blurts. “I told her I went out and got wasted, and then I might’ve said I need a few drinks to deal with working here.” She bites her lip. “But I swear, I was only joking!”

“Right. Let me know when patients show up.” I escape to my office, slamming the door behind me. Does she need to get drunk to stand working with me? Shouldn’t care what she thinks, but fuck, it digs under my skin.

I drop into my chair and drag my hands through my hair. Why does it matter so much? I don’t need some girl ten years younger than me. Age matters.

Twentysomething still believes in fairy tales, Prince Charming, true love, and happily ever after. They figure out later it's all crap. Life's no Disney movie.

Valerie taught me that lesson when she died. Three years together. I thought we had forever. Her heart seemed fine until the pregnancy. That middle-of-the-night call. The drive to the hospital with my heart in my throat. The doctor's face told me everything before he said a word. Both gone, Valerie and my son.

After the funeral, I promised myself never again. No more bright-eyed girls with futures. No more gambling with someone else's life, just so I'm not alone.

I've settled for hookups and good times. No strings, no hearts on the line. That's all I do now. No relationships, no bullshit love talk. The last thing I need is some mouthy twenty-two-year-old who's barely started living.

I force myself to focus on today's files. When I'm halfway through the paperwork, screams explode from the waiting room.

"What the hell?" I bolt for the door.

"I told you we don't do that here!"

I burst into the waiting room to find my receptionist facing off with a client. Her finger jabs into the woman's chest. All five-foot-nothing of Emily squared up against someone who towers over her by at least eight inches. Her face is flushed.

The others waiting are watching like it's better than Netflix.

"What the hell is going on?" My voice booms.

Both women whip around. The client looks relieved, while Emily is still blazing with

anger.

“Dr. Price!” squeaks Blondie in her fancy suit with her perfect nails, perfect hair, perfect teeth. “This horrible girl has been nothing but rude! I demand you do something!” She grabs my arm as though I’m her personal bodyguard. Her perfume’s so strong my eyes water.

In my short time knowing Emily, she’s never been anything but professional with clients. Sometimes awkward, often blunt, but always cordial.

“Emily?” I give her a stern look. “Care to explain?”

Instead of backing down, she crosses her arms and lifts her chin as though she’s ready for war. The lights catch those gold flecks in her eyes, making them burn brighter. “The lady,” she practically spits, “needs to find another clinic. I was just helping her locate the exit.”

“Emily,” I growl, getting pissed.

“Logan,” she throws back, mocking my tone. Behind her tough act, I catch a flash of hurt. Makes me regret snapping at her.

“See?” the woman shrieks as her nails dig into my arm through my coat. “She’s completely out of line! No respect! You need to fire her immediately!”

Something protective surges through me. Even if Emily is a pain in the ass, nobody talks to my staff that way.

“Ma’am—”

Emily explodes. “She’s the problem! People like her shouldn’t have pets! She’s a

monster! A witch! A bit?—”

“Enough.” I peel the woman’s hand off my arm and turn to her. “Ma’am, you need to leave.” Her mouth opens, but I cut her off. “Don’t know what happened yet, but I trust Miss Baker. If she says you’re bad news for pets, I’m listening. Take your cat and go, Ms...”

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“Callaghan. You can’t kick me out!” Her face twists into an ugly rage.

“Actually, I can,” I answer, keeping my voice steady despite the memories crawling up my spine. “Or I can call animal control and let them handle it.”

I’ve reported abuse before. That’s part of the job. And I’ll do it again, even for wealthy clients with fancy lawyers.

Mrs. Callaghan’s mouth snaps shut. If looks could kill, I’d be a smoldering pile of ash. She looks ready to crack, her eyes darting between us. Finally, she storms out, cursing while the door cheerfully jingles behind her.

I turn to ask Emily what the hell just happened when she launches herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Knew you weren’t a complete ass,” she murmurs against my skin, her breath hot on my neck.

The watching clients fade into the background. All I can focus on is Emily pressed against me, smelling like citrus and sunshine, her tiny frame fitting against mine as if she were made for it.

My body reacts instantly. Don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I’m not complaining. Hands settle at her waist, feeling her warmth through her shirt. I shouldn’t enjoy this so much. I know I’m playing with fire here.

I pull back gently, clearing my throat. “Let’s talk in private. Folks, give us a minute, yeah? We’ll be right back.”

As we walk to my office, I feel the clients watching us. Emily's cheeks are flushed with embarrassment or leftover anger, which is hard to tell. One thing's for sure: my life has become a hell of a lot more interesting since she showed up.

Inside, I close the door. "Spill it. What happened?"

Emily takes a deep breath, squaring up as though she's heading into battle. "She wanted to declaw her cat. I told her we don't do that here."

Everything clicks. Declawing is a barbaric practice I've refused my whole career. Basically amputation that causes lifelong pain. Emily was dead right.

"You did good," I say, surprised at how warm my voice sounds. "Won't perform that procedure. It's cruel as hell."

The tension drains from her shoulders. She gives me a small, genuine smile. "Thanks for backing me up. Wasn't sure you would."

"Always. Animals come first here. Period."

For a moment, we just look at each other. Something shifts between us, some new understanding. Emily might be young, unpredictable, a total headache sometimes, but we're on the same page about what matters.

She loves these animals as much as I do, even when they scare the crap out of her. Weirdly endearing, that contradiction.

"Better get back out there," I say finally. "Got patients waiting."

Emily nods, but neither of us moves right away. So much unsaid hangs in the air. I should keep my distance and maintain those walls I built to protect everyone

involved.

But watching Emily fix her shirt and smooth her hair, getting ready to face the world again, I wonder if some rules are meant to be broken.

My phone buzzes right when I'm about to enter my apartment. Unknown number. After a hellish fourteen-hour shift at the clinic with yappy pets and their even yappier owners, my thumb's itching to hit decline, but some stupid part of me answers anyway.

"Yeah?"

"Logan?" Emily's voice comes through. "I need help!"

"Shit. What happened? You okay?"

"No, Demon is dying! She's—" Something crashes in the background, followed by a sound straight outta hell. "She's pooping from her mouth, Logan! From her freaking mouth!"

I yank the phone away from my ear. "She's... What the hell?"

"Pooping. From. Her. Mouth!" Emily shrieks, each word higher than the last. "Brown, nasty things coming out of her mouth! Pretty sure cats aren't supposed to work that way—which means she's broken, and I've killed another damn pet! First the goldfish bloodbath, and now this!"

My vet brain kicks in despite running on fumes, and I have a pretty good idea of what's going down. Gotta bite my cheek not to laugh. "How big are these... mouth poops?"

“I dunno! Three inches? Four? They’re disgusting and hairy and— Oh shit, she’s doing it again!”

Horrible retching sounds blast through the phone.

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“Emily,” I cut in, trying not to lose my shit laughing. “Just breathe, okay? Where exactly are you?”

“My apartment, drowning in cat mouth poop!”

“Text me the address. I’ll be there in twenty.”

The hallway stinks like someone died behind the walls, and something sticky as hell grabs my shoe on the fourth-floor climb. By the time I reach her door, the door flies open before I even knock. Emily looks like she stuck her finger in an electrical outlet. Her eyes are wild, and her hair shoots in fifty directions. Her ratty T-shirt says I’m probably thinking about pizza, and she’s wearing these shorts that show way too much leg for my sanity.

“Oh, thank fuck you’re here.” She drags me inside with scary-strong hands. “Crime scene’s over there.”

She points at three normal hairballs on her kitchen floor.

The apartment’s a glorified closet with a toilet. The furniture looks like she mugged a thrift store. Nothing matches, but somehow, it doesn’t look completely terrible together. Books are piled everywhere, and there’s Demon, sprawled on top of a bookshelf, casually licking her paw like the queen of the damn universe while chaos reigns below.

“Look at her!” Emily digs her nails into my arm. “Acting all innocent after breaking the laws of freaking nature!”

I drop my bag and check out the crime scene. “These aren’t mouth poops, Emily. Just hairballs.”

“Wait, what?” She flaps her hands at the evidence. “Why the hell do they call them balls? They’re not remotely ball-shaped! They’re like nasty cylinders! Should call them hair-logs or hair-turds or?—”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to bring that up at the next vet convention.” Can’t keep the laugh out of my voice. “Your cat’s fine. Totally disgusting but normal.”

Emily stares at me as though I’m speaking another language, eyes darting between me and the hairballs. “So... cats are supposed to barf up poop-shaped things?”

“Not poop. Just hair they swallow when they’re licking themselves that clumps up in their stomach.”

“So it’s... stomach fur... barf?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s nasty as hell.” Her face scrunches up.

Demon watches me approach with that superior cat look that says, This human thinks she owns me. Isn’t that adorable?

“What’s up, kitten?” I mutter under my breath. “Making your mom lose her mind?”

She lets me pick her up with just enough squirming to maintain her dignity. A quick check confirms what I already knew. The cat’s healthy as hell.

“She’s fine,” I tell Emily, who’s hovering behind us, still glaring at the hairballs as

though they might attack. “All cats do this gross stuff.”

“How the hell is puking up hair-tubes normal?”

Demon jumps from my arms as if she’s been insulted, and Emily smacks her forehead. “Oh, crap! I dragged your tired ass over here at ten thirty at night for fake poop!” Her face goes tomato-red. “I’m such a disaster.”

I finally lose it and laugh. “Trust me, I’ve heard worse.”

“But I bet nobody ever calls their vet screaming about their cat’s mouth poop.” She groans, shoving her face into her hands.

“Let me help clean this mess up.” I nod at the hairballs.

“God, no. You’ve done enough. I can handle the nasty hair-turds.”

“Shut up and let me help.” I grab paper towels from her cluttered counter and squat next to the first hairball. “All part of the emergency service.”

While we clean, she keeps shooting me these embarrassed looks. “Next time I’ll just Google cat barfing weird shit before freaking out and calling you.”

“Or just call me.” My mouth runs ahead of my brain. “Boss’s orders.”

Something changes in her face that makes my heart slam against my ribs. “Even at ten thirty when you’re dead tired?”

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“Especially then.” Our fingers touch when I hand her the last paper towel. Neither of us moves away.

“I’ll remember that.” Her voice drops to something that makes my skin tingle. “Thanks for coming over, by the way,” she says softly. “I know it wasn’t life or death.”

“Anytime,” I say back—and damn if I don’t mean it.

The shoebox apartment feels microscopic now. From her throne, Demon stares down, judging our pathetic attempt at keeping things professional.

This isn’t just wanting someone anymore. I actually like Emily Baker, with her disaster apartment, her crazy energy, her stupid pizza shirt, and the way she chews her lip when she’s nervous, like she’s doing right now.

Bad idea. Really fucking bad idea.

But when she steps closer, smelling like vanilla, I can’t remember why I’m supposed to care.

And this is when the cat starts throwing up again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Emily

I've endured two weeks at the Price Veterinary Clinic. Fourteen days of answering phones, scheduling appointments, and dodging the murderous intentions of Manhattan's pet population. My relationship with our furry clients? It's still a total shit show.

Yet somehow, I've survived.

"Last appointment just left," I call to Logan, who's still scribbling notes in his office. The clock says seven thirty, which is way past when we should have locked up.

My shoulders are killing me, and my feet are straight-up cussing at me for the dumbass cute flats I picked this morning.

Logan comes out of his office. He's ditched the white coat for a dark button-down that makes his eyes look stupid green. His tie's loose, and he's got that crazy end-of-day thing going that makes me wanna mess him up more.

"Ready to lock up?" He rolls up his sleeves, and holy shit, those forearms. It should come with a warning label. Danger: hot as hell, may cause panties to spontaneously combust.

"I have to finish filing these charts." I rip my gaze off him. It's so wrong to mentally undress him. Though I totally do. All the time. When he's too busy being Mr. Perfect to catch me doing it.

And the worst part? He's being... nice.

Not friendly nice. Logan Price doesn't do friendly. His emotional range goes from pissed off to barely tolerating your existence. But I'm working on it.

I'm halfway through alphabetizing the H-K folders when the front door explodes

open. A woman stumbles in, her face streaked with tears and mascara, and she's clutching a blood-soaked bundle to her chest.

“Please,” she gasps between sobs. “Someone help him!”

Logan materializes beside me. “What happened?”

The woman sobs. “C-car... He ran... I couldn't—” She collapses onto the floor, clutching the bundle tighter.

“Ma'am, I need to know what happened to treat your dog effectively.” Logan's voice stays measured but firm. His eyes narrow at the corners.

“Don't let him die!” she wails, rocking back and forth. “Please, don't let him die!”

Logan's shoulders square and his jaw tightens as he retreats further behind his doctor shield.

Before my brain catches up to my body, I'm on the floor next to the sobbing woman, abandoning all customer service protocols that would've given Mrs. Moore a stroke.

“Hey.” My voice strips away all that professional polish crap. “What's your dog's name?”

She blinks through mascara rivers. “M-Milo.”

“Milo. Solid name.” I lock eyes with her. “Look, you're scared shitless right now. I would be too. But Milo needs you to pull it together for three minutes.”

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Logan makes a strangled sound behind me, probably mentally drafting my termination notice, but I press on.

“See that guy?” I jerk my thumb toward Logan. “He's the best. I've watched him perform surgery on a snake that swallowed a tennis ball. Basically extracting a watermelon from a garden hose. But he can't help Milo without knowing what happened.” I grip her arm. “Take a deep breath. Then tell us when Milo got hit. How long ago?”

My bluntness cuts through her panic fog. She inhales shakily. “About twenty minutes ago. He slipped his leash chasing a squirrel. The car wasn't going fast, but?—”

“Good information.” I stand, maintaining contact with her arm. “Now we let go of Milo so Dr. Price can help him. Okay?”

She nods, finally surrendering the small dog to Logan.

After what seems like hours but is no more than forty-five minutes, Logan comes out of the room, rolling his shoulders. “He needed surgery to repair the internal damage, but everything went well, and he's stable now.”

Relief liquefies my knees into Jell-O. “So he'll be okay?”

“His prognosis is guarded but hopeful.”

After letting Milo's owner see her dog and convincing her to go home until morning, I collapse into my chair. The adrenaline abandons me, leaving me shaking and tired

as fuck. I close my eyes, gathering enough energy to lock up without face-planting on the reception desk.

When I open my eyes, Logan stands before me with a steaming mug.

“Coffee.” He sets it on the desk. “You look like you need it.”

“Thanks.” The warmth seeps into my fingers. “Sorry for the whole sit-on-the-floor thing. Not exactly from the professional handbook.”

He leans against the desk, closer than usual. “It was exactly what she needed.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I get stuck sometimes. Like there's only one way to handle things.”

“And I never stick to any path,” I reply with a half-smile. “Drives everyone certifiably insane.”

“Not everyone.” His eyes capture mine. “Sometimes chaos is exactly what's needed.”

I blink, uncertain I heard correctly. “Did you just... compliment my chaotic nature? Should I check for a fever? Call an exorcist?”

His mouth quirks into that almost-smile that's becoming dangerously addictive to provoke. “Don't push it, Baker. Finish locking up. I'll take you home.”

I force my trembling legs to stand, placing the empty mug in the sink before gathering my things. Logan moves through the clinic, checking on Milo one last time, dimming the lights, and setting the security system.

By the time we slide into his car, the momentary connection feels like a dream, and we're back to our usual embarrassing silence. The dashboard suddenly looks inviting as a hiding spot.

“So,” I venture, trying to break the ice, “did Mrs. Moore work a long time for you?” It's a pathetic attempt, but it's all I can think of right now. If that doesn't work, I can always comment on the weather.

“Yes” is all the answer I get.

“Um, okay. How long?” Okay, it would have been better to talk about the weather then. “I'm sure she'll miss you.”

Silence. I roll my eyes, frustrated by the man behind the wheel. I mean, jeez, make a little effort, won't you?

“It's pretty cold tonight,” I continue to blather on.

He shoots me a glance from the corner of his eye. “Yeah.”

I give up. The absolute silence falls again as we near my neighborhood. I don't live in the posh part of the city, a fact I suddenly become painfully aware of when Logan draws the car up in front of my building.

I've always known it, of course. It isn't the first time I've seen someone sleeping on the stairs up to the entrance, propped up against the wall with an empty bottle next to him. And I can't deny I've noticed those rough-looking guys circling the cars parked on the street. But with Logan next to me, it suddenly all seems... worse. I have no idea what his neighborhood is like, but from the expensive suits he wears and the high-end clientele his practice attracts, I have the feeling he's not doing too badly.

As if these thoughts don't make me feel bad enough, the expression on his face as he looks around makes it crystal clear how out of place he feels in a neighborhood like this.

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I heave a sigh and say, “Thanks for the ride.” Pulling on the door handle, I try to slip out of the car as quickly as I can.

“Wait,” he says, taking my elbow. “Let me walk you.” There’s a note of uncertainty in his voice. He keeps looking around with a worried expression. “Do you think it's safe to leave the car parked here? I didn't really think about it the last time I came.”

“I don't know.” I shrug. I've never had a car to park.

“Luckily, I have good insurance,” he mutters, letting go of my elbow and opening his door.

I'm about to protest and say he doesn't need to accompany me to the door, but Logan's already on the sidewalk waiting for me. Closing my eyes, I let out a sigh. I hope nothing happens to his car. How embarrassing would it be if someone stole my boss's car and it was all my fault?

I give my head a shake to drive that idea away. It's better not to think about it, but I offer up a silent prayer to the big Boss in the sky that nothing happens to Logan's car. Yep, I'm that desperate.

Walking quickly, I brush past him on the way up the stairs to the lobby. Opening the door, I rush inside, pulling him in behind me.

I'm used to climbing the four flights of stairs every day, but I have to admit I'm surprised that Logan's not even out of breath when we finally get to my floor. I stop to admire his body, biting my lower lip. He's got the physique of someone who trains

a lot, and the results are finger-licking good.

I'm busy drooling, standing behind my boss, when the door to my apartment suddenly flies open. Startled, I jump backward and get tangled up in my own feet. I'm just about to fall on my butt when Logan lunges toward me and grabs me around the waist.

I almost manage to forget about the man who just charged out of my apartment with the angriest look on his face I've ever seen. Almost, but not quite.

“You're out! Right now!” my landlord bellows. He's got a pulsating vein in his forehead, and his eyes are tiny slits. “I want you out of this apartment right this minute!”

My stomach plummets. “Mr. Green?—”

“Now, Emily! That monster you've got in there has destroyed everything. The neighbors have been complaining about the noise for days.” He shakes his head, looking both exhausted and exasperated. I almost feel sorry for him. “You have to move out and take that-thatthingwith you. No pets are allowed in this building, as you, miss, well know.”

The world seems to tilt around me. This can't be happening. Not now. Not when I'm barely making ends meet as it is.

“Mr. Green, you can't kick me out this way!” I'm begging now. Tears prick at my eyes. “Where will I go?”

The cold reality of homelessness looms before me. I'll have to sleep in shelters or, worse, on the street. My meager savings wouldn't cover even a week in a cheap motel.

“That's not my problem!” he spits furiously, throwing his arms up. “I'll let you know what the damages are and how much rent you still owe me.” He marches toward me, passing me without a backward glance on his way to the stairs. No sooner is he out of sight than the tears spill over and run down my cheeks.

“Now, what am I going to do?” I say in a desperate whisper. “Where can I go? I can't afford a hotel.”

“We'll find a solution.” The voice is low and kind.

My heart does a flip, but then I remember who the voice belongs to and the pitiful state I'm in at the moment. I'm sobbing and crying, not in the sweet, ladylike way some women manage to pull off, but in a really ugly way. Snot runs down my upper lip, and I know my eyes must be red and swollen. I'm a wreck, and the worst part is, I'm having a nervous breakdown right in front of my boss, the sexiest man ever.

“Emily,” he says, putting his hand against my back. “Everything's going to be fine. You can—” He swallows audibly and takes a deep breath. “You can stay with me for a few days.”

At a moment like this, I should show a modicum of self-control and a little self-respect. Yet all I can do, after a long period of silence during which my mind suddenly goes blank and my mouth opens and closes like some stupid goldfish, is squeal and throw myself at Logan, wrapping my arms around his neck and jumping on him as if he were a tree and me some demented monkey.

Definitely not one of my finer moments. Although...

What could be even more embarrassing than climbing all over my boss, my face smeared with snot and crusty tears?

Well, just then, something hard presses into my lower belly. Just to be sure, I move my pelvis a tiny bit. It's now that I should be embarrassed, and I am. Kind of. Along with a lot of other things, like horny as fuck.

Luckily, or not, Logan seems to sense my internal dilemma. Clearing his throat, he puts his hands on my waist and sets my feet back on solid ground. Literally. "I'll help you get your things together," he says, his voice a little gruff. Avoiding my eyes, he heads toward the open door of my apartment.

I decide to let his weird reaction go for now. That and the huge erection that's still straining against the front of his pants. Instead, I limit myself to admiring his ass. I can't hold back a sigh of longing. Logan's my boss, not to mention a narcissistic jerk who thinks the world revolves around him, and, after tonight, my new roommate. Definitely off-limits. But a girl can dream, right? I linger a few more seconds, drooling behind him, then decide maybe I'd better follow him inside.

When I step into the apartment, I immediately understand why Mr. Green was so upset. The living room looks like a war zone. The couch cushions are scattered on the floor, their stuffing erupting from long gashes in the fabric. Feathers are everywhere, drifting like snow in the faint breeze from the open door. The coffee table has deep gouges on one side, and the glass top is cracked in more than one place.

Even the TV lies on the floor, and the electric cord is chewed to such an extent that I think maybe I've got mice in my apartment. But no. The culprit is sitting next to my precious ficus plant. Or rather, what's left of it. My ficus is now only a sad stump with a few mangled leaves desperately clinging to life.

She looks at me with her little yellow eyes as if challenging me. Like she's telling me, You can't do anything to me, you stupid human. Her tail swishes slowly back and forth across the floor.

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Logan approaches the furry little demon. His forehead puckers in a frown as he bends over and picks up the cat. “You really have been a bad kitten, haven't you?” he reproves her in that low, velvety voice that makes me melt.

I know he's not talking to me, but I still have to bite my tongue to keep from answering him because I wish he were mad at me. I wish I could say to him, Yes, sir, I've been really bad. So bad I deserve a spanking.

Instead, I keep my inner moans and whimpers to myself. Or at least I try to. When Logan turns toward me, I realize I haven't been discreet enough.

“Everything okay?” he asks, his tone preoccupied.

I bite my lip and nod, not brave enough to speak.

He continues. “Everything's going to work out, Emily. We'll find a solution.”

Oh, but I'm not worried about that. Obviously, I can't say that to him, just like I can't tell him that my panties are soaking and that I'm about to come just from the sound of his voice. I feel like I'm getting hot. The room suddenly feels small and suffocating.

“I'll just go get my stuff,” I say, running for my room. Once inside, I close the door behind me.

How can I live with a man who has this effect on me?

Opening the drawer of my bedside table, I take out the vibrator my friends gave me

for my birthday. It was probably Kate's idea since I doubt that Sarah, the sweet virgin, would have had the courage to buy a sex toy. I'm getting the feeling we're going to be spending a lot of time together, especially now that I'm going to be living in the same house with my gorgeous Superman he-man who exudes sex from every pore. It's probably not the best idea to accept his invitation, but what choice do I have? It's either freeze to death on the streets of New York or learn to live with my sexual frustration. It's a tough choice.

Heaving yet another exasperated sigh, I toss it into my suitcase and begin to pack my stuff. It's only a temporary solution. As soon as I can save a little money, I can find another apartment or move in with Sarah or Kate. A few days at Logan's house can't be that terrible, right?

After throwing all my belongings, which are embarrassingly few, into my small suitcase, I return to the living room, where I find Logan writing something on a piece of paper. When I approach, I realize what's in his hand isn't a piece of paper. It's a check.

"What are you doing?" I ask him, horrified.

"Covering the damages and what's left of your rent," he replies calmly, as if he's handing me a few pennies instead of hundreds of dollars.

"That's not necessary, Logan," I protest. "I can pay." The lie sounds pathetic even to me.

"It's no problem," he says curtly, walking into the kitchen and leaving the check on one of the shelves. "Do you have everything?"

"Yes," I murmur, still bewildered by what he just did.

His eyes go to the small suitcase at my feet, and he frowns but says nothing. He bends over to pick it up.

“You don't need to, I can carry it,” I hasten to say, but Logan, with his usual dark knight attitude, ignores my words and goes toward a corner where he put the carrier with the cat inside. Gotta admit, the guy's super-efficient. He not only managed to get Demon inside the carrier, but he also tried to clean up the living room.

I follow him out the door, still stunned by his behavior. I know Logan's not a monster. There have been moments when I've even seen the hint of a smile on his face. But all his kindness is normally devoted to animals, or at least to other people. People who aren't me.

When we finally climb into his SUV, which, thank God, is still intact, I'm so confused about his sudden show of humanity that I don't even try to break the silence by making small talk. I just stare at him not too discreetly during the whole trip.

I've always assumed Logan is wealthy. He wears designer suits, drives an expensive car, and has a vet clinic in the heart of Manhattan. But as we drive along Central Park and he finally parks in front of one of those luxury Upper East Side high-rises, I realize just how wealthy. I didn't think a vet made that much money, but I guess I was wrong.

I'm so absorbed in admiring the tall building, my mouth no doubt hanging open, that I'm not even aware that Logan's turned to me and is watching me with the usual scowl on his face.

“Shall we?” he asks, a tinge of uncertainty in his voice.

I nod and open the car door, stumbling as I climb out, naturally. I feel so out of place.

Logan gets out and opens the back gate of the SUV to take out the carrier and my suitcase.

“Are you sure Demon is allowed in a... place like this?” I wave at the imposing skyscraper in front of me.

“Animals are allowed,” he says, walking toward the lobby door. “I have a dog.”

Behind him, I give a start, stopping in my tracks for a second at his last word. “A dog?”

He told me that already, but I must have blocked it out. Great, another animal that probably wants to maul me.

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“Yes, a Saint Bernard. His name is Bob.”

We're in the opulent lobby now, walking toward the elevators. A man is sitting behind a desk waving hello to us, but I'm too focused on what I just found out to pay attention.

“You mean like Beethoven?” The movie's the only reason I know what kind of dog he's talking about. If I remember right, a Saint Bernard is a huge dog. I swallow, feeling my palms begin to sweat. “You know, maybe this isn't such a good idea. I mean, cats and dogs don't get along, right? Maybe I can find somewhere else to spend the night. A hotel room or something.”

“It's not a problem,” he says, ignoring everything I just said. “Bob's a really good dog. I'm sure he and Demon won't have any problem bonding.”

I'm not worried about the fucking cat. I'm worried about me. The last time Logan called a dog a good dog, the thing looked at me as if it wanted to devour me.

The elevator arrives at the top floor with a loud ding. I step out, feeling as if I'm headed to the guillotine. And right this minute, having my head cut off seems like a kinder fate than being mauled to death by a monster that weighs more than I do.

Only two doors are opening off the landing. I follow Logan and wait for him to put his key into the lock. Here we go. The door opens into an enormous open space. Floor-to-ceiling windows run the length of one whole wall. A cozy-looking sofa sits in front of a massive flat-screen TV. The kitchen island stands in the middle of the room, with two stools on one side. Behind it stands a huge, double-door fridge. How

much does Logan eat that he needs a refrigerator that big?

The answer runs up to me. He's almost as tall as I am, with two enormous round eyes and a tongue that lolls out of his mouth. The last coherent thought that goes through my mind before I fall backward under the weight of the giant animal, other than the sudden realization that, of course, you would need a fridge that big to feed a beast of that size, is that he really does look like a Bob.

What the hell have I gotten myself into this time?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Logan

I'm so fucked. I knew it the second I opened my stupid mouth and invited Emily to crash at my place. Her reaction, jumping on me as if I were some kind of human jungle gym, took me by surprise, and my dick reacted exactly how you'd expect.

She definitely noticed. How could she not feel my hard-on pressing against her? The weird part is she didn't say anything about it. Maybe she's not into me. Maybe that's why she didn't call me out right there.

We just got to my place, and I'm still obsessing over it. I can feel her eyes on me while I fumble with the lock. She's obviously uncomfortable, and I don't blame her. I'm her boss, for Christ's sake, and I've been acting like a horny teenager instead of a professional. She probably only accepted my offer because she was desperate. I don't know if she has family nearby or friends she could stay with. I barely know anything about this woman except that every time she's near me, my dick turns to steel.

As we walk in, I watch her reaction from the corner of my eye. My place is a far cry from that sad little apartment she lived in, though hers actually felt like someone

lived there. Mine is sterile, with no photos and no personal shit lying around. Everything's spotless and organized. Cold, just like me.

For a second, I see my apartment through her eyes. The stark white walls, the spotless countertops that rarely see any actual cooking. The only personal touch is a worn leather dog collar hanging by the door.

She starts to say something but lets out this little shriek instead when Bob comes charging in, plants his massive paws on her shoulders, and knocks her flat.

"Bob, no!" I yell, but it's too late. The giant mutt already has his tongue out and is slobbering all over Emily's face. I drop her suitcase and the carrier with her cat inside and rush to save her, pulling Bob away so she can breathe. "Sorry, he gets excited."

I hold out my hand. Emily's eyes are huge, and her face is ghost white. When she takes my hand, she's trembling.

"I promise Bob wouldn't hurt a fly," I tell her, but I don't think she buys it.

She nods anyway, those big brown eyes still fixed on my dog. "I'll let Bob go now if that's okay?" She nods again, still pale as hell.

Despite his overly friendly welcome, Bob really is a good dog. He sits on his backside and watches Emily, with his tongue hanging out like an idiot.

"You can pet him if you want," I tell her.

She reaches out one small hand, visibly shaking as she touches Bob's fur. After a few seconds, she pulls away and looks at me. "Wait a minute," she says, narrowing her eyes. Her expression shifts from fear to suspicion. "When I asked you to take Demon, you said your dog doesn't play well with others. But Bob seems perfectly friendly."

Shit. I forgot about that lie. Heat creeps up my neck.

“Did you just... make that up so you wouldn't have to take my cat?”

“I, uh...” I run a hand through my hair, avoiding her eyes. “Bob can be... selective. With who he likes.”

“Selective?” She crosses her arms, but a smirk forms at the corner of her mouth. “He just tried to French kiss me two seconds after meeting me.”

“Maybe he has good taste.” The words slip out before I can stop them. Her eyebrows shoot up, and I clear my throat, desperate to change the subject. “What do you say we let the cat out and check out your room?”

“Okay,” she whispers.

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I bend to open the carrier, praying my dog and her cat don't start World War III in my living room. The black cat stalks out, looking around as if she owns the place. She sniffs the floor, walks up to Bob, studies him for a moment, then decides he's beneath her notice and wanders off to explore.

I should be worried about my furniture after seeing what that little monster did to Emily's apartment. Still, honestly, I don't give a shit. I can replace anything she destroys. Nothing in this place means anything to me anyway, which is pretty fucking sad when you think about it.

It reminds me of something my therapist said years ago before I stopped going. "Your reluctance to form attachments to objects mirrors your fear of forming attachments to people." I blew her off then, but now I wonder if she had a point. My apartment is basically a fancy hotel room, functional but empty. Safe.

I shake it off. "This way," I say, leading her to the guest rooms. I've got three bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a living room big enough to park a car in.

"Wow, this is amazing," she says when we walk into the guest room.

I can't help but smile. She's so easily impressed. It's kind of sweet.

The room's done in neutral colors, beige, cream, and light blue, with some abstract painting over the bed. The decorator picked it out, along with everything else. It's supposed to be the ocean or some shit, but it's always looked like a storm.

"There's your own bathroom through there, and the closet's empty if you want to

unpack.”

“Thank you, Logan.” She turns toward me and takes my hand. “Really, what you've done is—” Her voice breaks, and her eyes fill with tears.

She looks so fragile suddenly, so different from the spitfire she usually is. Something tightens in my chest. I want to pull her against me and tell her everything will be okay. The feeling scares the hell out of me.

“It's nothing,” I say quickly. “Make yourself comfortable. I'll be out there if you need anything.” I bolt before she can respond.

Back in the kitchen, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. This girl does something to me. When she's sad, I'm sad. When she smiles, I want to smile too.

I don't even recognize myself anymore.

I grab a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet, pour a shot, and wander into the living room. Dropping onto the couch, I take a sip, trying to calm the fuck down.

It's been years since I lived with a woman. Valerie and I met in college. We were friends first, her, me, and my buddy Stephen. We were practically joined at the hip. Took me a year to get the balls to ask her out. After that first date, things moved fast, and six months later, she moved in. Everything was perfect, even though we were both career obsessed. Marriage and kids seemed like a distant maybe.

I can still hear her laugh. It was the first thing I noticed about her. She sat behind me in Biology 101, and when the professor made this lame-ass joke about mitochondria, most people groaned, but Valerie laughed. A real laugh, not that politelittle chuckle people give to unfunny professors. I turned around to see who could find that funny, and there she was, those green eyes sparkling.

Valerie knew all about my fucked-up family. The alcoholic dad, the mom who died when I was eight. I told her right away I didn't want kids, but she got pregnant anyway.

I roll the glass between my hands. Emily reminds me of her in some ways. She's tiny like Valerie was. Her hair's darker, though, and her eyes are this intense hazel color, while Valerie's were green. But they've got the same smile. That smile some girls have, the one that brings men to their knees. The kind you miss like hell when it's gone.

I down the rest of my drink and get up for another. As I grab the whiskey, debating whether to skip the glass and drink straight from the bottle, the door to the guest room opens. Emily changed into shorts and an oversized T-shirt. She's barefoot, her hair wet from the shower.

“Your shower's amazing. I could live in your bathroom!” she says, plopping onto one of the stools at the kitchen island.

I smile at her. “Want something to drink?”

She glances at the bottle in my hand and shrugs. “Sure, why not? I think I deserve one. I mean, I'm basically homeless, right?” She gives this laugh that doesn't reach her eyes.

“We'll figure something out.” I lay my hand over hers, and an electric shock runs up my arm.

“Looks like we generate sparks,” she jokes but quickly pulls her hand away, cheeks turning pink. I clear my throat and turn to grab another glass. When I look back, she's staring at her lap, hands folded.

“Here you go,” I say, filling the glass and sliding it to her. “Sorry, I don't have anything else.”

“This is fine.” She takes a sip and wrinkles her nose. She doesn't put it down, though.

I'm shit at small talk, and Emily seems focused on drowning her sorrows, so we just sip in silence. When I finish my second drink, I decide to call it a night.

“I should—” we say at the same time.

She stands up, and suddenly, we're pressed together. My eyes drop to her lips, and I wonder what they taste like. I could find out. All I have to do is lean in a little closer. My hands settle on her hips as if they have a mind of their own, fingers brushing against her T-shirt.

The scent of her shampoo, something sweet, fills my nose.

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Emily's lips part, and her eyes lock on mine with an intensity that tells me she wouldn't stop me if I kissed her right now. I breathe her in. That vanilla-scented shampoo drives me crazy. Everything about her drives me crazy.

She takes her lower lip between her teeth as I bring my face closer. Fuck, I love when she does that. My dick springs to attention, and I know one taste won't be enough.

Then it hits me.

Valerie in that hospital bed, face waxy and pale, machines beeping frantically. Doctors rushing in, pushing me away. "Sir, you need to let us work."

With a sigh, I give up, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead instead. "Good night, Emily," I murmur against her skin.

It takes every ounce of willpower I have to take my hands off her hips and turn toward my bedroom. But I can't cross that line, even if it means going to bed with blue balls.

I broke my rules once with Valerie, and I'm not making the same mistake twice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Emily

Itouch my forehead. I can still feel the warmth of his lips against my skin. You know when your heart starts to beat so hard you could swear you're about to have a heart

attack? That's what I'm feeling right now. I don't think I've ever felt anything like it before.

I've had enough emotion for one day. Maybe I am about to have a heart attack. Or maybe it's all Logan's fault. He's the one who makes my heart beat like this.

Standing in the kitchen, I trace my fingers along the cool marble countertop, trying to steady myself. Through the vast windows, the city is spread out below, a carpet of twinkling lights against the darkness. It's beautiful but intimidating, like Logan.

I go to my room, desperately trying to figure out what just happened. I mean, he just broke every rule in the book! Everyone knows the kissing distance rule. When two mouths are less than an inch and a half apart, there is inevitably a kiss. At least that's what always happens in the movies. But Logan didn't obey this rule. Instead, he chose to leave me like this. Horny as fuck!

Closing the bedroom door behind me, I lean against it and slide to the floor. What is it about this man that gets under my skin? I've never been the type to get all fluttery over a guy. Sure, I've had crushes, but nothing like this, this constant awareness, this physical pull. It's like my body knows something my brain hasn't figured out yet.

I knew that vibrator would come in handy sometime. Grabbing it, I let myself sink into the mattress, and my hand slides down over my stomach and under the elastic of my panties. Logan's hands are bigger. I touch my clit with one finger and give a small moan. Even Logan's fingers are big. I'm sure he could make me come in a second.

I continue to stroke myself as the image of the hot vet appears in my mind. If he were here right now, my fingers would be burying themselves in his thick, dark blond hair. I would lose myself in his big green eyes for a moment before bringing his face close to mine and claiming his lips in a passionate kiss.

Now he's teasing me with his tongue, licking my lower lip, then biting it. Only later, when I'm already panting, desperate for him, does he slide his tongue into my mouth, kissing me the way I'm quite sure only Logan Price can.

In my fantasy, his hands are gentle but commanding, exploring my body with a confidence that makes me shiver. He whispers in my ear, telling me exactly what he wants to do to me, what he wants me to do to him. His voice is rough with need, his words making me wetter still.

He's naked above me, and I'm naked below him. I don't know at what point we got undressed. In my fantasies, Logan rarely has clothes on. The head of his cock presses against my opening, and I cry out when he finally penetrates me. It feels so good, and I know I won't last long.

He pushes himself inside me. At first, he's gentle, but then he starts to go faster. I can see the change in his eyes. He wants me. He desires me. He craves me.

“Harder,” I whisper. “Give me more.”

He obeys and drives his cock deeper into me, harder. In and out. My eyes roll back, and I shout his name as my orgasm slams into me.

“Oh, Logan, yes! Yes, like that! Logan!”

“Emily?”

My eyes fly open. The vibrator's still pressed to my clit, and my body's shaking from the amazing orgasm I just had. I look around, momentarily disoriented. An instant later, reality hits me like a bucket of cold water.

Oh shit.

“Yes?” My voice is husky and trembly. There's a moment of silence before I hear Logan's voice again.

“Is everything all right in there?” His voice is hesitant. No doubt he's confused. I mean, I would be if I heard someone shouting my name like that.

My face burns with mortification. The walls in this apartment must be thinner than I thought. I can picture him standing outside my door, his ear pressed against the wood, his expression a mixture of shock and... what? Amusement? Disgust? Arousal?

“Um, of course!”

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“Okay. I'm sorry, I thought I heard something. Probably just my imagination.”
There's a pause. “Okay, so I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, see you tomorrow!” I squeak, my voice shrill. I hear his steps retreating and grab the pillow, pressing it against my face. I can't believe Logan heard me masturbating. I scream my frustration into the pillow and try not to overthink the fact that my boss just heard me cry his name in the grip of my orgasm. I could die of embarrassment.

Part of me wonders why he didn't say anything more or, worse, open the door. Maybe he didn't know what was happening? Or maybe he was just being polite? There's no way to know without asking him directly, and there's no way in hell I'll do that.

Despite my mortification, a yawn escapes me. Tomorrow. I yawn again. I can die of embarrassment tomorrow when I see Logan. For now, though, I'll close my eyes and let sleep take me away. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to dream of more unbridled lovemaking with the handsome veterinarian.

A girl can always dream, right?

Since I forgot to close the curtains last night, the sun is shining right into my eyes. I groan, cursing myself for forgetting. I hate being woken up that way. There's nothing poetic about opening my eyes because a stupid ray of sunshine decides to hit me right in the face.

This ridiculously comfortable bed isn't helping matters either. The mattress feels like it's cradling me in a cloud, and the sheets are so soft I wonder if they're made of angel

feathers or something. Way too easy to oversleep in these conditions.

I continue to grumble, muttering words even I can't understand under my breath. I'm definitely not a morning person. I don't wake up singing, every hair in place, and my face as radiant as someone who just got back from the spa.

Decidedly not. Half my face is sticky, and my hair looks worse than some ragged, unpruned bush. I run my fingers through it, trying to untangle the knots, but quickly give up. I'm not good for anything until my body has its proper dose of caffeine. I can't even comb my hair.

Yawning hugely, I climb out of bed, then pad to the door and drag myself to the kitchen. There, I don't even stop to say good morning to Logan. I just head straight for the coffee machine. When I put the cup to my lips and the first drop of the blessed substance meets my taste buds, I give a little moan of satisfaction.

Logan is leaning against the counter, already dressed in a white shirt and dark slacks. His hair is damp from the shower, and the cologne he's wearing mingles with the rich aroma of coffee. He looks like he stepped out of a men's fashion magazine. Meanwhile, I'm sure I resemble something that just crawled out from under a rock.

"Good morning?" Logan observes me, a half-smile on his lips. He looks amused.

I give him a half-hearted wave that's meant to be a greeting. I admit it could also be taken as a gesture that says Leave me the fuck alone.

"Not a morning person?"

I answer that with a grunt.

"Okay, then." He chuckles. "We can talk when you've had your coffee."

Suddenly, the blood leaves my face, and my legs become jelly-like. I swallow hard. “About what?” My voice quivers.

“About this whole situation.”

Oh my God. He heard me. He heard me playing with myself last night while thinking about him. In his guest room.

My stomach does a nauseating flip. I'm going to have to find somewhere else to live. There's no way I can stay here after he heard me. And work. Oh God, I'll have to quit my job too. Which means I'll have no income, no place to live, and no way to feed that demonic cat. I'll end up living in a cardboard box with Demon, who'll probably eat my face while I sleep.

“Um, what situation?” I whisper.

“You're living here, Emily. I want to know if there's anything you need. What food you like? So I can buy things for you. That sort of thing. Roommate stuff, in other words.”

“Oh, that's what you want to talk about!” I say with a little too much enthusiasm.

He raises an eyebrow. “Why? Is there something else you wanted to tell me?”

For a split second, I consider coming clean. Just blurting it out: “I was masturbating and thinking about you last night, and you probably heard me, so can we just get the awkwardness out of the way?” But looking at his perfect face and confident stance, I chicken out. Some things are better left unsaid.

“No, no,” I hasten to say. “And about your question, I really need nothing. You've done so much for me, Logan, and I don't want to impose on you any more than I have

to. I'll start looking for a new place as soon as possible. So really, don't worry about me. You've been so kind, and I don't even know how to begin to repay you."

"There's no need." His expression changes suddenly, his face darkening. There's something different in his eyes. e pushes himself away from the counter and begins to walk away, saying over his shoulder, "We can go to work together."

"Of course, thank you!" I watch his back as he disappears through his bedroom door. And to think that for a moment, I feared Logan might actually be a sunny, friendly guy. But no, he's his usual grumpy self. I was beginning to worry that he'd been snatched by aliens and that the person I'd been dealing with was a clone. I giggle stupidly at the thought as I go back to my room. I'd better hurry if I want to tame the mop of my hair and look halfway presentable for work.

Bob watches me from the hallway, his tail thumping lazily against the hardwood floor.

"Don't look at me like that," I tell him. "Your owner is the weird one, not me."

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The Saint Bernard cocks his head to the side as if considering my claim, then trots off toward Logan's bedroom. At least someone in this apartment knows where his loyalty lies.

To my great surprise, I manage to get ready in record time. Or at least record time for me. Pulling my hair back into a ponytail saves me a lot of time. I emerge from my room wearing a yellow pencil skirt and a white blouse. I have my favorite heels on, with my bag in one hand and my coat in the other.

It's so nice not to have to wear an ugly orange uniform or a hideous chicken costume. And even though this isn't exactly the job I imagined myself in, I'm beginning to like it. Having the sexiest boss in the world is a plus.

The mere thought of Logan is enough to make him appear in the living room. I could spend hours drooling over him, but it wouldn't be professional.

Yeah, right. As if playing with myself while fantasizing about him and jumping on top of him every time he turns around is. Sometimes I don't even understand how my own mind works.

“Ready to go?” Logan's voice interrupts my twisted thoughts.

I give him a bright smile. “Yes, sir!”

His eyes light up as he surveys me from head to toe, and his Adam's apple moves up and down as he swallows. His jaw tightens slightly. With a quick nod, he walks past me toward the front door.

Weird.

I follow him. Before going out the door, I pause to look around. I haven't seen Bob or Demon this morning, which is odd. "Um, Logan, are you sure it's a good idea to leave the animals alone here?"

Like me, he turns back and sweeps his eyes around the apartment, looking for the two pests. "Don't worry about it. Mrs. Potter will be here in a minute and take care of them."

"Who's Mrs. Potter?" I've never heard him mention that name before.

"His housekeeper, obviously!" This doesn't come from Logan. The person I imagine to be the mysterious Mrs. Potter is standing behind him. She's barely five feet tall, if that, and has a classic sweet grandma kind of face. Her gray hair is pulled back into a perfect chignon, and small wrinkles appear around her mouth as she gives me a warm smile.

"Good morning, Mary," Logan says, turning around and hugging her.

"No, no," Mrs. Potter admonishes him. "Let me go, my boy. I want to see your new friend." She pushes him to one side and walks up to me, adjusting her glasses and regarding me with a serious expression. "How do you do, Miss?—"

"Baker. Emily Baker," I say, shifting nervously from foot to foot. I put out my hand for her to shake, but she pushes it away and enfolds me in a tight embrace.

"I'm so happy to finally see a woman in this place!"

I stand there wordlessly. First of all, I don't know what to say to her. And two, Mrs. Potter is squeezing me so tightly I can barely breathe.

“Mary,” Logan says, “let Emily go now, or we’ll be late to work.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Potter steps back just far enough to look at my face. “So you’re the new receptionist!”

My eyes go from her to the man standing behind her.

“Amelia’s told me so much about you!” She pats my cheek a couple of times before releasing me. “I’m going to call her right away to tell her I finally got to meet you. She won’t believe that you’re here!” She prances toward the kitchen, and I see her rummaging in her purse, probably looking for her cell phone.

Logan shakes his head and motions for me to follow him. The door closes behind us, and I can’t contain myself any longer. “Why are your housekeeper and your ex-admin talking about me?”

“They’ve been friends for years.” Logan takes a deep breath. “And they both love to gossip.”

“No, no, Mr. Boss. You’re not getting away with vague answers this time.” I press my index finger against his chest. “Talk.”

He looks down at my finger, then back at my face. For a moment, I think he’s going to brush me off again, but then his expression softens slightly.

“Amelia was my babysitter when I used to go to my grandparents’ house during the summers, and Mary was their housekeeper. Long story short, after my grandparents died and left me their estate, I decided to keep both of them on. They needed a job, and I needed help.”

I study him for a few seconds. I know there’s more to the story, but I’ll have to

content myself with his brief, concise explanation for now.

As we step into the elevator, I find myself wondering about Logan's childhood. He doesn't talk about his parents, only his grandparents. And the way Mrs. Potter hugged him is not an ordinary employer-employee relationship. There's history there, and I am increasingly curious about what shaped the man standing beside me.

At least now, I know he inherited his money from his grandparents. For a second, when I first entered his fortress of solitude, I was afraid he might be mixed up in some shady business.

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Instead, it turns out that Logan Price is simply a self-centered, rich, hot veterinarian.

Definitely out of my league.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Emily

I can't get anything else out of Logan. Aside from the terse explanation he gave me about why Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Potter act like a couple of gossipy grandmas, all I learned is he's not a mafioso or a professional hitman. My mind goes in weird directions sometimes.

At any rate, work progresses uneventfully. There are no unfortunate encounters with huge boa constrictors or bitchy Barbies who want their pets mutilated. The only thing annoying me is the crowd of women in the waiting room. I'm beginning to believe that the only reason ninety percent of the clients are of the female gender is the sexy vet waiting in the doorway.

The clinic has a distinct smell today, a blend of antiseptic, pet shampoo, and the overpowering floral perfume of Mrs. Reinhart's poodle. She insists it's therapeutic for Fluffy, but I'm pretty sure it's giving me a migraine. The air conditioning is also on the fritz, making the small space uncomfortably warm and adding a hint of sweat to the olfactory medley. Yet no one seems to mind as long as Dr. Price will grace them with his presence.

Wait, why is he standing there?

He speaks, clenching his jaw. “Emily? Could you show the next patient in, please?”

Oops. I may be a little distracted.

“Of course!” I scan the appointment book to see who’s next. “Mrs. Hilton?”

I lift my gaze to see which woman will stand up. It’s like being catapulted into The Hunger Games or something. Only the strongest will survive and get the coveted prize: Logan Price.

Muzak plays in the background as the women look at each other. There’s tension in the air. Thunder rumbles somewhere in the distance. One contestant grinds her teeth. Another curls her hands into fists. Another sets her jaw.

A bead of perspiration appears on my forehead as I watch the show. Who will be the victor?

Mrs. Jankowicz clutches her tabby cat’s carrier tighter to her chest as if preparing for battle. Mrs. Fitzgerald, whose teacup Yorkie matches her pink Chanel suit, straightens her spine and tosses her silver-streaked hair. The competition is brutal. These ladies have been honing their flirting skills since before I was born.

And then, there she is. Mrs. Hilton stands. She has long, straight blond hair and enormous hazel eyes framed with fake long lashes. High cheekbones. Sculpted red lips. A delicate upturned nose. She’s wearing a black sheath dress, and her narrow waist accentuates her abundant bosom. Her breasts are so perky I can’t tear my admiring eyes away from them for a few seconds. Her legs are long and slender, and she’s wearing a pair of red stiletto heels.

She’s fucking gorgeous. I have a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I recognize that feeling because it's the same one I had in third grade when Becky Wilson got picked for the lead in the school play instead of me. Jealousy, with a side of inadequacy. Except this time, it's worse because I don't even have the right to feel possessive over Logan. He's my boss, not my boyfriend.

Mrs. Hilton is carrying a crate with her pet inside. She undulates toward Logan, walking as if she owns the world. "Dr. Price," she purrs. Literally.

The other women shoot daggers at her with their eyes, but she ignores them as she sets her hand on Logan's forearm. Even her fingers are delicate, her nails long and red.

I look down at my bitten nails, ink-stained fingertips, and the slight burn on my thumb from a curling iron mishap last week. I'm about as elegant as a construction worker next to this woman. She probably has weekly manicure appointment, while I can't even remember the last time I painted my nails.

When I return my gaze to Mrs. Hilton, Logan is smiling at her. I see red, and my claws come out. I feel like a fucking lioness that's just come upon an intruder in her territory.

He's mine.

The thought crashes into my consciousness with such force that it startles me. When did I start thinking of Logan as mine? And why do I want to vault over this desk and physically wedge myself between him and this woman?

"Logan," I call, fluttering my eyelashes and pouting my lips, "can I do anything else for you right now?"

He regards me with his eyebrow raised. "No, Emily, thank you."

“Okay,” I say, keeping up the pout. “Call me if you need me.”

He stops, his mouth slightly open, and a small frown creases his forehead. It’s like he wants to say something but decides against it. Instead, he shakes his head and turns back to Mrs. Hilton. “Shall we go into my office?” he asks her, opening the door to the back.

Barbie 2.0 gives me a last look before following my sexy vet. I know what she’s trying to tell me. She thinks she’s won.

For now, bitch. Only for now.

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I look back at the other women in the waiting room. Suddenly, they all have their eyes fixed on me. I swallow and look down at the appointment book. Holy shit, I think I just became their common enemy number one.

I busy myself with paperwork, trying to ignore the collective side-eye I receive. The phone rings, and I've never been so grateful for a distraction.

Between hostile looks and nasty comments, the day draws to a close. I know Logan and I are living together for now and that he offered me a ride this morning, but I won't take for granted that he'll make the same offer now.

He comes out of his office with the usual scowl on his face and leans against the doorjamb. "Ready to go?"

I nod and hurry to gather my things and put them in my bag. My cell lights up with a new text. Probably a message from Kate or Sarah. I told them I was evicted but assured them not to worry, that I was fine and would update them soon. It's clear they didn't believe me.

With an eye roll, I stick my cell back in my purse. I should call one of them and ask if she can put me up for a few days. Sarah lives in a tiny apartment, so I would have to crash on her ratty old couch until I find a new place. Kate lives in a condo like Logan's. She's got a guest room, and I know she would be happy to have me. The only problem is that she's allergic to cat hair. To put it shortly, Logan's the only choice I have at the moment.

Also, staying with him means I have a ride to work every day, and I get to sleep on a

mattress that's as soft as a cloud. Yeah, I'll leave things as they are for now. And that's not even because my new roommate is tall, hot, and has a sculpted physique. Definitely eye candy.

With a deep breath, I follow him out of the clinic. The cold hits me as soon as I set foot outside. I quickly shrug my coat on and run toward the car. I can't wait to get home and try out the tub in my new bathroom.

The interior of Logan's car is warm and smells faintly of leather and his cologne. I sink into the passenger seat, fighting the urge to close my eyes and inhale deeply.

"Emily?"

"Huh?" I must be lost in my thoughts because I haven't even realized that Logan's gotten into the car and is drawing away from the curb. I turn toward him, flushing slightly. "Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"What were you thinking about?"

His question catches me off guard. It's not that I've been daydreaming about him in the nude, at least not this time, but the fact that Logan just asked me something vaguely personal kind of throws me for a loop.

"Um, nothing special. I think I'll take a long, hot bath as soon as we get home. Your bathtub is too inviting to resist."

He shifts in his seat. His jaw tightens, and his Adam's apple bobs up and down, though he continues to look straight ahead at the road. "I see," he says before giving me the silent treatment again.

And I'm the weird one?

We drive in silence through the early evening traffic. The city is transforming into its nighttime persona, with its streetlights flickering to life, restaurants beginning to fill with the dinner crowd, and neon signs glowing against the darkening sky. I steal glances at Logan's profile, admiring the firm line of his jaw, the straight slope of his nose, and the way his hair falls over his forehead. God, he's beautiful.

I wonder what he's thinking about. Does he regret offering me a place to stay? Is he plotting the fastest way to get rid of me? Or is he thinking about Mrs. Hilton and her perfect manicure? The thought makes my stomach clench.

When we get to the apartment, I run straight to my room, desperate to avoid another assault by Bob. Demon doesn't seem to have done any damage this time, either that or Mrs. Potter has already cleaned up her mess. I hope the stupid cat has learned her lesson and decided to behave like a normal pet instead of like some sort of beast possessed by Satan.

The apartment is quiet, with only the faint sounds of traffic from far below. Logan's place is high enough that the city noise is muted, unlike my old apartment, where every car horn, siren, and drunken argument was broadcast directly into my bedroom.

I open the door to the bathroom, already anticipating my nice hot bath when a black furball darts between my legs. I look for something to grab onto, but my fingers clutch only air, and I fall, unable to repress a cry of pain when my butt hits the parquet floor.

"Emily, is everything okay?"

"No!" I yell. Why does Logan always have to see me this way? Can't I just once look as sexy as the women who come to his clinic? I'd even been thinking of wearing stiletto heels myself, but that's a joke since I can manage to fall even when wearing flats.

The bathroom doorway darkens as Logan appears, concern etched on his features. He's already changed out of his work clothes into a soft-looking T-shirt and sweatpants that hang low on his hips. The casual attire makes him even more attractive, less untouchable, and more human.

"What happened?" Logan's hand appears before my face.

Pushing a stray lock of hair behind my ear, I grab his hand, and he pulls me to my feet.

"Thanks," I mumble, still breathing hard.

"What were you doing on the floor?" The corners of Logan's lips tremble as he tries not to laugh.

"It was the cat, okay?" I snap, throwing my arms in the air. "She hates me!"

At this, my dark knight loses control and laughs right when I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He laughs and laughs. "Oh, you're so cute."

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I frown, cross my arms over my chest, and give him a challenging look. “Really? That beast just destroyed my apartment and got me kicked out. She attacks me every time she sees me and uses my clothes to sharpen her claws. I no longer have a roof over my head or clothes to wear, and nine times out of ten, I have to choose between feeding her or feeding myself. What exactly do you find amusing about any of that?”

My voice cracks at the last words, betraying my genuine stress. Being homeless isn’t a joke. Neither is having your life turned upside down by a demonic feline that seems to have a personal vendetta against you.

The amusement fades from Logan’s face, replaced by genuine contrition. “Okay, calm down.” He rests his hands on my shoulders. The warmth of his palms seeps through the thin fabric of my blouse, steadying me. “Demon’s just a cat. She doesn’t hate you, nor is she trying to make your life a living hell.”

“Easy for you to say. You haven’t had to live with her for two weeks,” I splutter, refusing to meet his eyes.

He takes my chin between his fingers and forces me to look at him. I swallow, and suddenly, my nervousness is replaced by a new sensation.

I run my tongue over my lower lip. Logan follows the movement, and his breathing becomes faster and more irregular. Our mouths are at that ideal distance again. A shiver runs up my spine, and I squeeze my thighs together, trying to ease the throbbing pain between them.

His eyes darken as they lock with mine. I can smell his cologne, something woody

and masculine and the scent that's uniquely his beneath it. His thumb traces my jawline, featherlight, making my skin tingle. The bathroom is suddenly too small, too warm. Time seems to stretch and slow. I'm aware of my heart hammering against my ribs, the sound of our breathing, the infinitesimal decrease in distance between us.

If he doesn't kiss me within five seconds, I'm going for it.

Five. Four. Three. Two.

"I'm going to fix myself a drink. Care to join me?"

Come on. Seriously?

I shrug and sigh, trying to keep myself from rolling my eyes. "Sure. Let me just get out of my work clothes and put something more comfortable on."

He gives me a brief nod and leaves the room. No sooner has he closed the door behind him than I give a small yell of exasperation. Logan Price is the most nerve-racking man I've ever met. Not Hollywood material at all.

I want to sink into the bathtub and scream underwater. Twice now, he's gotten me all worked up and walked away. It's like he's toying with me, getting close enough to make me think something will happen, then pulling back just when I'm ready to throw caution to the wind.

I yank off my work clothes and pull on a pair of yoga pants and an oversized sweatshirt that reads I'm Not Arguing, I'm Just Explaining Why I'm Right. My college roommate gave it to me after a heated debate about whether pineapple belongs on pizza. It doesn't, for the record. Some hills are worth dying on.

I catch my reflection in the mirror and sigh. My hair is coming loose from its

ponytail, my face is flushed, and there's a small smudge of mascara under my right eye. Not the seductive vixen I was hoping to portray. But then again, my attempts at seduction aren't working anyway, so what's the point?

Squaring my shoulders, I march to the kitchen. We're roommates who work together. Nothing more, nothing less.

Even if my body screams otherwise.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Logan

While I wait for Emily in the kitchen, I pour myself a whiskey. The minute the first sip touches my taste buds, I begin to relax.

I know I need to stay away from the sassy little brunette who's now my roommate, but I can't do it. It's not just my cock that wants her so badly. Every fiber of my body is attracted to her. My fingers twitch whenever a lock of her hair falls into her face. My tongue craves to take possession of her mouth. My hands are dying to cup her small breasts. My eyes want to admire every inch of her body.

But the most terrifying thing is how my heart pounds every time she's around.

I take another deep swallow of whiskey, savoring the burn as it slides down my throat. The amber liquid glints in the low light of my kitchen, reminding me uncomfortably of my father and his ever-present bottle. I force the thought away. I'm nothing like him. I drink to relax, not to escape. There's a difference.

Isn't there?

I give my head a shake. After Val, I swore I would never even look at someone as young as Emily. I drew up strict rules for myself, and I've never broken them. Until Emily.

It was a year after Valerie's death before I could even look at another woman. My therapist called it prolonged grief as if there's some standard timetable for mourning. As if one day you wake up and decide, Okay, I'm done being sad now. Truth is, you'll forever miss the ones you lost.

When I finally did start dating again, I chose women who were nothing like Val. Older, career-focused, sophisticated. Women who wanted the same things I did: companionship without commitment, pleasure without promises. It worked. It was safe.

I can hear her footsteps behind me, but I don't dare turn around. If I come face to face with her right now, I won't be able to restrain myself.

"Can I have one?" Her delicate voice sounds in my ear like a sweet melody. She's so close to me, I can smell her scent. I breathe it in deeply and close my eyes.

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“Sure,” I say, my voice gruff. Picking up the bottle, I walk over to the cupboard for a clean glass.

“I don’t need my own,” I hear her say. “I can drink from yours.”

I turn around just in time to see her lips settle on the rim of my glass. There’s something so intimate about seeing her mouth in the same place mine was a minute ago. She makes her usual grimace of disgust as the golden liquid goes down her throat.

My mind immediately conjures an image of those same lips wrapped around my cock, and I have to grit my teeth as blood rushes south. What is it about this woman that reduces me to my basest instincts?

“I’m sorry,” I say. I have to clear my throat to talk. “I can buy something else next time.”

“I don’t need it.” She shrugs and shoots me a quick smile. That’s one of the things I like most about Emily. She doesn’t limit herself to curving her lips and showing her teeth. No, when Emily smiles, her whole face lights up, her eyes sparkle, and two adorable dimples appear on her cheeks.

Val’s smile was the same way. It transformed her entire face and made her eyes dance. I used to tell her that her smile was more intoxicating than any drink. She’d laugh and tell me I was being corny. But it was true. And now here I am, feeling that same pull toward Emily’s smile and warmth spreading through my chest.

I swallow audibly. I've got to get out of here if I don't want to lose the shred of self-control that remains. "I think I'll go to bed." I walk past her, stopping a step away. "Good night, Emily."

"Logan?" she says. I turn back to her. She's still looking at me with that bright smile. "I just wanted to thank you again. If it hadn't been for you—" She shakes her head and stretches out a hand toward me, touching my forearm. "I don't even know how I can repay you."

Her touch is light, barely there, but it sends electricity shooting up my arm. Through the thin fabric of my shirt, I can feel the warmth of her fingers, the slight pressure of each one. Such a simple touch shouldn't affect me this way, but my body betrays me, responding instantly.

I feel like a pig for what I'm about to do, but her words trigger something inside me. All the self-control I managed to hold shatters.

My hand cups the nape of her neck. I weave my fingers into her hair and press my mouth to hers, nuzzling her beautiful lips with my tongue until they open for me. She's so ready for me, so finely attuned to me, that she immediately lets me in, giving a faint moan.

Her lips are soft and warm, tasting faintly of whiskey and mint toothpaste. The combination is intoxicating. The small sound she makes in the back of her throat drives me wild and makes me want to consume her completely.

Her hands move over my chest and down my hips. She grabs the hem of my shirt and begins to pull it upward. Her movements are frenetic. She's impatient. I release her mouth and help her, pulling the shirt over my head and tossing it aside.

The cool air of the apartment hits my bare skin, but I barely notice. I'm burning up,

every nerve ending on fire with need. Her eyes widen as she takes in my chest, and the naked hunger in her gaze only fuels my own.

Emily looks at me, catching her bottom lip between her teeth in that way that drives me crazy. There's no way I can resist her. Reclaiming her lips, I run my hands over every inch of her body.

"Undress for me," I command her.

She lifts her eyes and stares into mine. She likes it when I give her orders, I realize. I can tell she wants me to be in charge. Taking a step back, she fingers the hem of her tank top. She's not wearing a bra, and her hard nipples thrust against the fabric. She pulls the shirt over her head and drops it on the floor. I want to touch her, but even more, I want to see her completely naked, at my mercy. My cock throbs painfully against the zipper of my jeans as Emily slides her thumbs under the elastic of her shorts and pushes them slowly down her thighs.

"What do you have against underwear?" I say in a hoarse voice.

She shoots me a cheeky smile as she kicks her shorts off and stands before me, completely nude. "No woman likes to wear panties and a bra to bed," she says as if it's something I should know.

Standing before me in all her naked glory, she's breathtaking. Her skin is pale and smooth, her breasts small but perfect, with rosy nipples hard from arousal. Between her thighs, I can see the dark shadow of her pubic hair and the glisten of moisture that tells me she's as aroused as I am.

I grab her by the hips, pick her up, and set her down on the kitchen island. "I've wanted to taste you since the moment I met you," I murmur against her skin, leaving a trail of kisses along her neck.

The skin of her throat is delicate and soft under my lips. I can feel her pulse racing. She tilts her head back to give me better access, clutching at my shoulders, digging her nails in slightly.

My mouth descends to her firm breast, and I gently bite one nipple while rolling the other between my thumb and index finger. She gasps and lifts her hand to my head, sinking her fingers into my hair.

“Logan,” she moans. “Please.”

“Not so fast, kitten.” Releasing her nipple, I continue down her flat stomach. Emily lets herself fall back onto the cold surface of the island, exposing every inch of her body to me. I draw circles around her belly button with my tongue before descending farther and running my tongue along the crease between her pussy and her thigh.

She squirms beneath me, lifting her hips, seeking more contact. Her scent grows stronger, musky, feminine, and intoxicating. I take my time teasing her, wanting to build the anticipation until she can’t stand it anymore.

“Logan!” she cries. Her voice sounds desperate.

I press my hand into her belly to hold her still while, with the other, I open her pussy lips. “So beautiful,” I murmur, kissing the nub of her clit.

Her cry of pleasure arouses me. I want to hear the sounds she makes when she comes. I want to know what she tastes like. Running my tongue over her clit, I insert one finger in her pussy. It’s so tight and wet.

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She's hot and slick inside, gripping my finger like she never wants to let go. Her taste is heady, tangy, and sweet at the same time. I lap at her hungrily, circling her clit with my tongue while pumping my finger in and out of her.

“Logan!”

I move my finger faster and deeper, in and out of her. Her pussy tightens around it.

“Logan!”

Her orgasm explodes, her whole body shuddering.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur, grasping her by the hips and pulling her body up against mine. I take her mouth again, letting her taste herself on my tongue. My cock is so hard the pain is practically unbearable. If I don’t fuck her now, my balls might explode.

I lift her off the island and turn her around. “Set your hands on the counter’s edge and bend over.”

A shiver runs through her, but she does what I asked.

“That’s a good little kitten.” I unbutton my jeans, lower the zipper, and then pull them off with my boxers. Grabbing the base of my cock, I caress her pussy.

“Please...” she murmurs.

“What is it, kitten? What do you want?”

“You, Logan,” she moans. “Please!”

“You need to be more specific, Emily.” I slide a finger into her, making her moan again. “Tell me exactly what you want.”

“I want you to fuck me, Logan. Please, fuck me!”

Her words send a bolt of pure lust through me. Something about hearing her beg, about knowing how much she wants this, pushes me to the edge of my control.

She doesn't have to ask me twice. I pull my finger out of her wet channel, and she utters a little cry of protest when she feels it leaving. I laugh and set the head of my cock against the opening of her pussy, then plunge deep inside her in a single thrust. God, it feels good. I can't restrain a moan of pleasure once I'm inside her. I begin to slide my hard cock in and out of her.

The tight heat of her swallows me, setting every nerve ending on fire. She fits me perfectly, as if her body were made for mine. Her inner muscles grip me with each thrust, making me see stars. I've never felt anything so incredible.

It feels so amazing I could keep doing this forever, but I really need to come, and if Emily's moans indicate anything, she's right there with me. I thrust my cock harder and deeper into her, moving faster and faster. I know she's close. The walls of her pussy tighten around my cock. One of my hands is clamped around her hip. I slide the other around her belly until I find the little button of her clit. Rubbing it gently with my finger, I keep driving my cock into her.

“Come with me,” I tell her. “Come for me again, kitten.”

An animal-like groan issues from my throat as I pump my cum into her. Her wet pussy tightens around me. She cries out with pleasure as her orgasm rocks her whole body. I give a couple of final thrusts and slump against her back, exhausted.

We stay like that for a moment, our bodies connected, our breathing gradually slowing. The kitchen is silent except for the sound of our panting. It's been a long time since I felt this content.

"That was..."

"Amazing," I finish the sentence for her, giving her a tender kiss on the back.

I just fucked up big time. But all I want to do is hear Emily's cries of ecstasy as she comes again underneath me. At the mere thought, my cock shudders and begins to harden again.

Emily turns her head to one side. "I can tell someone's not tired yet," she teases.

With my lips and tongue, I caress the tender skin between her back and nape, pulling another moan from her. "It doesn't sound as if you're complaining." I nip her earlobe. "Let's go to my room. There are still some things I want to try out on your sweet pussy."

"Yes, please..."

Smiling, I straighten up, allowing Emily to stand up as well. I'm not kidding when I say there's so much more I want to do to her. I've made a mistake, but fuck it all. If I can only have Emily for one night, I'll do everything I can to make it unforgettable.

Maybe this is exactly what my new problem's going to be. Will I be able to forget her after this one night and move on?

As I lead her to my bedroom, a voice in the back of my mind whispers that I'm crossing a line I've carefully maintained for years. That I'm setting us both up for heartbreak. That I'm making promises with my body I can't keep with my heart.

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I silence the voice. Tonight isn't about tomorrow. Tonight is about Emily, naked and willing in my arms. Tonight is about drowning in her scent, her taste, her warmth. Tonight is about forgetting everything except the feel of her skin against mine.

Tomorrow's problems can wait until tomorrow.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Emily

I can barely walk straight as Logan leads me to his bedroom. My legs feel like jelly, my pussy still pulsing from the orgasm I just had on his kitchen counter. He keeps his hand on the small of my back, possessive and warm. It sends little shivers up my spine. I want more. Need more. It's like I've been starving without even knowing it.

His bedroom looks exactly like I expected. Everything's perfect and in its place, like the man himself. Dark sheets pulled tight across a California king.

I don't belong here. That's pretty fucking clear. I'm chaos in human form, and Logan's room is a temple to control. But here I am anyway, and I'm not going anywhere.

Logan shuts the door with a soft click. When he turns around, his eyes are almost black with desire. "Second thoughts?"

I laugh, the sound weirdly breathless. "About a thousand. None of them matter." I lift my chin, challenging him. "You?"

He answers by crossing the room in two strides and crashing his mouth against mine. There's nothing gentle about it. Allteeth and desperation. He grabs my ass and lifts me like I weigh nothing. I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling his stiff cock press against me. Still ready. Again.

“Fuck, Emily.” He groans against my lips. “What are you doing to me?”

If I knew, maybe I could stop it. But I don't have answers, only this crazy need clawing at my insides, desperate and raw.

He lays me on the bed like I'm something precious. It's a weird contrast, the gentleness of his hands and the hunger in his eyes. Nobody's ever looked at me like that before. Like they want to devour me but also worship every inch.

I reach for him, but he catches my wrists in one hand and pins them above my head.

“Not yet,” he murmurs. “I told you there were things I wanted to try.”

A thrill shoots straight between my legs. “Like what?” God, I sound desperate.

“Like taking my time.” He kisses the corner of my mouth, my jaw, and then that spot below my ear that makes me squirm. “Like learning what makes you fall apart.” His free hand barely touches me as it slides down my body. “Like making you come so many times, you forget your own name.”

“Bold claim,” I challenge, even as my thighs fall open, inviting him in.

He smiles against my throat. “I don't make promises I can't keep, kitten.”

That nickname should annoy me, but something about how he says it makes my pussy clench around nothing.

His mouth works its way down my neck, across my collarbones, between my breasts. He pauses, looking up at me through his stupidly long eyelashes. "You're beautiful," he says, so honest it hurts.

"You don't have to say that."

"I know." He lets go of my wrists and turns my face back to his. "I say it because it's true."

This feels dangerous, more dangerous than just fucking. This feels like territory where hearts get shattered. I should pull back. Instead, I kiss him, pouring all my confusion and desire into it. He responds instantly, sliding his tongue against mine as he cups my breast. His thumb circles my nipple until I'm arching into his touch like a cat.

His mouth replaces his fingers, hot and wet around my nipple, teeth grazing just enough to send sparks straight to my core. I grab his hair, holding him against me as his other hand drifts lower, tracing patterns over my stomach, my hips, my thighs, everywhere except where I need him.

"Logan." I whimper, lifting my hips like the shameless slut I am. "Stop teasing."

He chuckles, the vibration against my breast making me moan. "But you're so responsive. So fucking perfect." His fingers finally touch my center, where I'm embarrassingly wet. "See? So ready for me."

"I've been ready." I gasp as one long finger slides into me, curling to hit a spot that makes white spots explode behind my eyes. "Since the moment I met you."

He freezes for a heartbeat, something flashing across his face too fast to read. Then he's moving again, adding a second finger, stretching me as his thumb circles my clit.

My pussy's still sensitive from coming in the kitchen, and it doesn't take much before I'm teetering on the edge again.

“That's it,” he encourages, watching my face as if he's memorizing it. “Let go for me.”

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I want to hold back, to make this last, but my body betrays me. When he crooks his fingers just right and sucks hard on my nipple, I shatter, crying out his name as pleasure crashes through me.

Before I even catch my breath, he moves down my body and settles between my thighs. I try to push him away. I'm too sensitive, too exposed, but he just grips my hips tighter.

“Logan, I can't?—”

“You can,” he says with absolute certainty. “And you will.”

Then his mouth is on me, his tongue licking through my folds, and holy shit, he's right. I can. The overstimulation transforms into something else, sharper and more intense. His tongue flicks against my clit in precise movements as he learns exactly what makes me moan, what makes me curse, what makes me grab handfuls of his expensive sheets.

“Fuck, you taste good,” he mumbles against me, his stubble scraping my inner thighs in a way that should hurt but doesn't. “Could do this for hours.”

The image of Logan between my legs for hours, relentless and thorough, nearly sends me over the edge again. I make sounds I didn't know I could make, high and desperate, as he works me with lips and tongue and fingers.

This time, when I come, it's with a scream that I muffle against my arm, my body jackknifing off the bed. Logan holds me down, not letting up until I'm pushing at his

head, begging him to stop. It's too much. I can't take any more.

He rises on his knees, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand—a gesture that should be gross but is somehow the hottest thing I've ever seen. His cock stands proud against his stomach, thick and flushed and intimidating. I reach for it, wanting to return the favor, but he catches my hand.

“Next time,” he promises, his eyes burning into mine. “Right now, I need to be inside you.”

He stretches to the bedside table, pulling out a condom. I watch, mesmerized, as he rolls it on with practiced ease.

He positions himself between my legs, the head of his cock nudging at my entrance. “You good?” he asks, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

Despite his obvious need, the concern in his eyes makes something warm unfurl in my chest. “So good,” I assure him, wrapping my legs around his waist to pull him closer. “Please, Logan.”

He enters me slowly this time, inch by excruciating inch, his eyes never leaving mine. I feel impossibly full, stretched to my limit in the best possible way. When he's seated to the hilt, we both groan, and he rests his forehead against mine, breathing hard.

“You feel fucking incredible,” he murmurs, reverent. “So tight, so perfect.”

I clench around him, loving his sharp intake of breath. “Move,” I urge, digging my heels into his lower back.

He withdraws almost completely before driving back in, setting a rhythm that has me seeing stars. Every thrust hits something deep inside me, building a pressure I've

never felt before. It's like he knows my body better than I do, angling his hips to hit my sweet spot with devastating accuracy.

“Look at me,” he commands, and I open eyes I didn't realize I closed. The intensity in his gaze nearly undoes me.

I don't know what comes over me, but I hear myself saying, “Roll over. I want to ride you.”

A flash of surprise crosses his face, quickly replaced by heated approval. In one smooth motion, he flips us, keeping us connected, so I'm straddling him. The new position sends him even deeper, and I can't help the loud moan that escapes me.

His hands grip my hips as I begin to move, rising and falling on his length, finding a rhythm that makes us both pant and curse. I've never felt so powerful, watching his control slip as I grind against him, as I take pleasure from his body.

“Fuck, Emily.” He groans, his head thrown back, exposing his throat. “You're going to kill me.”

“What a way to go,” I tease, leaning down to kiss him, my breasts brushing against his chest.

He surges up to meet me, tangling his hand in my hair to hold me in place as his tongue plunders my mouth. The other hand slides between our bodies and finds my clit, circling it in time with my movements.

The dual sensation, his cock filling me and his fingers working my clit, is too much. I break the kiss with a gasp as my third orgasm approaches, this one building slower but more intensely than the others.

“That's it,” Logan encourages, his voice rough. “Come for me, kitten. One more time.”

My rhythm falters as the pleasure builds, but his hands on my hips guide me, keeping the pace. When I finally come, it's with a sob, my entire body shuddering as wave after wave crashes through me. I collapse against his chest, trembling and spent.

But Logan isn't done. With a growl, he flips us again, hooking one of my legs over his shoulder as he pounds into me with renewed vigor. The change in angle hits places inside me I didn't know existed, and impossibly, I feel myself building toward another peak.

“I can't,” I gasp, clutching at his shoulders. “Logan, it's too much.”

“You can,” he insists, sweat beading on his forehead with the effort of his restraint. “One more, Emily. Come with me.”

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His thrusts become erratic, powerful, and desperate. I'm beyond thought, beyond words, beyond anything but sensation. When he reaches between us to circle my clit, I break apart for the fourth time, my inner muscles clenching around him, pulling him deeper.

With a curse and my name on his lips, Logan follows, tensing above me as he finds his release. The sight of him lost in pleasure, all that control finally shattered, is something I'll never forget.

He collapses beside me, careful not to crush me with his weight. For long minutes, we lie there. I'm genuinely not sure I can move.

“Holy shit,” I finally manage, my voice hoarse from screaming.

Logan turns his head to look at me, a mixture of satisfaction and something more vulnerable in his eyes. “Yeah,” he agrees simply.

He gets up to dispose of the condom, and I take the opportunity to check out his ass. Perfect, just like the rest of him. When he returns, he hesitates for a moment before sliding back into bed beside me.

I tense, waiting for him to say something, to set boundaries, to remind me this was just sex. Instead, he pulls me against him, my back to his chest, his arm draped over my waist.

“Sleep,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

I should leave. Go back to the guest room. Maintain some distance, some dignity. But his warmth feels so good, his breath steady against my neck, and I'm so fucking tired of fighting what I want.

So I stay, curving into him like puzzle pieces. Sleep pulls at me, dragging me under despite my best efforts to stay awake, to savor this moment that feels both perfect and scary as hell.

The last thing I remember is his arm tightening around me, holding me closer, as though he's afraid I might disappear if he lets go.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Emily

I stretch, feeling a slight pain between my legs that brings a smile to my lips. A delicious reminder of last night etched into my muscles. Logan's scent is everywhere, and my hand reaches across the bed for him, but all I find are cold, empty sheets. My smile fades as I sit up, looking around in confusion.

Rising from the bed sends another ripple of soreness through me. I wrap myself in the discarded sheet and pad across the cold hardwood floors. The first door I try is a bathroom twice the size of mine, with all gleaming surfaces and black granite. Empty. His walk-in closet yields only suits and shirts arranged by color, with each hanger arranged at the same distance apart. What a neat freak.

I follow the scent of coffee to the kitchen, where I find him fully dressed in his work clothes, staring out the window with a steaming mug in his hand. His shoulders tense when he hears me approach.

"Morning," I say, trying to sound casual despite the sheet wrapped toga-style around

me and my sex-mussed hair. “Any coffee left for the rest of us mere mortals?”

He turns, and my stomach drops. His expression is closed off, professional, so unlike the man who looked at me with such hunger last night.

“We need to talk,” he says, setting his mug down.

Those four words are never a good sign in the history of human interaction. I clutch the sheet tighter around me, suddenly feeling exposed in ways that have nothing to do with my lack of clothing.

“Last night was...” he begins, running a hand through his hair, “a mistake.”

“Wow. Don’t sugarcoat it or anything,” I joke.

“I’m your employer, Emily. And your landlord, essentially. It was unprofessional of me to cross that line.”

“Pretty sure I was an enthusiastic participant in that line-crossing.”

“That’s not the point.” He won’t meet my eyes now. “We need to be adults about this.”

“Adults,” I repeat, the word tasting bitter. “Right.”

“I think it’s best to forget last night happened and maintain a strictly professional relationship moving forward.” He delivers this as if he’s reading from a manual. “For both our sakes.”

“Fine by me.” I shrug and force a smile that feels like it might crack my face. “It was just sex, Logan. Amazing sex, don’t get me wrong, but I’m not planning our wedding

or anything.”

Something flickers across his face—relief? disappointment?—before that mask slides back into place. “Good. I’m glad we understand each other.” He checks his watch. “I need to head to the clinic early. I have to meet with some pharmaceutical representative.”

Convenient. I’ve never heard of any meeting today, and I am the one who takes all his appointments.

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“Sure thing, boss,” I say with mock cheerfulness. “I’ll see you there.”

He nods once, grabs his keys, and walks out without another word. As soon as the door closes behind him, I sink to the kitchen floor. What the hell just happened? Last night, he couldn’t get enough of me, and now, he can barely look at me. Fine. If that’s how he wants to play it, I can be an adult too. I can pretend last night never happened. I can act like my heart isn’t currently being shredded into confetti in my chest.

I drag myself to my feet. Time to get dressed and face the day with as much dignity as possible for someone who just got the morning-after brush-off from their boss/landlord/whatever-the-hell Logan is to me now.

I’m fine. Totally fine. It was just sex, after all. People have casual sex all the time. They’re adults about it. I can be an adult too.

The microwave clock blinks 09:07, and reality crashes down. Shit! My self-pity party has lasted so long that I’m now late for work.

I race back to the bedroom. My clothes from last night are still scattered across the floor where Logan tore them off me. The memory sends heat rushing to my face, even while doubt gnaws at my insides.

Cranking the shower to scalding, I stand under the spray, letting it pound against my skin.

I scrub myself in a hurry. Gotta look professional, not like I just rolled out of my boss’s bed after mind-blowing sex. Definitely not that.

Back in my room, I face the disaster zone that is my wardrobe, courtesy of Demon's fashion critique via claws. After ten frantic minutes, I unearth jeans and a sweater that somehow survived the feline apocalypse. I throw them on, jam my feet into sneakers, and grab my purse and jacket.

Outside, the city's already in full swing. I call an Uber, wincing at the cost. Every dollar spent on transportation is one less for my future independence, but what choice do I have?

My driver shows up in a beat-up sedan piloted by a chatty twentysomething who won't shut up about everything from Mercury retrograde to her latest Tinder nightmare. I tune her out, too busy with the tornado of thoughts whipping through my head.

"Bad morning?" She catches my eye in the rearview mirror.

"Just running late," I mutter, not in the mood for conversation.

When the clinic comes into view, I throw money at the driver and leap out before she's fully stopped. Barreling through the entrance, I nearly collide with the door as it swings inward. The waiting room is packed with women and their pets, all witnesses to my breathless entrance. I bend forward, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath.

"You're late."

Those two words freeze me mid-breath. I straighten slowly, already knowing what I'll find. Logan stands in the doorway to the back offices, dressed in his pristine white lab coat with a clipboard in hand. His expression offers nothing, not a flicker of the man who hours ago whispered filthy, beautiful promises against my heated skin.

“I’m sorry...” My gaze locks with his, searching for any remnant of last night’s tenderness. Green eyes that burned with desire now chill me with glacial indifference.

“We’ve got a full schedule today. Please take your position at reception and start doing the job you’re paid to do.”

Each word lands like a physical blow. Humiliation burns my cheeks, intensified by our audience of waiting clients. Before I can respond, he pivots on his heel and strides away. The slam of his office door echoes through the suddenly silent waiting room.

Yeah, adults, my ass!

“Excuse me, but do you think you could do what Dr. Price told you to do? We don’t have the whole day to waste while you’re figuring out how to do your job.”

I turn to find some blonde in designer clothes clutching a dog the size of a hamster, looking at me like I’m something she scraped off her shoe.

“I apologize,” I force out through clenched teeth. “I promise you won’t have to wait long.”

I retreat behind the reception desk, dump my bag on the floor, and sink into my chair. Everything looks normal, including the computer screen, the appointment list, and the ringing phone. Everything except me.

Logan Price is the world’s biggest asshole, and I’ve fallen for him like the complete idiot I am.

Tears burn behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Not here. Not where he might see. Not wheretheymight see. I log into the system with trembling fingers and force

myself to focus on the day's schedule, calling in one patient after another in a voice that somehow doesn't crack.

Every time Logan emerges to collect a patient, he glides past my desk without even acknowledging me, as if I've become invisible.

The day crawls by at a snail's pace, each minute stretched into hours, and I bounce between wanting to cry and wanting to scream in his face. Through the cracked door of the exam room, I catch glimpses of a different Logan, smiling, gentle with scared animals and worried owners. I watch those big hands holding a trembling Chihuahua with impossible tenderness, and my heart twists with a sick mixture of longing and fury.

The days that follow are pretty much the same emotional hell.

Logan doesn't actively mistreat me. He erases me from existence. Sometimes, I wonder if I hallucinated that whole night, the way he looked at me as though I were something precious, the gentleness that contradicted how desperately he wanted me, the way he said my name like it was something sacred.

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A week passes, seven days since we had sex, one hundred and sixty-eight hours where the only thing he says to me is some version of “Please show the next patient in, Emily.” His voice is always professional and distant as if he’s talking to a stranger instead of someone who knows the sound he makes when he comes.

The rides to and from work are the worst part. Not even my lame attempts to talk about the weather work anymore. Our only interaction happens at the clinic, where he maintains careful distance. His behavior pisses me off so much that I fantasize about pounding on his door until it breaks down. And then I’d either punch his perfect face or kiss him until neither of us could breathe. I don’t know which I want more.

The apartment feels like a minefield. I sneak through hallways like I’m trespassing, avoiding common areas whenever possible. Even the animals pick up on the tension. Bob gravitates toward Logan, and Demon gets even more destructive than usual.

Friday night, after another day of suffocating silence, I grab my phone and type.

Emily: I need a drink. Now.

Kate: Where do you want to meet up?

Sarah: Not the usual pub, I beg you! I still feel like puking just thinking about the last time.

Emily: Any place is fine with me.

While they debate locations, I strip off my work clothes and transform myself. The

black mini dress hiding in the back of my closet comes out. It's strapless and tight enough to look painted on, showing more cleavage than I usually dare to display. I heard the front door open and close after I got home; Logan's gone out. Running from his own apartment to avoid me. If he's looking to get laid tonight, I can play that game too.

I curl my hair until it falls in waves around my shoulders. Then add makeup, smoky eyes, flushed cheeks, and blood-red lips. My highest heels complete the look, black stilettos I bought on sale and have worn exactly once. I'll probably break an ankle trying to walk in them, but tonight's mission is to sit at a bar looking hot and wait for someone who isn't Logan to notice me. Or drink until I can't feel anything. Either way works.

Even as I admire my handiwork through the mirror, I know it's pointless. How do you forget someone when you live in their house, work at their clinic, and feel them in your bloodstream like some addictive drug?

You can't.

But tonight, I'll pretend.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Emily

After I pace and obsessively check my phone for an hour, Kate finally sends an address. The bar is in a trendy area not far from Logan's place, thank God, since these heels might kill me if I have to walk far.

My Uber driver is this kid with a face full of pimples who looks way too young to be driving. He spends the whole ride stealing nervous glances at me in the rearview

mirror, his eyes darting away whenever I catch him looking. His obvious discomfort saves me from making small talk, which is fine by me. Tonight has one goal: get Logan Price out of my system once and for all.

The bar sits nestled between a fancy restaurant and a designer clothing store. Kate and Sarah are waiting at the entrance. Kate whistles when she sees me while Sarah's eyes go wide with shock.

“Damn, girl,” Kate says, looking me up and down. “You clean up good.”

“You look... different,” Sarah manages, her expression caught somewhere between impressed and worried.

As soon as we enter the 360, I can tell this place is nothing like our usual dive bars. Modern décor gleams under blue and purple lights, with cushy seating areas and a massive bar running along one wall. Well-dressed people sip colorful drinks and laugh over music that's actually at a volume where you can hear yourself think. Everything about it screams expensive, from the drinks to the people.

Sarah tugs at her cardigan self-consciously. “This looks like a pricy place.”

“I'm buying tonight!” Kate declares happily, clearly unfazed by our surroundings. “We have to celebrate! In just over a month, I'm having my first show!”

“Oh, K, that's fabulous!” I throw my arms around her in a huge hug. Kate's been working toward this gallery showing forever, and it's everything she's dreamed of. For a moment, I almost forget my misery, her excitement pushing back the darkness.

Almost.

“Let's grab a table,” Sarah suggests, pointing to a corner booth that just opened up.

We weave through the crowd, and I feel a little better, buoyed by friendship and the promise of celebrating something positive instead of wallowing in self-pity. Just when that feeling takes hold, I catch sight of two figures at a table near the window, partially hidden by some decorative divider thing. Even in the dim light, I'd know that jawline, that thick dark blond hair, that brooding expression anywhere. My heart plummets straight through the floor.

“Shit!”

“What's up, Em?” Sarah's concerned eyes follow my gaze toward Logan's table. “Do you know him?”

“What a hottie!” Kate exclaims, her eyes widening appreciatively. “A new friend?”

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“My boss,” I mutter, trying to steer my friends toward a table as far from Logan as physically possible. The universe must be laughing its ass off right now. Of all the bars in New York City, he had to be at this one?

“He's sexy!” Kate stares openly. “No wonder you've stuck with this job longer than your last three combined.”

“He's an asshole,” I snap, refusing to look in his direction. I sit with my back to him and pull my hair forward like a curtain. My face burns, not just with embarrassment but something more painful. Seeing him relaxed and social while I spent a week drowning in misery feels like a knife between my ribs.

“So that's why you agreed to work at that vet clinic!” Kate says, her voice carrying during a sudden lull in the music. “I knew there had to be more to it than just 'the pay is decent'!”

“Shh!” I try to silence her, mortified at the thought of Logan overhearing.

Kate rolls her eyes dramatically. “Really, Em? We're all the way on the other side of the bar, surrounded by a bunch of noisy people. How can you think he'll hear us?”

Logically, she's right. The crowded, noisy bar makes eavesdropping impossible. But logic doesn't exist in the same universe as Logan Price. Something I learned the hard way.

“Is everything all right?” Sarah places a gentle hand on my shoulder, her eyes full of concern. “You suddenly turned pale and looked like you might puke from one minute

to the next.”

“I just want to get drunk.” I grab the cocktail menu. The elaborate descriptions blur together as my eyes refuse to focus.

“Oh, come on! What could have happened with your boss that was so bad—” Kate stops mid-sentence, looking between me and Logan as realization dawns. “Holy shit,” she says, a knowing smile spreading across her face. “Our sweet little Em finally got some action.”

“What?” Sarah blinks in confusion, looking between us.

“Our sweet little Em slept with her boss, darling.”

“Keep your voice down, Kate!” I hiss, sinking lower in my seat.

“Really?” Sarah's eyes widen, but there's no judgment, just surprise and concern.

“It's complicated,” I mumble, shredding a cocktail napkin between my fingers.

“What's so complicated about it? You two had sex. So?” Kate leans forward, never one to beat around the bush.

“The thing is, I'm living in his apartment and working for him. That seems fairly complicated to me.” The weight that's been crushing my chest all week gets heavier with each word. “And we haven't spoken about it. At all. He's just... pretending it never happened.”

“Wait, what do you mean, living with him?” Sarah's forehead creases with confusion.

I heave a sigh and rub the back of my neck. “Why isn't anyone coming to take our

order?" I scan the area for a server, desperate to change the subject. The last thing I need is to break down crying in this fancy place.

"Don't change the subject, Emily!" Sarah scolds. "What do you mean, living with him?"

"It means that my landlord kicked me out. I couldn't live with you because, forgive me, I don't want to sleep on your old sofa, and I couldn't ask Kate either because she's allergic to cats, and apparently, I have no one else to ask! So it was either move in with Logan or live under a bridge somewhere. He was there when it happened and offered help. End of story."

My friends exchange looks that say they don't believe this is the end of any story.

"Okay. So you guys are living together," Kate says as if connecting the dots. "And working together. And now sleepingtogether." She leans forward, eyes bright with interest. "Can we get back to the part where you had sex?"

"Sometimes I think you're a perv, Kate," Sarah mutters, her cheeks flushing pink.

Kate rolls her eyes but doesn't argue.

"We slept together. It was amazing until the next morning when I woke up alone." My voice catches, and I have to swallow hard against the lump in my throat. "Logan hasn't said a word to me since that night. Not about what happened, anyway. It's like... it's like I don't exist for him anymore, except as his receptionist."

I don't tell them how much it hurts. How each cold interaction feels like a betrayal of the intimacy we shared. How I lie awake at night in his guest room, listening for his footsteps, wondering if he's thinking about me too. How I replay every moment of that night over and over, trying to figure out what went wrong.

“Oh—”

A server appears before Kate can finish her thought, a guy with a neat beard and an attentive smile. His arrival is a welcome interruption from the Logan discussion, even if Logan's physical presence across the bar remains a constant reminder.

“Ladies, what can I get for you this evening?” he asks, pen poised over his notepad.

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“I’ll have a Sex on the Beach,” Kate says immediately, blinking seductively.

“A glass of the house white for me,” Sarah adds.

“Vodka tonic. Double,” I say, ignoring Sarah’s raised eyebrow. “And maybe bring us some of those truffle fries?”

When the drinks arrive, the conversation shifts to lighter topics like Kate’s upcoming art show, Sarah’s adventures with her third grade class, and the latest shows we’ve been streaming. Logan’s name disappears from the discussion, though I remain painfully aware of his presence across the room, like an electrical current humming beneath my skin.

Despite my plan to get wasted, I barely touch my drink. I keep rolling the glass between my hands while watching Kate knock hers back, and Sarah struggles to keep up. My thoughts keep circling back to Logan, no matter how hard I try to focus on something else. What’s he doing here? Is this a regular spot for him? Who’s that guy he’s with? Does he not care at all about what happened between us?

“Fucking asshole!” Kate exclaims, her voice slurred. She’s completely wasted, her usual grace replaced by wobbly indignation.

I follow her gaze and see two women joining Logan’s table. They’re sleek, sophisticated types in cocktail dresses and are laughing at something he said. One of them leans in close, her hand on his arm. The knot in my stomach tightens painfully, and I have to blink back tears.

I have no right to be jealous. Logan doesn't owe me anything. What happened between us was just a hookup, nothing more. I repeat these facts to myself, but they do nothing to ease the ache in my chest. I'm so distracted that I don't notice Kate getting up until she's already several steps away.

“Where are you going?” I call after her, but she's too far away to hear me.

Sarah gives me a helpless shrug.

Horror dawns as I realize where she's headed, straight for Logan's table.

“No!” I clap my hand over my mouth, frozen for a second before jumping to my feet, nearly knocking over our table. Trying to navigate the crowded bar in these ridiculous heels is almost impossible. I have to weave through a maze of bodies to reach Kate. By the time I get there, she's already facing off with Logan's table.

“Pig,” she says, lifting a glass of what looks like whiskey.

Logan whips his head around, meeting my eyes for the first time in a week. Something flashes across his face, surprise, recognition, or maybe even guilt, before his expression hardens again. He looks away from me and back at his friend, who now has a lap full of Kate's drink.

I love Kate. She's the best friend anyone could ask for, loyal and protective to a fault. But right now, her misdirected vengeance is making everything worse. The guy she doused isn't even Logan, just some innocent bystander. He sits there stunned, his pants soaked. The woman next to him jumps up, clutching her designer purse as though Kate might attack it next.

Time seems to slow down as I take in the whole disaster: Kate swaying on her feet, defiant; the soaked guy trying to dab at his pants; the women looking outraged and

confused; and Logan... his expression impossible to read. His jaw is tight, his eyes cold, but there's something else there too, something I can't quite identify.

"I think you have the wrong table," Logan says, his voice eerily calm. He deliberately avoids looking at me.

"Oh no, I know exactly who I'm looking for," Kate slurs, her finger wavering as she points. "You're the asshole who's been making my best friend miserable."

"Kate, please," I whisper, wanting to sink into the floor with embarrassment. "Let's go."

"No, Emily," she protests loudly. "He needs to know what a jerk he is!"

"I think we all get the point," Logan's friend says, standing up and ineffectively dabbing at his soaked pants with a napkin. "Maybe we should take this outside before we get thrown out?"

Logan nods curtly, dropping some cash on the table. He still won't look at me. "Ladies, enjoy your evening," he says to the women, who exchange glances before gathering their things and heading for the restroom.

I stand there, paralyzed with horror, as Logan and his friend make their way to the exit.

"That showed him," Kate says triumphantly, then sways dangerously. I grab her arm to keep her from falling.

"Let's get you home," I mutter, feeling utterly deflated. I lead Kate back to our table, where Sarah waits, eyes wide with shock.

She stands quickly. “What happened?”

“Kate decided to redecorate Logan's friend's pants.” I sigh. “They left.”

“Oh, Kate,” Sarah says, shaking her head. “Let's get our bill and go.”

While we wait for the check, I can't help but glance toward the door. Some crazy part of me hopes Logan might come back, acknowledge me, and explain what the hell is going on. But the door stays stubbornly closed, and the knot in my stomach gets tighter. This night has gone from bad to worse, and I have no idea what's waiting for me when I go back to Logan's apartment.

If I still have a place to stay tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Emily

My hands shake like crazy while I dig around for Logan's keys in my trainwreck of a purse. God, that whole bar thing was so humiliating. Kate might've meant well with her little intervention, but holy crap, she crossed every line there is. If I'd known what she was planning, I swear I would've tackled her to that gross, sticky floor before she could do anything.

Or not.

Truth is, part of me wanted to join her crusade against Logan. To just yell and flip out and demand why he's been treating me like I have the plague after we hooked up.

But watching that drink splash all over his friend's fancy pants, seeing everyone's shocked faces... Jesus, it was like watching a car crash happening right in front of me. Kate's always been my bodyguard since we were kids. When Becky Wilson shoved me off the monkey bars in fifth grade, Kate pushed her face-first into the mud without thinking twice. That's just how she rolls. She's all impulse and rage. Screw what happens after.

I love her for it, seriously. But I didn't want Logan humiliated. Despite all the crap, despite him giving me the cold shoulder and acting all professional and the painful silence, I still want him to see me as more than just a messy pain in his perfectly organized life. And Kate's drunk revenge mission just confirmed his worst thoughts about me.

After the whole drink-throwing show, Logan jumped up and followed his friend outside without saying a single damn word to me. No reaction, no yelling, not even a glance my way, though we locked eyes just seconds before. Just nothing.

Sarah wrestled Kate into an Uber, both of us apologizing to the driver while Kate slurred on about jerks who deserve drinks in their faces from the back seat. After watching the car disappear into the night, I thought about going anywhere but back to Logan's apartment. But my options dried up with each minute ticking by, especially this late.

So here I am, outside his door. No clue what's waiting for me on the other side. Will Logan be sitting on the couch, feet planted wide, arms crossed over his chest, judging me silently? Will those green eyes pin me to the wall for ruining his precious night out? Or worse, will he tell me to pack my stuff and get lost? The hard truth is, I've got nowhere else to crash.

I take a deep breath, trying to chill my anxiety, and push the door open. The apartment is dark except for the glow coming through the enormous windows. I scan the room, looking for Logan. Part of me expects him to pop out from the shadows like some brooding movie villain. But the living room is empty.

As my eyes get used to the darkness, I step forward, wondering whether to call out or sneak to my bedroom and deal with the inevitable blowup tomorrow. Before I decide, a massive shadow breaks away from the darkness and charges at me.

I scream before I can stop myself. I stumble backward, nearly falling on my butt as the giant black beast tackles me.

“Goddammit, Bob!” I snap at the huge dog that’s slobbering all over my face. His tongue leaves wet trails across my cheeks, and his breath reeks of those stupidly expensive organic dog treats Logan buys him. Even though I’m annoyed, there’s

something nice about Bob's over-the-top greeting. At least someone in this apartment doesn't treat me like I'm invisible.

I dig my fingers into his thick fur and push him off with everything I've got.

“Sit,” I order, brushing away the explosion of dog hair covering my black dress. Seriously, how does one dog shed enough fur to make three more dogs?

Getting back to my feet, I look around for signs of Logan. I'm pissed he isn't here. The jerk's absence bugs me more than it should. I ruined his night out. Well, technically Kate did, but since she did it for me, it's on me. I embarrassed him in front of his friend. Well, again, Kate did. But that hardly matters now. So where the hell is he? Why isn't he waiting with that trademark scowl and clenched jaw, demanding explanations? Why isn't he confronting me or telling me to get out? Un-fucking-believable.

Without thinking, I let my feet carry me toward his bedroom. I push the door open without knocking and freeze in the doorway.

Holy shit, Superman! For just a second, one traitorous second, I forget why I'm so mad. Logan must have just gotten back. He's standing in the middle of the room, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped low around his hips. Water droplets cling to his broad shoulders and chest, catching the light from the bathroom. His hair is wet and slicked back, showing off the sharp angles of his jaw and cheekbones. Little streams of water roll down his chest and shoulders, disappearing under the towel's edge.

I bite my lip and can't look away. My anger melts under a hot wave of want that hits me out of nowhere. God, I want to run my tongue along every inch of his body. To drag my finger down that teasing line of dark blond hair from his belly button until it disappears beneath the towel, following the sculpted ridges between his abs. To press my lips against the hollow at the base of his throat where his pulse beats. I want?—

“What do you want, Emily?” His voice cuts through my daydream. He doesn't try to cover up, standing there like he either doesn't care that I'm here or he's too angry to be modest.

I push away my inappropriate thoughts and try to remember why I stormed in here like a hurricane. However, it's nearly impossible to focus with him standing there like some Greek god come to life. Down, girl. Breathe. Remember why you're pissed.

“I saw you at the bar tonight.” I mentally slap myself.

“Yeah, and I saw you, Emily.” His voice rumbles from deep in his chest, his gaze locked on mine. Those intense eyes peel away my defenses layer by layer as if he's reading my mind. “I also saw your friend. She seems... nice.”

“Um, yeah, I'm sorry for how she acted.” I shift uncomfortably, suddenly aware of my too-tight dress, my makeup probably smeared beyond hope from Bob's slobbery welcome. “She had a little too much to drink and kind of lost it.”

“Maybe she shouldn't drink if she can't handle her alcohol.” His measured tone barely hides how annoyed he is.

My face gets hot. “Oh, come on, she just did something stupid.” I feel defensive even though I know Kate went way over the line. Still, I won't throw my friend under the bus for Logan's approval, not even to fix this mess.

“Really? Her behavior seemed deliberately aggressive. Stephen was pretty cool about not making things worse. Someone else might have reacted way less nicely.” He runs his fingers through his wet hair, scattering droplets everywhere. “Not everyone has Stephen's patience.”

A snort escapes me. “I'm sorry, okay? Kate thought she was doing me a favor or

something.” The confession bursts out before I can stop it, and I immediately regret it.

Logan's eyes narrow, focusing on me with predatory interest. “Are you telling me Stephen wasn't the target? That the drink was meant for me instead of him?” His voice has a dangerous edge, daring me to tell the truth.

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I swallow hard, feeling like I'm on trial. "Maybe." Embarrassment burns my cheeks, mixed with something deeper, the raw vulnerability of having all my feelings exposed.

"I understand," he says.

"No, actually. You don't!" The words explode from me, frustration boiling over at his cryptic response. "You don't understand a single fucking thing about how I've felt this entire week!"

"What is there to understand?" Logan's voice rises, the calm façade cracking to show real emotion. Annoyance runs through his words, but beneath it, there's something that sounds like hurt. "You followed me and, like a silly schoolgirl, thought it brilliant to pull this ridiculous revenge stunt. You need to grow up, little girl."

I stand frozen, mouth open, his words stabbing like knives. Being dismissed hurts worse than any direct insult. Little girl? After everything we shared? After countless nights lying awake, wondering what I did wrong? He couldn't possibly have said that.

"How dare you?" I launch myself at him, stopping with barely an inch between us. "How dare you call me a little girl when you've done nothing but act like an immature jerk! Okay, so we slept together. It was okay. End of story." I jab my finger into his chest, the contact more intimate than I intend as my skin touches his. His muscles tense beneath my touch, but rage pushes me forward. "You're the one who needs to grow up, Logan!"

"It was great."

“What?” I blink, thrown off by the unexpected response.

“The sex between us was great. Not just okay.” His voice drops to a husky rumble that vibrates through my bones. His eyes capture mine while confusion scrambles my thoughts at this sudden change.

We’re fighting, aren’t we? “That's not the point?—”

His mouth crashes against mine before I can finish, his lips demanding and warm. My brain struggles to catch up with what's happening for a second. I should be furious with him. And I am. For good reason. Yet the moment his tongue presses against my lips, all the reasons vanish, replaced by desire so fierce it steals my breath. My body reacts before I can think, my lips parting to let him in. His hands circle my waist, pulling me tight against him. The hard planes of his chest press against mine, the dampness from his shower soaking through my thin dress. Pure madness. We solved nothing. Anger still simmers between us. We've barely spoken all week. Yet we're kissing as though the world ends tomorrow, and all I want is more.

My hand slides down his chest, feeling the hammering of his heart beneath my palm. My fingers trace the definition of his muscles, following their shape downward until they brush the towel's edge. I yank it free, letting it fall forgotten to the floor. My gaze immediately drops to his cock, already hard and straining toward me. The tip glistens with a drop of precum. I lick my lips and drop to my knees before him. Gripping the base of his erection, I slide my hand slowly along the rigid shaft. His skin feels incredibly hot and silky beneath my fingers.

Logan goes rigid, and a ragged breath tears from his throat. Looking up through my lashes, I see his transformation, the cold mask he's worn all week shattered, replaced by naked desire. His pupils grow until only a thin ring of green remains, his lips part, and his focus narrows exclusively to me. I trace my tongue across the head of his cock, drawing teasing circles, savoring the salty-sweet taste unique to him. His

breathing grows ragged and uneven, proof my attention is having the desired effect.

“Stop teasing me, kitten, and open your mouth.” The command comes out hoarse with barely restrained need.

I obey without hesitation, parting my lips as he places one hand on my neck while guiding his cock to my mouth with the other. His fingers tangle in my hair, gentle yet commanding, directing without forcing. He's too big to take completely, but Logan controls my movements, driving deeper with each thrust. Instinctively, my hand slips beneath my dress hem. I push aside my thin panties and moan against his cock when my fingers find my clit. I'm already soaked, turned on simply by pleasuring him. My fingers work in rhythm with his thrusts.

“Come for me,” he growls.” Come on, give it to me, kitten.”

His words push me over the edge. My body shudders as I cry out helplessly around his cock, orgasm crashing through me in relentless waves. At the same moment, Logan's cock swells between my lips. He drives himself deeper, his rhythm growing erratic as he chases his own release. With a guttural sound, he comes. I swallow instinctively, the intimacy sending aftershocks of pleasure rippling through my spent body.

Withdrawing from my mouth, he lifts my chin with a single finger, those intense green eyes locking with mine. The unexpected tenderness in his expression makes my heart skip.

I swallow and lick my lips like a satisfied cat, a gesture that darkens his gaze with renewed hunger. He helps me stand, his touch surprisingly gentle.

“Undress for me, Emily,” he whispers against my ear, his breath warming my skin and raising goose bumps along my neck. “You need to learn the difference between

just okay and great.”

I nod, and grabbing my dress's hem, I pull it off in one smooth motion. Logan turns me until my back faces him, his hands on my shoulders guiding the movement. I feel so exposed in this position, unable to see his reaction as he checks me out. A shiver runs down my spine as his fingertips trace a featherlight path from my shoulder blades to the small of my back.

“You're so beautiful I could look at you for hours,” he murmurs. “Turn around.”

I pivot to face him. One corner of his mouth is lifted in a genuine smile that transforms his usually serious face.

“Truly beautiful,” he repeats when our eyes meet. His hand touches my cheek with unexpected tenderness before trailing along my jawline and down my throat, following the path to my collarbone where his palm rests briefly over my racing heart. “Take off your bra, Emily.”

I reach behind me and unhook the clasp, letting it slowly slide down my arms. I enjoy his reaction, the way his eyes follow every movement and how his breath catches when black lace falls away to show my breasts. When it joins the pile of clothes on the floor, I meet Logan's gaze, feeling bold and powerful under his appreciative stare. Never have I felt more beautiful than right now, standing nearly naked before him with desire written all over his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Emily

Logan reaches for my breast while reclaiming my mouth. His kiss is hungry as his fingers work their magic across my body, switching between teasing touches and firm

grabbing. It's all too much.

He pushes me back gently. My knees hit the edge of the bed, and I tumble onto the sheets. He follows me down, stretching out next to me and sliding his hand over my stomach before slipping beneath my panties. When his finger enters me, he silences my moan with his lips.

"You're so wet," he whispers against my mouth, curling his finger inside to find that spot that makes me arch against him.

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“Fuck me, Logan,” I beg, not caring about pride anymore. “I need you to take me now.”

He responds right away. Taking his finger out, he grabs my panties’ waistband, the last thing between us. I jump at the sudden ripping sound as he tears them off with impatient hands.

“I liked those panties,” I protest, out of breath.

“I’ll buy you new ones,” he promises, positioning himself above me.

Our eyes lock as I reach between us to grab his cock, guiding him to my entrance. There’s a moment of resistance before he fills me completely, stretching me in ways that make me gasp. My eyes start to close as he moves, each thrust pulling sounds from me I barely recognize.

“Don’t close them,” he orders. “I want to look into your eyes when you come.”

I obey, meeting his gaze without hesitation. This eye contact during our most intimate moment, while he’s deep inside me and I’m tight around him, scares the hell out of me with how intense it is. He’s looking right into my soul, seeing every feeling I tried to hide from him and myself. It’s overwhelming, but I can’t look away.

His rhythm changes, slowing to something more deliberate, more intense. Each thrust feels purposeful, as if he’s trying to say something his words can’t express. His hands cradle my face, thumbs stroking my cheeks with surprising tenderness. The contrast between the gentleness of his touch and the power of his body moving inside mine

breaks something open in my chest.

“Emily.” He breathes my name as if it’s something sacred, something precious.

I wrap my legs around his waist, drawing him deeper, wanting more of this connection that feels dangerously like something beyond just physical need. His forehead presses against mine, our breath mingling as we move together.

“Logan!” His name rips from my throat as the pressure builds beyond what I can take before shattering in a flood of pleasure so intense tears spring to my eyes.

“Come, Emily. Come with me.” His voice is strained as his rhythm speeds up, chasing his own release.

I moan as aftershocks ripple through me, waves of pleasure crashing over and over. Even though I try to keep my eyes open, my vision goes blurry as I call his name again and again, half prayer, half desperate begging. He drives into me a few more times before stiffening above me, his face transformed as he comes. His hot release fills me and triggers another wave of pleasure through my super-sensitive body.

We stay frozen for several heartbeats, breathing hard, with our bodies still joined, before Logan rolls beside me. His absence leaves me feeling weirdly empty. But before I can dwell on that feeling, his arms encircle me, one hand splayed across my stomach, the other pillowing my head.

“Logan,” I venture after a while, my voice barely above a whisper. “What are we doing?”

His hand stills for a moment, then resumes its gentle exploration. “Right now? We’re lying in bed together.”

I snort. “You know what I mean.”

He sighs, his breath warm against my neck. “I don’t have a good answer for you.”

“I’m not asking for promises or labels,” I say, trying to keep my tone casual even as my heart races. “I just want to understand... this.” I gesture vaguely between us.

“This is...” He pauses, and I can almost hear the gears turning in his head as he searches for the right words. “Complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” I turn in his arms to face him. “We’re adults. We can figure this out.”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch lingering. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Maybe it is.” I place my hand on his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath my palm. “Maybe we’re the ones making it complicated.”

Something shifts in his expression, a softening around the edges. “Maybe,” he concedes, though I can tell he’s not entirely convinced.

Before I can press further, he pulls me closer and kisses me again, this time with a gentleness that makes my toes curl. It’s different from the desperate hunger of before. It’s slower, deeper, and more deliberate. Like he’s taking his time to learn me, to memorize the shape of my lips, the taste of my mouth.

When we break apart, both breathing hard, he rests his forehead against mine. “Let’s just... be here. Right now. Can that be enough for tonight?”

Part of me wants to argue, to demand more clarity, more certainty. But another part

that's still buzzing with the afterglow of what we just shared is willing to accept this moment for what it is.

"Okay," I whisper, settling back against him. "For tonight."

He presses a kiss to my shoulder, tightening his arm around my waist. "Thank you."

There's so much we need to talk about, how he acted all week, what this means for us, where we go from here, but as he holds me close, all that stuff can wait till morning. I rest my head on his chest, listening to his breathing slow down and his heartbeat steady under my ear.

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His hand strokes my hair, the rhythm soothing and hypnotic. I fight against the pull of sleep, wanting to stay in this moment a little longer, to savor the rare peace between us. But eventually, my eyelids grow heavy, and I drift off, lulled by his warmth and the tiny hope that maybe tomorrow might be different.

I wake with a start, feeling intensely uncomfortable. In fact, I'm suffocating. Something presses against my face. My eyes fly open. I'm blind! I panic. Did I die during the night and this blackness is the void beyond life? Then I recognize the weight on my face and the unmistakable smell of cat fur.

"Goddammit, Demon!" I throw the cat off me, spitting and hacking like a crazy person. Cat hair coats my tongue like a fuzzy carpet. The little monster has been plotting my death since day one, and sooner or later, she'll succeed in smothering me in my sleep. She lands perfectly as always, staring up with offended dignity as if I did something terrible.

Sighing, I look around the room through the pale morning light. My eyes automatically go to Logan's side of the bed, and my stomach knots up hard. Empty space mocks me. Again.

"Fucking son of a bitch!"

My shout startles Demon, who arches her back with a nasty hiss before racing from the room. The goddamn coward disappeared again.

I launch myself up, swinging my legs over the edge before standing and dragging the sheet behind me. I storm out of the bedroom, fury burning through my veins so hot I

swear it might burn me up from the inside.

How dare he? After everything we shared last night, after those tender moments and whispered conversations in the dark, how could he just leave? Again?

Un-fucking-believable! Teeth clenched until my jaw hurts, I mentally put together all the things I'm gonna yell at that asshole the second he shows up. My rage pumps out an endless list of insults and curse words at an amazing rate.

How could he do this twice? How could anyone be such a jerk? He doesn't want a relationship or anything serious? Fine! But for Christ's sake, how long can he pretend nothing happened? How long can he ignore me?

Last night, I thought we turned a corner and found some new understanding between us. But this morning proves it was all in my head. Just another stupid fantasy I created because I wanted it to be true. I'm such an idiot.

I march toward the kitchen, each step feeding my anger. One hand curls into a fist while the other clutches the sheet around my body. Coffee is my first priority. Before confronting Logan at work, I need caffeine's clarity, and a double dose might help me figure out whatever the hell I'm supposed to do next.

Maybe it's time to face reality. This arrangement isn't working. I need to find my own place, establish some boundaries, and protect what's left of my dignity. How am I supposed to face him at work after this?

Lost in my thoughts and fury, I don't notice right away that someone else is here. The rich smell of coffee gets stronger, along with sizzling sounds from the stove. Turning the corner into the kitchen, I freeze mid-step, my prepared rant disappearing instantly.

"Good morning!" Logan says, and my jaw drops as I take a sharp breath. My brain

needs several seconds to process what I see.

Logan stands at the stove with a spatula, dressed in nothing but low-hanging sweatpants. His hair is all messy from sleep, and there's almost a smile at the corners of his mouth. The kitchen island has neatly arranged plates, silverware, and steaming coffee mugs.

“Good morning?” The words come out like a confused question. Am I dreaming? Have I fallen into some weird parallel universe?

“Come, sit. I made breakfast.” He points toward the stool opposite the island before returning to the pan.

This sentence sets off every alarm in my head. I approach cautiously, still looking at him from the corner of my eye, then slide onto a stool at the counter.

“Bacon and eggs. My grandmother's recipe,” he adds when I don't respond. I just stare at him, my mouth half open. “If you'd prefer something else?”

“No, no,” I hasten to say, waving my hand dismissively. “It's perfect, thank you.” This whole situation is bizarre. “Um, is there something you want to say to me?”

His mouth opens, but no words come out, so I try again.

“Do you speak my language? Do you understand what I'm saying?” I jab my finger at him.

“Huh?” He looks genuinely confused.

“You,” I repeat, pointing to myself, speaking with exaggerated clarity like he's hard of hearing. “Do you understand me?”

“You're crazy,” he mutters, turning back to the eggs.

“Phew, for a second, I feared the worst,” I whisper. I'm still not convinced aliens haven't replaced him with this bizarrely domestic version.

While Logan finishes cooking, I focus on the coffee before me. The first sip is perfect, strong and sweet, which is exactly how I like it. I can't remember ever telling him how I take my coffee.

There can be no doubt now that aliens have kidnapped him, and the man who stands before me is just a nicer clone of the real Logan. I shudder. Stupid aliens. They definitely need to improve their cloning skills. I mean, don't they know that Logan Price is anything but kind, smiling, and sunny?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Logan

I study Emily's naked form in the morning light, discovering details I missed before. There's a thin scar on her left elbow and a coffee bean-shaped birthmark on her hip. Though her skin has these tiny imperfections, she's still pure perfection.

I sigh. What the hell am I doing? I move a lock of hair from her face and watch her expression as she sleeps. Her cheeks are faintly flushed, and her lips are pushed out in an adorable pout. I could spend hours studying each freckle, each curve. My hand trembles, wanting to trace the delicate curve of her jaw, to memorize her face through touch.

But reality intrudes. This night was a catastrophic error, one I need to end before it goes further. Before I hurt her.

I've been a real jerk to her, but the truth is, I don't have the slightest idea of what to do. Emily is right. I've behaved like an immature kid. Not this time, though. When Emily wakes up, we will talk about everything that happened and why it can't happen again.

Part of me wants to wake her with kisses, to pull her against me again. Instead, I force myself to slip from the bed even if my muscles protest, reluctant to leave her warmth.

Maybe we can try to be friends.

Yeah, right.

With the memory of her body still fresh in my mind, friendship seems impossible. If only things were different. If she weren't under my roof, working in my clinic. I can't kick her out, can't fire her. My only option is to talk, hoping she understands why we need to stop before it's too late.

I retreat to the kitchen and switch on the espresso machine. Then I open the fridge, satisfied to see I have everything needed for breakfast. We don't have to go to the clinic on Saturday, so I'll have plenty of time to talk to Emily.

My hands shake as I crack eggs into a bowl while bacon sizzles in the pan. Breakfast is my limited culinary specialty.

Lost in rehearsing what to say, I barely notice the soft padding of footsteps until I hear a sharp intake of breath. Turning around, I almost choke on my own saliva.

Emily stands in the doorway, wrapped only in a white sheet. Morning sunlight streams behind her, making the fabric almost see-through. Every curve of her body is visible, her nipples hard against the cool air. Desire surges through me, and my plans for a platonic discussion evaporate.

I have to clear my throat before I can speak normally. "Good morning!" I force a smile as my heart pounds against my ribs.

"Good morning?" Confusion furrows her brow, uncertainty in her voice. She doesn't move and watches me with suspicion.

"Come, sit. I made breakfast."

Emily's eyes narrow, and she stares at me with her mouth half open. I frown. What did I do wrong this time?

“Bacon and eggs. My grandmother's recipe,” I add.

She still doesn't move. I swear she's even stopped breathing for a few seconds.

“If you'd prefer something else—” Something else? This is all I know how to cook!

“No, no,” she hastens to say, waving her hand dismissively. “It's perfect, thank you.” She approaches cautiously, still looking at me from the corner of her eye, then slides onto a stool at the counter. “Um, is there something you want to say to me?”

My mouth opens, ready to deliver my prepared speech, but one look into her eyes scatters my thoughts. I can't find the words to explain that I'm not the man she thinks, that my damage runs too deep.

“Do you speak my language? Do you understand what I'm saying?” she asks suddenly.

“Huh?” Her bizarre question yanks me from my thoughts. What the hell is she talking about?

“You,” she repeats, jabbing her finger at me. “Do. You. Understand. Me?” She points to herself, speaking with exaggerated clarity as though I'm hard of hearing.

“You're crazy,” I mutter, turning back to the neglected eggs, hiding my relief. Even in this tension, her quirky personality breaks through my defenses.

“Phew, for a second, I feared the worst,” she whispers.

When the bacon and eggs are perfectly cooked, I take plates from the cupboard and turn to serve her. I freeze mid-motion, nearly dropping everything.

“What are you doing?” The words come out sharper than intended.

She shrugs with wide-eyed innocence as if saying, Isn't it obvious? Demon sits on the kitchen island like a miniature sphinx while Bob sits beside Emily's stool. Both animals stare at the cookie suspended in her hand.

“They're not allowed to eat sugar!”

Emily freezes, cookie suspended mid-air. Her eyes dart from me to the animals and back again. “But they keep looking at me with those sad puppy eyes!” She gestures toward Bob, who intensifies his pleading expression to theatrical levels.

“What exactly are sad puppy eyes?” I raise my hand to stop her explanation, a genuine smile breaking through. It's actually my fault. I'm the one who left the cookie jar on the kitchen island. Setting her plate before her, I lift Demon from the counter and put her on the floor, earning an indignant meow. I sit on my own stool, acutely aware that Emily is inches away, still wearing only a sheet. “No sugar for animals, Emily,” I repeat firmly. “Am I making myself clear?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, sir,” she mutters, grabbing her fork to enthusiastically attack her breakfast. It's not the first time I've seen Emily eat, yet I still marvel at how she can eat anything without working out or gaining an ounce.

“It's so good!” she moans, with her mouth full and her eyes closed in pleasure.

“Listen, Emily, about last night—” Just as I find my courage, the doorbell's harsh buzz interrupts. “Hold that thought,” I say, rising to answer.

My intuition screams danger before I reach the entrance. I throw open the door and stop at the sight of the man standing on my doorstep. He looks worse than during our last encounter, with patchy stubble and bloodshot eyes in sunken sockets.

“What do you want?” I growl, deliberately lowering my voice.

“Aren't you going to invite me in?” he slurs. He's way too drunk to be able to talk properly.

“No,” I respond, planting myself firmly in the doorway. “I've told you I don't want anything to do with you.”

“Is this any way to treat your father?” Indignation raises his voice. “Your own flesh and blood?”

My jaw goes rigid. I don't want to cause a scene out here in the hall, but I also don't want Emily to meet this joke of a father I've got. In the end, though, I don't have much choice. I grab his arm and yank him inside, slamming the door to contain whatever disaster follows.

He lifts his head and stares in Emily's direction. She's still sitting on the kitchen stool.

I position myself in front of him, creating a shield. “What do you want?”

“You know, son, it's hard to get ahead,” he whines. “No one wants to hire an old man like me. And the city's expensive.” His gesture nearly topples him.

“So then move out of the city.” The muscle beneath my left eye twitches.

“How can you say such a thing? How can you think I would move far away from my only child?” His feigned hurt elevates his voice.

“Cut the crap,” I mutter through clenched teeth. “You know that tactic doesn't work with me. I don't give a damn if you go live under a bridge. I'm not your fucking ATM!”

I hear a noise behind me and turn to see Emily standing there, her expression mixed

with confusion, horror, disgust, and pity. The pity hurts the most.

“Emily—” I reach toward her, but my father's reflexes are faster.

“Good morning, my dear!” He sidesteps me with surprising agility and positions himself before Emily. Taking her hand, he raises it to his lips. Revulsion crawls across my skin at the sight of his contaminating touch on her delicate fingers.

“Let her go,” I growl, striding forward. Gripping his elbow, I wrench him away from her. He staggers, but I instinctively steady him before he falls. It's a reflex I wish I could kill.

“Logan, what—” Emily's voice sounds small and uncertain.

“Emily, please, could you give us a few minutes? I need to discuss some things with my... father.” Saying that word leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. This man has never been a father to me. I avoid meeting her gaze, unwilling to face her questions or, worse, her judgment.

“Don't be rude, Logan. Allow me to introduce myself to your new friend.” The old bastard tries to approach Emily again, his gaze roving over her with predatory assessment.

“Please, Emily,” I implore, letting rare vulnerability show. “Go to your room.”

My father is a violent bastard who spends his days swilling booze. He's the last person I want close to Emily or anyone else.

“Why won't you let me talk to her, Logan? Are you afraid that she might find out who you really are?” His bloodshot eyes challenge me, trying to diminish me in front of Emily. He's angry because I refuse to give in to his pleas.

“That's enough!” My voice erupts as I draw myself to my full height. “I want you to leave and never come back. If you do, I swear I'll—” My fists clench so hard my nails pierce flesh.

“You'll what, son? What will you do? Are you going to kill me the way you killed your mother, your fiancée, and your son?” His words strike exactly where intended, tearing open wounds that never healed.

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“What?” Emily startles, her gaze darting between us, color draining from her face.

“He hasn't told you?” Cruel laughter erupts from him as he sways. “Thanks to your dear Logan, my wife is dead, along with his fiancée from college and their child. If you value your life, little girl, stay as far away as possible from him. He's cursed.”

I grab him by the jacket and drag him to the door. There's no sense in continuing to waste my breath on him. Tomorrow, I'll call my lawyer and get a restraining order taken out against him. I should already have done it, but for some ridiculous reason, I haven't had the guts. Until now.

“Get out,” I command, pushing him through the doorway. “Go now, or I'll call the police.”

He raises his hands in mock surrender. “I'm going. There's no reason to come back here. As far as I'm concerned, I have no son!”

His words drip venom, but they don't affect me. I feel nothing as I watch the man who was supposed to be a father to me enter the elevator and disappear forever from my life. The doors close with finality, and I exhale like a weight has lifted.

Right when I'm about to go back into the apartment, the door on the other side of the floor opens. It's my neighbor, Nathan Reed. He looks almost as exhausted as I feel, with his dark hair disheveled and dressed in rumpled sweats.

“Everything okay?” He surveys the hallway with concern. “I heard shouting but thought it was just the TV.”

“Yeah, don't worry.” I wave dismissively, noticing the pronounced darkness beneath his eyes. From within his apartment comes the cheerful melody of a children's show. I didn't know Nathan had a kid. No child has ever been with him in the building until now. But Nathan Reed isn't what I'm worried about right now. Emily is.

I return inside, securing the door behind me.

Emily stands frozen in her previous position, still clutching the sheet. Her gaze dissects me like she's trying to crack an encrypted code. “I think we need to talk.”

I nod wordlessly and head to the kitchen on autopilot. From the liquor cabinet, I pour myself a whiskey. The amber liquid splashes into a tumbler, sloshing over the rim as my hand shakes. It's way too early, but fuck it all, it's got to be five o'clock somewhere, right?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Emily

Logan pours himself a drink. After what just happened with his dad, I don't blame him. I'd reach for the whole bottle.

I adjust the sheet wrapped around my naked body, wishing I'd gotten dressed before following him out here.

“What do you want to know?” Logan downs half his whiskey in one gulp.

I shift my weight uncomfortably. “Well, the part where your dad accused you of killing three people seems like a good place to start.” I try for casual, but even I can hear the strain in my voice.

“That man isn't my father,” Logan snaps, his jaw clenching so tight, the muscles bulge. “He's just a sperm donor.”

I flinch at his tone. “Okay... so maybe explain the murder thing?” I soften my voice because, seriously, the idea of Logan deliberately taking someone's life seems about as likely as me suddenly developing a talent for not falling on my face.

Logan's shoulders sag as he stares into his glass. “That bastard's always been good at twisting the truth.” He drains the rest of his drink and pours another. “My mother died of breast cancer when I was eight. She didn't know she had it until it was too late.” His voice catches, and he swallows hard before continuing. “I was always a sickly child. Too small, fragile, constantly ill. She devoted everything to taking care of me. Daniel claims she was so focused on my health problems that she ignored her own until it was too late.”

Bitterness colors his words. “My grandparents stepped in after she died. I spent summers at their house in the Hamptons. They probably thought a couple of months of kindness each year could make up for the other ten months living with that monster.”

His laugh sounds like broken glass, making my heart twist. I think about my own childhood, chaotic and imperfect but filled with warmth and love. My parents cheered me on even when I kept failing at everything. My little brother, despite being annoying as hell, always defended me when neighborhood kids were mean. The contrast with Logan's life makes something inside me ache.

“My father blamed me every day for killing her,” Logan continues, his gaze fixed on something far away. “My grandparents sent money monthly for my needs, but he took every penny for his drinking, gambling, and women.” He refills his glass without seeming to realize he's doing it. “He called it his compensation payment for the damage I caused by taking my mother from him. He'd say, ‘If she hadn't been so

busy running you to doctors, she might have noticed her own symptoms.” A deep sigh escapes him. “The hell of it is, I believed him. For years, I was convinced that if I hadn't been such a weak kid, she might have lived.”

“Logan—” I step toward him, wanting to tell him that it wasn't his fault, that no child should bear that kind of guilt.

He holds up a hand, stopping me. “Don't, Emily. I've made peace with it.” But the shadows in his eyes tell a different story. He shakes his head as if trying to clear it. “Anyway, Daniel has always used my guilt to extract money. Especially after my grandparents died and left everything to me.”

So that's where his money comes from. Not from being a vet but from inheritance. Somehow, I respect him more, knowing he built a career healing animals instead of just living off his trust fund.

“I'm sorry for everything you've been through,” I say, crossing the distance between us and placing my hand over his. I half expect him to pull away again, but he doesn't, which feels like a small victory.

“I should be apologizing that you had to witness my father's pathetic extortion attempt.” His eyes finally meet mine, searching for something, disgust maybe, or judgment, and finding neither.

“It's fine. I'm a big girl. I've dealt with worse.” This isn't entirely true. Daniel Price ranks among the most disturbing encounters of my life, but I don't want to add to Logan's burden. “What happened with your fiancée?” I ask, treading carefully. I'm ready to back off if he shuts down, but I need to understand this piece of his past.

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A sad smile touches his lips. "Valerie was one of my closest friends in college. That's all we were for months until something shifted between us." Logan gently pulls his hand from under mine. "She's why I established my rule about never dating young women."

"Because you still love her?" The question scratches my throat as it comes out, my heart squeezing at the thought of competing with a perfect memory.

"I do love her, part of me always will, but that's not why."

"I don't understand," I admit as his eyes meet mine again. They glisten with unshed tears.

"Valerie knew everything about my childhood with Daniel. From the beginning, I told her I didn't want children." His voice falters before he steadies it. "How could I be a father when I never had one? It wasn't for me. I expected her to leave, but she surprised me by saying I was enough, that she didn't need anything beyond what we already shared." He takes another long drink. "Our plans fell apart when Valerie discovered she was pregnant. By the time we realized, she was already in her second trimester."

My heart sinks, and I already know this story doesn't end well. "What happened?"

"She had an undiagnosed heart condition that the pregnancy worsened. They rushed her to the hospital one night, but by morning, she was gone. Along with our child."

Tears spill down my cheeks before I can stop them. "I'm so sorry, Logan. So

incredibly sorry.”

His thumb gently brushes the dampness from my face. “Don't cry, Emily. Please.”

“I'm sorry...” I swallow hard, embarrassed by my reaction. This isn't my tragedy to mourn.

His strong arms wrap around me, pulling me against his chest. The steady beat of his heart beneath my ear offers strange comfort. “This is why I can't pursue anything serious with you. You're young, with your whole life ahead of you. You deserve someone who can give you everything: marriage, children, and a family. I've closed those doors permanently.”

I push back from his chest, needing to see his face. “Are you serious right now?”

“You don't know me?—”

“Stop,” I cut him off, irritation flaring through my sympathy. “You're right, I don't know you completely, but your arrogance is showing. You think you understand exactly what I want? What makes you so sure you know my desires better than I do? Hell, I haven't even figured that out yet!” I shake my head. “I've never seriously thought about kids or traditional family stuff. Maybesomeday I will, or maybe I never will. I can barely handle myself and one demonic cat! At first, I forgot to feed him for two days straight. Do you know what reminded me? Finding that little monster licking bathroom soap. Soap, Logan!”

His chest vibrates with unexpected laughter. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“Just that we shouldn't rush to label whatever this is between us. We can work together, live together, and occasionally sleep together. I'm not demanding rings or babies or forever promises. I'm nowhere near ready for that.” The words spill out in a

rush, and I hope they sound more convincing than I feel.

But even as I say them, a small voice inside me questions whether I'm telling the complete truth. Am I okay with this undefined arrangement, or am I just accepting it because it's all he's willing to offer? I push the doubts away. It's not like I'm lying, I'm terrified of commitment too. My dating history is a slideshow of disasters.

And yet, with Logan, something feels different. When he looks at me like he's doing now, I can almost picture what forever might look like.

“And if that day ever comes when I need more than you can give, I'll tell you, and we'll go our separate ways.”

His gaze locks on mine with an intensity that steals my breath. “You're unlike anyone I've ever known, Emily Baker.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Price,” I respond with exaggerated formality, trying to keep things light despite how his words make my pulse race. “Though I doubt I'm the only woman alive who doesn't care about conventional milestones.”

“Not the only one, maybe, but definitely the only woman under forty I've met who hasn't immediately started planning our future together.” There's teasing in his voice now, the tension melting from his posture.

“I know, I defy categorization,” I mumble, heat rising to my cheeks.

“Not uncategorizable. Exceptional.” He captures my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tracing my lower lip with his thumb. “What was that you mentioned about occasionally sleeping together?”

I shrug with fake nonchalance. “Nothing mandatory about it.”

“For once in your life, stop talking.” He silences me with his mouth on mine.

“I hate when you silence me like that,” I murmur against his lips, meaning exactly the opposite. My fingers explore the muscles of his back through his shirt.

“Liar,” he whispers.

His hands loosen the sheet around me, letting it fall to the floor. My own hands work at the string of his sweatpants, eager to feel his skin against mine.

“Bedroom,” he murmurs against my throat, and I nod wordlessly. He lifts me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me down the hallway.

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Time seems to slow as Logan lays me on his bed, his body covering mine.

“Do you want to know what I think?” I ask, breathing hard.

“I have a feeling you're going to tell me regardless of my answer,” he replies, but I can hear the smile in his voice.

“I think you're a better man than you believe you are.”

His expression sobers. “You don't know?—”

“No, let me finish,” I insist. “I'm not saying you don't have baggage. God knows we all do. But the way you care for your patients, the way you stepped in when I had nowhere to go, even how you stood up to your father just now...” I pause, gathering my thoughts. “Those aren't the actions of someone cursed or broken. They're the actions of someone good who's been convinced he isn't.”

He stares at me for a long moment, searching my eyes. I can't tell if my words have reached him or just bounced off those walls he's built so carefully over the years.

“You're the most challenging, frustrating, captivating woman I've ever met. You've turned my ordered life upside down from the moment you crashed into it. I should want you gone, but the thought of you leaving—” He swallows hard.

“What about the thought of me leaving?” I press.

“It terrifies me.” The raw admission seems torn from him.

My heart pounds so loudly, I wonder if he can hear it. “So what do we do now?”

“I don't know,” he admits, and the vulnerability in that simple confession nearly undoes me. “All I know is that I'm not ready to let you go. Not yet.” He reaches for me again, his touch gentler now as he cradles my face. “Can that be enough for now? Just knowing I want you here, even if I can't promise what tomorrow looks like?”

“Yes, it is.”

I was serious when I told him I didn't think about having a family of my own. And even when I said I didn't care about putting a label on what there is between us, I was being sincere.

The only problem is that I'm not sure I can keep myself from falling in love with Logan Price.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Emily

One month into whatever this thing is with Logan, and my body hums with the rhythm we've created. Days spent at the clinic dodging the longing stares of lovesick clients. Evenings sharing takeout containers across his granite countertop. Nights exploring the ridges and valleys of his body until we collapse, breathless and sated.

We exist in this unnamed space. Not lovers, that word carries too much weight. Not friends since friends don't memorize the sounds each other makes when they come. And not even roommates, though technically, that's what my bank account believes we are.

The arrangement works seamlessly behind closed doors. But at work? That's where

the façade crumbles.

Monday morning, sunlight spills through the clinic's windows while the waiting room overflows with Manhattan's elite.

A Yorkshire terrier yaps beneath my desk as I file Friday's charts. Yeah, I'm way behind, but what can I say? Fucking the boss has its perks.

The sound pierces my skull, yet his owner seems oblivious to the noise. Mrs. Lopez stands before me, impatiently tapping her manicured fingers against the counter.

“Good morning,” I offer, lips stretching into my professional mask. “What brings Droolius in today?”

Her nostrils flare. “Julius. His name is Julius, not Droolius.” Her voice drips with disdain, and I know I'm being mean, but come on! Who the hell names a dog Julius? Mrs. Lopez, that's who. “He's been listless. Barely touching his food. Dr. Price needs to see him immediately.”

The dog in question currently gnaws on his leash, his tail wagging with unmistakable vigor.

“Dr. Price has an opening next Thursday at?—”

“Thursday?” Her hand flies to her throat, clutching a string of pearls worth more than my annual salary. “This is an emergency!” Her voice elevates to a pitch that makes several other dogs in the waiting area perk up their ears.

“He seems rather... spirited to me.” I gesture toward the terrier.

“Are you a veterinarian? I think not. Fetch Dr. Price. Now.”

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The exam room door swings open before I can respond, and Logan emerges. Six women straighten their spines, three reach for lipstick, and Mrs. Lopez's chest thrusts forward at an angle that defies anatomical possibility.

Logan remains oblivious to the effect of his presence. "Mrs. Smith?"

A blonde rises from her seat, victory glinting in her eyes as she floats toward him in her pink Louboutins. "Dr. Price. How wonderful to see you again."

My eyes roll so hard I nearly glimpse my frontal lobe.

Logan spots Mrs. Lopez looming over my desk. "Is there a problem?"

She transforms before my eyes from viper to songbird in an instant. "Dr. Price! My poor Julius is absolutely distraught. I fear only you can understand his condition."

Logan's gaze drops to the dog, now humping her designer bag with impressive enthusiasm. "He appears quite... fine."

"It comes and goes," she insists, brushing her fingers across Logan's forearm, lingering a moment too long. "Couldn't you possibly see him today? For me?" Her eyelashes flutter.

Something primal stirs in my chest, and my throat tightens.

"As I explained," I interject, "Dr. Price is fully booked until Thursday."

The look Mrs. Lopez shoots me could freeze hell.

To Logan's credit, he doesn't cave. "I'm afraid Emily is right, Mrs. Lopez. My schedule is completely full today." His hand gently extricates from her clinging fingers. "Mrs. Smith, this way, please."

Logan's hand briefly squeezes my shoulder as he passes. For a moment, I forget about Mrs. Lopez until she speaks again.

"Thursday, then," she snaps, and her manicured talons snatch the appointment card from my hand. "I truly cannot fathom why he keeps that dreadful little girl at reception. She possesses neither competence nor beauty," she mutters while going through the front door.

My lips stretch into a grin so wide my face aches. "Have a splendid day, Mrs. Lopez! Give my fondest regards to Droolius!"

"Julius!"

Too easy.

The morning drags on, and by lunchtime, my cheeks ache from forced smiles, and my patience wears thinner than discount toilet paper.

It's then that the bell above the door jingles, and a familiar voice slices through the murmur of the waiting room.

"I need to see Logan—I mean, Dr. Price—immediately!"

Kate stands in the doorway, with her blonde hair piled atop her head in a messy bun, wearing paint-splattered overalls and clutching a pet carrier against her chest. Sarah

hovers behind her, looking like she's considering changing her identity and fleeing the country.

“What the hell?” I mutter under my breath. “Kate? What are you doing here?”

She marches to my desk. “I have a pet emergency!”

“You don't even have a pet,” I hiss, eyeing the carrier warily.

“I do now.” Triumph illuminates her face as she lifts the carrier to my eye level. Inside sits a tiny turtle in a shallow puddle of water. “Meet Michelangelo!”

“Like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle?”

“What? No! Like the artist!”

The urge to bang my head against the desk nearly overwhelms me. “What are you doing?” My whisper carries the intensity of a shout.

“Checking on you,” she responds, utterly unconcerned with the scene she's creating. “You've been AWOL for weeks. Plus, I wanted to see this hot vet who's been keeping my best friend hostage.”

“Well, you could have done that the last time if you weren't so taken by your misplaced vendetta against his friend,” Sarah mumbles.

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Before I can stop her, Kate swivels toward the waiting room. “Is that him?” She points at an elderly man cradling a bulldog. “No, wait, that can't be right.” She squints dramatically. “Oh! Is that Dr. McHottie over there?”

Her finger aims directly at Logan, who has emerged from an exam room looking like a GQ cover in his white coat and perfectly tousled hair. He freezes, confusion etching lines between his brows.

“Kate!” My fingers dig into her arm. “Stop. This. Now.”

She ignores me. “Hi! I'm Kate, Emily's best friend! We've sort of met before, though you might not remember since I was throwing a drink at your friend's crotch at the time. No hard feelings, right?”

The waiting room falls silent. Every pair of eyes locks onto this unfolding disaster. I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole. I could fake a seizure. Or start a small fire as a distraction.

But Logan, infuriatingly perfect Logan, doesn't even flinch. His mouth curves into something dangerously close to amusement. “Hello, Kate. What brings you to the clinic today?”

Kate thrusts the carrier forward. “My turtle is sick. Very, very sick. Probably terminal.”

Logan peers into the container. “A turtle? Did you provide adequate water?”

“Of course I did!” Kate bristles with indignation. “I put in, like, an inch. They need water, right? But not too much, or they drown. I googled turtle care for exactly forty-five seconds in the Uber on the way over.”

The turtle retreats into its shell, clearly regretting its role in this charade.

Mrs. Anderson, a regular whose cat mysteriously develops infections whenever her husband travels, rises to her feet. “Excuse me! I've been waiting for thirty minutes. Why does she get priority treatment when her pet is obviously fine?”

Logan smooths the situation with practiced ease. “This appears to be a potential emergency situation requiring immediate assessment. Emily, would you join us, please?”

I ignore the outrageous mutters from the waiting room and follow them to his office. My face burns hotter than the surface of the sun. Once the door clicks shut, I round on Kate. “Have you completely lost your mind? What possessed you to pull this stunt?”

Kate collapses into a chair. “Someone had to check whether Dr. Sexy here was treating you right. You've barely answered our texts for weeks.”

Sarah slides into the office, wincing apologetically. “I tried to talk her out of it. But you know Kate when she gets an idea in her head...”

“You could have called me!” I throw my hands up. “Or texted! Or used literally any other method of communication that doesn't involve embarrassing me at my workplace!”

“You weren't responding. What were we supposed to think? You move in with some guy we barely know, and suddenly you're ghosting your best friends?”

Guilt gnaws at my insides. They're right. I've been absent, wrapped up in the Logan bubble.

"I've been busy," I offer lamely.

"Yeah, we can see exactly how busy you've been." Kate's eyes dart between Logan and me, a knowing smirk on her lips.

Logan, who has been watching this exchange with remarkable composure, clears his throat. "I don't believe we've properly met. I'm Logan Price." He extends his hand to Kate, who eyes it suspiciously before shaking it. "And you must be Sarah," he adds, turning to my other friend.

"So, what exactly are your intentions with our Emily?"

I make a strangled noise. "Kate!"

"Fair question." Logan leans against his desk with infuriating casualness. "My intentions include not firing her for smuggling a clearly un-sick turtle into my clinic during business hours."

Kate narrows her eyes. "So you're saying your relationship is purely professional?"

"Kate," Sarah hisses, "boundaries!"

Logan slides his gaze to mine, holding it for a beat too long. "Emily and I have a... versatile arrangement."

"Versatile," Kate repeats flatly. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

I swear I see the corner of Logan's mouth twitch upward. "I believe the kids call it it's

complicated.”

“So you're fuck buddies,” Kate announces, nodding as if she's cracked some elaborate code.

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“Kate!” Sarah and I shout in unison.

A sharp rap on the door saves me from impending death by mortification. A frantic client peers through the window. “Dr. Price! Mrs. Anderson's cat just collapsed!”

Logan sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Duty calls.” He pushes off from the desk and pauses beside me, leaning close enough that his breath warms my ear. “Your friends are... intense,” he murmurs so only I can hear. “I like them.”

Then he's gone, leaving me standing there with my mouth half open.

“He's hot,” Kate announces once the door closes behind him. “Broody. Mysterious. Definitely your type.”

“He's my boss,” I manage weakly.

“And roommate. And versatile arrangement partner,” she counters, making air quotes. “You've got it bad, Em.”

“I don't— It's not— We're just—” I stammer.

“Eloquent as always,” Kate says. “I'm glad we did this. Now I know you're alive and getting thoroughly laid by Dr. McDreamy.”

Sarah finally speaks up. “Kate, maybe we should go. Emily has to work, and we've already caused enough... disruption.”

After extracting solemn promises to call them later and respond to texts, I usher them out with Michelangelo, the nonterminal turtle. The rest of the day passes in a blur of appointments and phone calls, my mind replaying Logan's words over and over. Versatile arrangement. It sounds so clinical, so detached.

Is that really all this is?

By closing time, I filed every chart, answered every email, and even alphabetized the medication cabinet to avoid thinking about the inevitable conversation with Logan.

“Ready?” His voice startles me. He stands by my desk with his coat draped over his arm and the car keys dangling from his fingers.

“Almost,” I murmur, shutting down the computer with deliberate slowness.

“So,” he says, leaning against the desk, close enough that I can smell his cologne.

My fingers fumble on the keyboard. “I'm sorry about Kate. She's...” I search for the right word.

“Protective,” Logan supplies. “I get it.”

“She's never been subtle.”

“Neither have you,” he points out, and when I look up, that almost-smile plays at the corners of his mouth. My heart does a stupid little flip.

“About what she said?—”

“The part about me being too broody or the part about us being fuck buddies?” His tone is light, but something flickers in his eyes that I can't quite read.

I swallow hard. "I don't know what we are, Logan." The confession slips out before I can stop it.

He studies me for a long moment, then reaches out, brushing his thumb across my lower lip. The touch sends electricity racing down my spine.

"We're..." He pauses, his eyes locked on mine. "Us."

It's not exactly a declaration of undying love, but the way he cups my jaw tells me things I'm not ready to hear anyway.

I lean into his touch, just slightly. "Is that enough?" I whisper.

He doesn't answer, at least not with words. Instead, he kisses me right here in the empty clinic with the lights still on and the cleaning crew due any minute. It's not our usual hungry, desperate kiss. This one feels like a question and an answer rolled into one.

When he pulls back, the look in his eyes makes my stomach drop. "For now."

We step into the evening air, and Logan's hand settles at the small of my back. Maybe labels are overrated anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Emily

Saturday morning, I wake to Logan's side of the bed already empty. The sheets still hold his warmth, though, so he can't have been gone long. I stretch languidly, enjoying the pleasant soreness from last night's activities. Who knew the stern, serious vet had such a creative imagination in the bedroom?

I roll from the bed, stealing his discarded T-shirt from yesterday. The soft cotton swallows me, hanging to mid-thigh and carrying his scent, a combination that shouldn't be as arousing as it is. My bare feet pad across the cold hardwood.

"Morning," I call, emerging from the bedroom. Logan stands at the kitchen island, and the open floor plan allows me to appreciate his bare torso.

"Morning." He extends a steaming mug. "Black with two sugars, right?"

The ceramic warms my palms as I accept his offering. "You know me."

"I pay attention." His lips quirk upward, a half-smile that still makes my stomach flutter ridiculously, like some lovesick teenager rather than a grown woman pushing twenty-three.

The coffee slides down my throat, rich and bittersweet. I sigh with contentment. "You've officially secured your position as my favorite person today."

“Just today?” An eyebrow arches.

“Don't push your luck, Price.” I settle onto a barstool, legs swinging. “The day stretches before us. Plenty of time for you to annoy me.”

His gaze travels over me, from my tangled hair to my bare legs, lingering where the shirt's hem kisses my thighs. “You look good in my clothes.”

Heat blooms across my cheeks. After almost five weeks of sharing his bed, he still reduces me to blushing with nothing more than a look.

My stomach chooses that precise moment to growl loudly.

“Hungry?” Amusement dances in his voice.

“Starving.” I glance around expectantly. “What's for breakfast?”

Logan's brow furrows. “I didn't make anything. I thought we'd order in.”

“On our day off? That's boring.” Inspiration strikes, and I slide from the stool with newfound purpose. “I'll cook!”

“You cook?”

“How hard can it be?” I wave dismissively, confidence bolstered by sheer ignorance. “I've watched plenty of cooking shows.”

“Emily—”

“Nope!” I silence him with a finger against his lips. “Decision made. I'm making breakfast. Go relax or something. I've got this under control.”

Skepticism radiates from him, but he raises his hands in surrender. “All right. I’ll be on the couch. Call if you need anything.”

“I won’t need anything,” I assure him, already rummaging through cabinets. “This will be amazing.”

Twenty minutes later, I contemplate my life choices amid what can only be described as a culinary war zone. Flour covers every surface, including my hair and face. Eggshells are scattered on the countertop, and something sticky has somehow reached the ceiling.

“Everything okay over there?” Logan calls from the couch, where he’s been pretending not to notice the increasingly concerning sounds emanating from the kitchen. I catch him peeking over his newspaper, lips twitching with suppressed laughter.

“Absolutely fine!” I lie through gritted teeth, vigorously adding milk to the mixture in my bowl. “Just putting the finishing touches on your gourmet breakfast!”

The batter plops onto the hot griddle with an ominous sizzle. Instead of spreading into an appetizing circle, it forms a stubbornly dense mound. I prod it with the spatula.

“Flatten, you bastard,” I mutter. The batter remains defiantly immobile. I press down with the spatula, which only results in the batter oozing through the slots. I crank the heat higher. If it won’t spread, it’ll cook faster.

Turning my attention to the bacon, I discover a new disaster in progress. Half the strips remain raw and rubbery, while the others have transformed into blackened carbon.

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“That doesn't smell right,” I whisper, frantically attempting to salvage the few pieces caught in bacon purgatory between raw and cremated.

A shrill, piercing beep slices through the air, startling me into dropping the spatula with a clatter. The smoke detector screams its warning.

“Shit!” I grab a dish towel, waving it frantically above my head, but the beeping continues, mocking my efforts.

Logan materializes beside me, reaching past to switch off the griddle and stove. I hadn't even noticed the black smoke rising from my pancake abomination. He lifts the bacon pan, depositing it in the sink with a hiss of protest from the hot metal meeting cold water. Windows open under his efficient movements while I continue my ineffectual towel dance.

Eventually, the smoke dissipates enough for the alarm to surrender its assault on our eardrums. Logan's immaculate kitchen resembles ground zero of a flour bomb detonation. The pancake fused to the griddle might require an industrial solvent to remove.

I lower my arms, still clutching the dish towel, and reluctantly meet Logan's gaze. To my surprise, his expression holds no anger. His lips are pressed tightly together, and his shoulders shake with barely contained laughter.

“Don't you dare,” I warn, brandishing the towel like a weapon.

He loses the battle with himself and tilts his head back, folding at the waist as he

bursts out laughing, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Your face,” he gasps between fits. “You look?—”

I try to keep my dignity, but it's a lost cause. Laughter bubbles up from my chest, escaping in hiccupping giggles that quickly evolve into full-bodied howls.

“It's not funny!” I protest through my betraying laughter. “I was trying to do something nice!”

“I know,” Logan manages, straightening and wiping his eyes. “That's what makes it so—” He gestures helplessly at the chaos surrounding us before dissolving into renewed laughter. “Come here,” he says, recovering enough to speak coherently. He pulls me against him. “Thank you for trying.”

“I'm actually a decent cook,” I mumble against his skin, inhaling his scent beneath the smokiness clinging to us both. “I just got... distracted.”

“By what?” He strokes my flour-dusted hair, dislodging a cascade of white powder.

“You. Walking around half-naked, looking like some Greek god. It's very inconsiderate when someone's trying to focus on the science of pancake-making.”

He chuckles. “I'll wear a T-shirt next time you're cooking.”

“There won't be a next time.” I groan. “I've learned my lesson.”

He brushes flour from my cheek with his thumb. “How about we clean this disaster zone and order breakfast?”

“Deal.” I heave a dramatic sigh. “Though this has severely damaged my domestic

goddess aspirations.”

“Trust me, Emily,” he says, pulling me in for a kiss, “you possess many other... talents that more than compensate for your culinary shortcomings.”

“Is that so?” My eyebrow arches as I slide my hands down his chest, leaving floury handprints in my wake.

“Mmm-hmm. But first, we clean.”

“Slave driver,” I grumble, reaching for a sponge.

We work side by side, scrubbing surfaces and wiping spills.

“I think this requires industrial intervention,” Logan announces, examining the pancake monstrosity still welded to the griddle. He prods it experimentally with a knife, which bounces off the surface with a dull thud.

“We could frame it,” I suggest, struck by inspiration. “Call it Breakfast Deconstructed and sell it to MOMA for millions.”

He snorts, continuing his assault on the solidified batter. “The smoke damage alone disqualifies it as serious art.”

“Critic,” I accuse, bumping his hip with mine.

His arm snakes around my waist, pulling me against him despite my flour-encrusted state. “What am I going to do with you, Emily Baker?”

“Keep me?” The words slip out unfiltered, and a raw vulnerability shows before I can shield it.

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Instead of him tensing or retreating, Logan's expression softens. "I'm certainly planning to try."

Later that afternoon, I barricade myself in the bathroom, determined to transform from a disaster zone to a desirable date. Logan promised to take me to his favorite restaurant tonight, likely to ensure I remain a safe distance from any cooking implements.

I lay out my arsenal of beauty products across the counter: shaving cream, razor, tweezers, and a charcoal face mask Kate gave me last Christmas that I've never found the courage to use. The packaging promises to detoxify, purify, and rejuvenate with activated charcoal and some herbs whose names contain more syllables than should legally exist in a single word.

Twenty minutes later, I stand before the mirror in mismatched underwear. Black, slimy stuff covers my face, and cucumber slices balance precariously on my eyes. One eye per time or I wouldn't be able to have one leg propped on the counter as I tackle the winter pelt I accumulated on my calves.

Concentration furrows my brow as I navigate the razor around my ankle bone, determined to avoid bloodshed. The bathroom door swings open without warning.

"Emily, have you seen my—" Logan's words die mid-sentence.

I shriek, cucumber slices launching like projectiles. My foot slips from its perch, and I almost face-plant on the floor, when strong hands steady me before gravity claims another victim.

“Jesus Christ!” My heart hammers against my ribs. “Hasn't anyone taught you to knock?”

Logan stares at me. His lips are pressed together but twitch suspiciously at the corners. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” I snatch a towel, attempting to salvage some dignity while standing there with half-shaved legs and a face covered in drying black sludge. “I'm performing an ancient ritual to summon the gods of beauty.”

He bites his lower lip. “Is that what this is?”

“Don't you dare laugh at me, Logan Price.” I brandish my razor like a tiny sword. “This happens when you invite a woman to live with you. Sometimes, we morph into bog creatures in the bathroom. It's the circle of life.”

The laughter breaks free, deep and rich, rumbling from his chest. “You look like you face-planted into a tar pit.”

“It's activated charcoal!” I protest. “It's supposed to extract impurities or some magic beauty bullshit. Kate swears by it.”

“And the cucumbers?”

“For puffiness!” I retrieve one fallen slice from the floor, displaying it like evidence. “Haven't you seen any movie featuring a spa scene?”

Logan steps closer, still chuckling, and wipes his thumb at a spot where the mask crumbles from my cheek. “You know you're stunning without all this, right?”

Warmth spreads through my chest at his words, but I roll my eyes to mask the effect

he has on me. “Says the man who hasn't witnessed my legs in their natural state. Trust me, all of this benefits you more than me.”

“I disagree.” His hands find my waist. “There's something incredibly sexy about a woman comfortable enough to let me see her like this.”

“Covered in black goo with half-shaved legs? You have weird turn-ons, Dr. Price.”

His smile turns wicked, transforming his face from merely handsome to devastating. “Want me to show you my other unusual preferences?”

Before I can formulate a clever response, his mouth claims mine. Logic insists I must taste like activated charcoal and cucumber, since I ate a slice or ten before putting it on my eyes. Yet he kisses me like I'm a feast he's been starving for. His hands slide lower, cupping my ass and pulling me flush against him.

“Your face will be black too,” I warn between kisses.

“Worth it,” he murmurs against my lips.

Needless to say, I ditch my beauty routine in the end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Emily

My eyes pop open, and I jump out of bed, putting my hand over my mouth. I race to the bathroom and reach the toilet just in time.

“Emily?” Logan's voice drifts from the bedroom, but I'm too busy emptying what feels like every organ I've ever possessed to answer him. The metallic taste of bile

burns my throat as I heave again. My fingers are white-knuckled around the porcelain that's become my only friend in this moment of betrayal by my body.

Two muscular calves enter my peripheral vision. Morning light catches the fine golden hairs there, making them look almost ethereal against the stark white tile. I groan and hunch deeper over the toilet bowl, with my hair hanging like a curtain around my face.

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“Go away,” I whine, not daring to look up at him. My forehead presses against the cool porcelain. “I don't want you to see me like this. It's disgusting.”

Logan and I have been navigating this undefined relationship for quite a while now. But this? This crosses into terrifying territory. Some boundaries aren't meant to be broken, and watching someone throwing up as if trying to imitate the girl from *The Exorcist* is definitely one of them.

“I don't want you to see me puking, Logan! Go away!” There are certain lines you don't cross when you're in relationship limbo, and this ranks at the top of that list.

A deep chuckle rumbles behind me. Jerk.

“You do realize I'm a doctor, Emily?” His voice carries that infuriating calm that makes me want to strangle him if only I had the strength to stand.

“A vet.” I moan, resting my burning cheek against the merciful coolness of the toilet seat. Hygiene be damned. “And I'm not an animal.”

The floorboards creak as he kneels behind me.

“Wrong,” he whispers, his breath warm against my ear, sending an absurd shiver through my disaster of a body. “You're my kitten.”

He gathers my hair, pulling it away from my face with the same gentle precision I've watched him use on trembling animals at the clinic.

A lump forms in my throat, and I honestly can't tell if it's because I'm about to puke again or because, little by little, I'm becoming genuinely attached to Logan Price. The realization hits harder than the nausea.

"I think I'm okay now," I rasp. "I just need a shower."

What I really need is to wash away this vulnerability, this rawness that has nothing to do with my physical state and everything to do with the tenderness in his touch.

"Okay." His lips press briefly against my head. He rises, and I look up to see him walking toward the shower and turning on the hot water.

The only thing he's wearing is a pair of tight black boxer briefs that cling to his perfectly sculpted ass.

I push myself up on wobbling legs. My body's staging a full-scale rebellion, and Logan, like the superhero he pretends not to be, instantly materializes at my side. His arm circles my waist, supporting me without apparent effort. I let him guide me to the sink, where I grab my toothbrush, desperate to scour away the acidic aftertaste of humiliation and sickness.

"Come here. I'll help you shower," he says when I finish. His voice drops lower, not suggestive but tender. A whole flock of butterflies erupts in my stomach, making me momentarily fear another bout of nausea.

I smile despite myself and take his hand, surrendering to the inevitable. He guides me to the shower and helps me pull off the oversized T-shirt I sleep in. His fingers graze my shoulder, then he slides his hand down to the small of my back and pushes me gently under the stream of warm water.

The heat cascades over my skin, washing away the clammy residue of sickness. I

watch through the rising steam as he pulls off his boxer briefs before joining me. His body is as familiar to me now as my own, yet still capable of taking my breath away. His cock stands proud, jutting from the nest of dark blond curls, but the way he touches me isn't sexual at all. There's a carefulness to his movements, a deliberate restraint that makes me feel both cherished and slightly disappointed.

He takes the cap off the shampoo bottle and pours a little into his hands. "Turn around."

I pivot, and his hands sink into my hair, working against my scalp in hypnotic circles. My eyes drift closed as he rubs small circles against my temples, somehow knowing exactly how to ease the lingering headache.

"That's nice." I sigh, tilting my head back into his touch. I can't see his face, but I know he's smiling. I'm getting dangerously used to these quiet moments of intimacy that aren't supposed to mean anything but somehow feel like they mean everything.

When he's finally satisfied that I'm clean, he turns off the water, grabs a big, soft towel from the heated rack, and begins to rub it over my body. The plush cotton feels heavenly against my skin but not nearly as good as the occasional brush of his fingers as he carefully dries me.

"You know, you shouldn't spoil me this way," I tease him, my voice still raspy. "I could get used to it." What I don't say is that I already am, that these small acts of tenderness are more addictive than I ever imagined they could be.

"Maybe I like spoiling you." There's no sarcasm in his voice. "Why don't you stay home today? I can handle the clinic by myself, and you can rest and focus on getting better."

For a moment, I consider it. The thought of crawling back into his enormous bed,

surrounded by sheets that smell like him, like us, is tempting. But there's also something frightening about how domestic this all feels, how easily we've fallen into caring for each other when we're supposed to keep things casual.

“I don't feel bad now,” I lie, ignoring the lingering queasiness in my stomach and the slight dizziness that comes when I move too quickly. “It was probably the Chinese takeout we ate last night.” Even as I say it, a whisper of suspicion curls through the back of my mind, a possibility I refuse to consider.

“Either that or the amount you ate,” he says.

“Hey!” I give him a playful punch on the shoulder. I stride to the closet, searching for something to wear that might help me feel like a normal, professional Emily rather than a vulnerable, possibly-falling-for-my-casual-fling Emily. “I don't eat that much!”

“It's not a bad thing,” he says, pulling on dark slacks. “Lots of people would love to have the body you have and continue to eat as much as they want.”

“Tell that to my jeans,” I mutter, struggling with the zipper on my favorite pair, which seem to have narrowed overnight. The denim strains across my hips, refusing to close properly. Usually, I would blame the dryer for their tightness, but dammit all, Logan's right. I've been eating a ton lately. My appetite's been insatiable, though not just for food. Oh well, it just means I'll have to start working out with him more.

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“Are you sure you want to go to work today?” he asks again.

“I told you, I'm fine now. I don't need to stay home.” Where I can't keep those vultures away from you.

“Okay. I'll go make the coffee, and we'll be on our way.”

“Sure!” I force my lips into a smile. “Let me just dry my hair, and I'll be right there.” The mere thought of coffee makes my stomach heave in violent rebellion. The rich aroma that usually has me salivating now feels like an assault on my senses.

He stands watching me for a few more seconds, his gaze more penetrating than usual, and for an instant, I'm afraid he's found me out, that he can somehow see the thoughts tumbling through my head. Instead, he presses his lips to my forehead in a chaste kiss and walks out of the room without saying anything else, leaving me with the ghost of his touch burning my skin.

As soon as his footsteps fade away, I race to the bathroom and close the door behind me, leaning against it as another wave of nausea rolls through me. I slide down to sit on the cool tile floor, drawing my knees up to my chest, trying to breathe through the sickness.

I swear I'll never eat another egg roll in my life. But deep down, I know it's not about the food at all. There's a calendar in my head that I've been deliberately ignoring, days ticking by without the familiar rhythm of my cycle making itself known.

My hand presses against my still-flat belly. I can't be pregnant. I just can't be.

Don't jump to conclusions, I tell myself firmly. It could be stress, a stomach bug, or a dozen other things. No point in panicking until I know for sure.

I push myself up from the floor. I'll get through today like nothing's wrong. Because nothing is wrong. It has to be nothing.

Going to work was a terrible idea. My head feels like it's going to explode as the shrill voice of the woman standing in front of me threatens to burst my eardrums.

"My Queenie isn't talking anymore," she explains to me with tears in her eyes. "See? He's been like this for days!"

She lifts the carrier onto the counter and opens it, forcing her pet to come out. It's one of those miniature dogs with short hair and enormous ears that always look like they're pissed off. I admit that the little monster does seem to have some sort of problem. It's like watching a movie but without the soundtrack.

"You see?" shouts his owner hysterically.

Queenie's opening and closing her mouth, showing her tiny, sharp teeth, and hopping back and forth as if she wants to attack me.

Sometimes, I don't understand the way my mind works. I know the dog's basically mute, so why do I have this urge to touch it and see if, for some absurd reason, I can turn the audio back on? I proceed to make the big mistake of stretching my hand out toward it. The little bitch sinks its teeth into my finger.

"Shit!" I mutter, trying desperately to disengage my finger from its mouth.

"Everything okay here?" I hear Logan coming up behind me. "I was calling you from the door. Why didn't you answer me, Em— What the hell?" He grabs the little beast

by the head and pries its jaws open, freeing my finger. “Mrs. Ross, you know perfectly well you shouldn’t take Queenie out of her carrier,” he admonishes the client. “Pets must always be kept on a leash or in their carriers in the waiting room.”

“Oh, Dr. Price, forgive me! But your admin told me to wait my turn even though I told her it was an emergency. I just wanted her to see the condition my little treasure is in.”

Logan sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Mrs. Ross, there’s nothing seriously wrong with Queenie. She probably just has a bit of a cold.” He keeps his tone professional, though I can tell he’s about to roll his eyes and laugh in the woman’s face. “I’ll prescribe an antibiotic for Queenie. You need to give it to her twice a day by mouth.” He quickly writes out a prescription and hands it to her.

“Thank you, Dr. Price!” she peals happily, taking the tiny dog from Logan’s arms and hugging it to her chest. Queenie glares up at her dear mommy and bares her teeth. Mrs. Ross picks up the prescription and the carrier from the reception desk and heads for the exit.

If I were Mrs. Ross, I wouldn’t let the little beast sleep in my bed. I would lock my bedroom door, so it couldn’t get in. To hell with what Logan says, Queenie has the distinct look of a homicidal maniac. I’m seriously beginning to worry about that poor woman who has to live with her. I shudder. Animals are truly terrifying.

I look at my finger. It’s still bleeding. I know it’s just a flesh wound, but it really burns. “Um, Logan?”

My hunky vet turns toward me. “Yes, Emily?”

“I’m not going to become like Queenie, am I?” I wave my bloody finger with dramatic flair. “I’m not going to lose my ability to make noise, right? Because I kind

of rely on my voice for, you know, communication and occasional bouts of hysterical screaming.”

“She's not a radioactive spider.” His lips twitch, fighting a smile. “Dog bites don't typically confer special powers, unfortunately.”

I roll my eyes, immediately regretting it when pain stabs through my temples. “What I meant is, I'm not going to get doggy laryngitis now, am I? Because if I'm going to lose my voice to a bite, I should probably start practicing my mime routine.”

“I'm sorry,” he replies, voice grave while his eyes dance with suppressed laughter, “but no, unfortunately, you won't be losing your voice. The world will have to continue enduring your particular brand of commentary for the foreseeable future.”

My jaw drops. Logan Price just cracked two jokes in sixty seconds. The stern, brooding veterinarian who communicates primarily through grunts and frowns has suddenly developed a personality.

“Jerk,” I mutter, pressing my fingers against my throbbing temples. Despite my best efforts, a smile threatens to break free. I like this playful version of Logan.

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“Hey, I was joking.” He crosses to me and places his hands on my shoulders.

“I know, don't worry. I just have a really bad headache.” My head drops forward as his fingers work magic on my knotted muscles. A sigh of pleasure escapes before I can trap it.

“Why don't you go home? There are only two patients this afternoon. I can handle things alone.” Genuine concern threads through his voice, making my chest tighten. This isn't how casual arrangements work. We shouldn't care about each other's well-being or worry when the other person feels sick. We signed up for fun and physical release, not... whatever this is becoming.

I want to insist I'm fine and can power through, but exhaustion weighs on me. My nerves feel raw, and my stomach continues its rebellion. The thought of facing even two more clients makes bile rise in my throat.

“Maybe it wasn't the Chinese food,” I whisper. “Maybe I'm coming down with the flu or something.”

“Probably. That's why it would be better for you to go home and rest.” His thumbs press into a particularly stubborn knot at the base of my skull, drawing a half-moan from my lips. “You look pale, and your skin's a little clammy. Classic signs of a virus.”

“Yeah, maybe you're right.” Surrender comes easier than expected since my body is too exhausted to maintain the pretense.

“I’ll call you a cab.”

“No, Logan, you don’t have?—”

But he’s already dialing, one hand on the phone while the other remains on my shoulder, grounding me in the moment.

“Thanks,” I murmur, letting my eyes close. For just a second, I allow myself to lean into his touch, to imagine we’re something more substantial than what we really are, that I could confess my deepest fears without shattering everything we’ve built.

My hand slides unconsciously to my lower abdomen, resting there briefly before I catch myself and drop it to my side. Two weeks later. One conversation I’m nowhere near ready to have.

For now, I’ll blame everything on a stomach bug or the flu. I’ll go home, and then... then I’ll figure out what comes next.

Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned about life, it never follows the script you’ve written. Especially not when you’re Emily Baker, chaos magnet extraordinaire.

“The cab will be here in ten minutes,” Logan says, breaking into my thoughts. “Do you want me to wait with you outside?”

“No, I’ll be fine.” I offer him a smile that I hope doesn’t look as strained as it feels. “Just need to gather my things.”

As I collect my purse and jacket, I can feel his eyes on me, concerned and watchful. Whatever virus or flu or... other possibility... is brewing inside me, I know one thing for sure. Sooner or later, I’ll have to face the truth.

And when I do, everything between us will change forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Emily

“Emily, the taxi's here.” Logan gently shakes me awake.

“Huh?” My eyelids flutter open. I must have fallen asleep. Maybe I really am getting sick. Or maybe... Nope.

“The taxi's waiting,” he repeats.

“Thanks.” I grab my purse and coat, rising on unsteady legs.

Before I can stop myself, I lean in and press my lips against his. His mouth is warm and slightly chapped against mine, familiar now in ways that make my chest ache. I want to sink deeper, to lose myself in him, but I pull away, terrified he'll read the naked longing in my eyes.

“See you at home,” he says.

Again I feel those damned butterflies in my stomach. I have to remember that Logan's house is not our house. My presence there is only temporary. Even so, every once in a while, I lose myself in a daydream about how a real relationship with Logan Price would be.

Shooing away that thought, I return his smile. “Bye,” I say, hurrying toward the door.

Outside, the yellow taxi is stopped at the curb. Jumping inside, I give the driver the address and fall back onto the seat.

What the hell is happening to me today? And I don't mean the churning stomach or the headache threatening to split my skull open. Those symptoms have an explanation, one I'm actively avoiding. No, the real problem is my obsessive circling around whatever exists between Logan and me, this undefined territory we've occupied for a while now.

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As the taxi turns onto Logan's street, my fingers rummage through my bag, bypassing tissues, lip balm, and wallet before closing around my phone.

Emily: I need to talk to you two.

Their almost instant responses make me wonder if my friends have been hovering near their phones, waiting.

Kate: I can't right now. Family reunion. Bo-o-o-oring!

Sarah: I'm free. Where do you want to meet?

Relief washes through me, and I send her Logan's address.

Kate: What's wrong?

Emily: I feel tired and queasy. I might have food poisoning, or I'm coming down with the flu. I don't know.

My thumb hovers over the screen as I debate whether to confess my deeper fear. Before I decide, another message appears.

Kate: Or you're pregnant.

Shit, she thinks that too.

Deep down, I know it's a possibility. I'm not the brightest crayon in the box, but even

I can recognize pregnancy symptoms. I just didn't want to admit it to myself. And Kate saying it out loud somehow makes my fears real. But it can't be, right? I mean, I take the pill religiously... mostly. Sure, I've forgotten a day or two, but pregnancy? Ridiculous. We've been careful. Except for that time in the shower. And maybe the night on the couch. And...

Oh. Fuck.

Sarah: Stop it, Kate. Leave Emily alone! Em, sweetie, I'm going to run by a pharmacy to get something for your nausea, okay?

Kate: And pick up a pregnancy test while you're at it.

Emily: I'm not?—

But I can't finish typing it.

Kate: Just kidding. Just jerking your chain, Em. I'm going out of my mind with boredom here.

Kate: Truly, I'm sorry you're not feeling well. I'm sure it's nothing serious.

Kate: Em, are you there?

But I stare at the screen, barely registering Kate's attempts to backpedal.

Emily: Sarah, buy a pregnancy test too, okay?

My hands tremble violently as I type. This can't be real. Yet what if it is?

Kate: Shit.

Sarah: Shit.

Yeah, shit.

I'mface down on Logan's fancy couch, feeling like complete garbage, when the doorbell yanks me out of my pity party. I drag my sorry self to the front door, and as soon as I open it, Sarah practically tackles me, wrapping me in a hug.

“Emily!” She squeezes me. “Don't worry about anything. Everything's gonna be fine. I'll help you to?—”

“Enough, S.” I peel her off me, clocking the worry lines between her eyebrows. Her concern pisses me off and touches me at the same time. “I'm not pregnant, okay? Ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure.” Bullshit. Total bullshit and my churning stomach knows it.

“Okay.” Sarah's eyebrow shoots up as she steps inside, those big green eyes scanning through my crap like she has built-in lie detectors. “Even so, you should take the test. That point-one percent chance...” She drops her purse on the table, and I swear the pregnancy test mocks me from inside.

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“Fine,” I snap, then immediately feel like a jerk. My face burns. “Sorry for being a bitch. No coffee all day, and I'm losing my mind.” Even thinking about coffee makes my stomach do a sick flip.

“No coffee? Why not?” Sarah tilts her head, giving me a once-over that takes in my greasy hair and death-warmed-over complexion.

“Just the smell makes me wanna puke my guts out.” I hug myself without meaning to, wrapping my arms around my middle as if I'm protecting something. Sarah's eyes bug out. “Don't.” I shoot my hand up, cutting her off. “I'm not pregnant. This'll prove it.” I snatch the paper bag from her and stomp toward the bedroom, faking confidence I do not feel.

“If you say so,” she mutters, following me.

Logan's bathroom is ridiculous, with all its marble like something out of a magazine. The shower where he had his hands all over me this morning takes up half the damn wall. I yank down my jeans and underwear, then plant my ass on the toilet. The plastic test feels cold as I position it. Sarah appears in the mirror like some bathroom-summoned ghost.

“Do you mind?” My voice cracks. “Can't pee with you staring at me.”

“We've been peeing together since we were five.” Sarah parks herself on the edge of Logan's massive tub, swinging one leg nervously. “Remember fourth grade? When we both got food poisoning from those nasty-ass cafeteria fish sticks?”

I actually laugh. Meanwhile, my bladder decides now's the perfect time to lock up tighter than Fort Knox.

“Stage fright.” I groan. “My stupid body's screwing me over.”

“Water sounds?” Sarah's already turning on the faucet, then the shower, then the tub. The bathroom fills with so much running water it's like sitting in Niagara Falls. Still nothing.

“Sing something,” I beg, desperate enough to try anything.

Sarah launches into “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” her voice cracking on the high notes. It's awful, and yet the combo finally works. Sweet relief as my body stops being an asshole. I set the test on the counter and wash my hands.

“How long?” I ask, not daring to look at the plastic stick of doom.

“Three minutes.” Sarah checks her watch.

Fuck that. Every second feels like an hour. I can't breathe. Can't think. Panic explodes through me, and I bolt for the door, not even glancing at that stupid plastic stick.

“Emily!” Sarah lunges after me, her skinny frame surprisingly solid as she grabs my arm in the doorway. “Where the hell are you going?”

“Not pregnant,” I insist as tears spill over. “Not pregnant, not pregnant, not pregnant.” The words dissolve into pathetic hiccups.

“Shh.” Sarah brushes hair out of my face as if I'm one of her kindergartners with a scraped knee. “Whatever happens, we're in this together. But we gotta know the truth first.”

“I’m not?—”

“I know what you’re saying.” Her voice goes all firm-teacher on me. “But if you were so damn sure, we wouldn’t be standing here with a pee stick in the bathroom, would we?”

My shoulders sag. “Logan would never forgive me.” The words barely escape my throat. “He’d hate me for this.”

“Emily, Logan seems a pretty decent guy. If—and it’s a big if—you’re pregnant, he’d man up.”

“You don’t get it.” My head shakes so hard my brain rattles. “He doesn’t want kids. He doesn’t even want me.”

“Breathe.” Sarah clamps her hands on my shoulders, anchoring me before I spiral completely. “Slow and deep.”

I suck air through my nose and blow out through my mouth. It barely helps.

“One clusterfuck at a time,” Sarah says, stroking my cheek. “First, we need to?—”

My phone screams to life, nearly giving me a heart attack. I fumble it with sweaty hands, fighting to unlock the screen. What if it’s Logan? What the hell would I even say? Surprise! Remember that thing you never wanted? Might be growing inside me right now! The screen stays stubbornly locked under my frantic tapping.

Sarah pulls out her phone. “It’s Kate,” she says, answering and putting it to her ear.

I stare at my silent phone like an idiot. Jesus, I’m losing it.

“Okay, hold on.” Sarah hits a button. “You're on speaker.”

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“Emily!” Kate's voice explodes from the speaker at her usual volume-eleven, her personality taking over the room even through the phone.

“Hi, Kate.” I drop onto Logan's bed.

“How are you? Did you take the test? What did it say? Oh my God, you're pregnant, aren't you? Holy shit, Em! What are you going to?—”

“She doesn't know yet,” Sarah cuts in, shielding me from Kate's verbal diarrhea. “Stop the interrogation. You're making it worse.”

“Shit, sorry! It's just... if I were you, I'd be losing my damn mind. Twenty-two's way too young for kids! I've got shit I wanna do, places to go! And babies, they're weird little poop factories that scream all night. They—” Her nervous babbling picks up speed, and her brain-to-mouth filter is completely offline.

“Kate, enough!”

Kate's not totally wrong, though. What do I know about raising a kid? I eat Lucky Charms for dinner half the week. I'm living rent-free with my sorta-boyfriend/boss because I'm broke as hell. And yet...something small and quiet whispers beneath the panic. A kid with Logan's green eyes. Tiny fingers curled around mine. Something real and permanent in my chaos-storm of a life.

“Just know there are options, Em.” Kate's meaning hangs heavy, unsaid but clear.

“She doesn't even know if she's pregnant yet!” Sarah's shout makes me jump.

“Guess it's time to find out.” Defeat washes over me. Fighting the current is pointless. I'm getting dragged under either way.

“About time!” Kate's relief crackles through the speaker.

Sarah starts to smile reassuringly. “Everything will be—” A loud splash cuts through from the bathroom. We trade confused looks. “What was that?”

“No clue.” Curiosity momentarily shoves aside dread as I peek around the door. Nothing looks weird until I notice the sink is empty except for water droplets. The test is gone. My eyes scan the room and land on the fuzzy black menace perched on the counter, yellow eyes gleaming with pure evil.

“What hellish scheme are you plotting now?” I step toward the cat, but Demon's laser-focused on the toilet, tail twitching like she's scored a victory. Horror hits me as I watch my future floating face down in toilet water.

Sarah appears behind me. “What happened?”

“The fucking cat.” I gesture helplessly at the toilet. “She knocked the test in.”

The sight's beyond belief. It's not just the pregnancy test bobbing in the bowl like some rubber duck. It's the smug satisfaction radiating from Demon, her mission to destroy my life reaching new heights. In my moment of greatest need, she's made sure answers stay out of reach.

“Shit!” Sarah rarely swears, which tells me just how bad this is.

“Package said to keep it dry.” I stare at the soggy test, defeat crushing me. “Even if we fished it out, it's useless now.”

“We're buying another one. Right now.” Sarah grabs her purse, determination hardening her usually soft features. Her take-charge attitude would be impressive if it wasn't so fucking exhausting.

“No!” The word explodes out of me. “I can't do this again. The waiting, the panic—I'm not peeing on another stick today.”

“Then what's your genius plan?” Sarah crosses her arms.

“Nothing?” My hands fly up in surrender. “We wait. If a kid pops out in nine months, the mystery is solved.”

“You can't be serious.” Sarah gapes at me, eyebrows disappearing into her hairline. “Emily, pregnancy isn't something you just ignore and hope goes away. If you're knocked up, you need prenatal care ASAP. And if you're not, we need to figure out what's actually making you sick.”

“Dead serious. Not curious enough for round two of this torture.”

“Girls? Hello? What's happening?” Kate's voice reminds us she's still there, confusion evident through the tinny speaker.

“Minor disaster.” Sarah grabs her phone from the counter. “I'll call you back with updates.”

“Wait, is she preg—” Kate's question vanishes mid-word as Sarah hangs up, stuffing the phone in her pocket.

“Kinda rude to hang up on her.”

Sarah rolls her eyes. “Bigger fish to fry.” She punches numbers into her phone with

scary precision, lifting it to her ear.

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“What are you doing?” Alarms bells ring in my mind, but Sarah shushes me with a hand.

“Good afternoon! Sarah Roberts here to make an emergency appointment for my friend Emily Baker with your gynecologist.”

“What the actual fuck?” I mouth silently, slashing my hand across my throat. “Hang up!” My pantomime gets more desperate as Sarah keeps talking.

“Perfect. We'll be there in thirty minutes. Thank you.” She ends the call, looking way too pleased with herself. “Why are you still standing there? We need to leave now, or we'll be late.”

“What did you just do?”

“Got you an appointment with someone who can give us real answers. Someone canceled last-minute. It's a sign.” Her enthusiasm feels like a cheese grater on my raw nerves.

“I don't want to see a gynecologist!” I sound like a whiny kid, but terror trumps dignity.

“Too late. It's done, and we're running late so move your ass.”

“I won't go.”

“Emily Eleanor Baker. Either you walk to that clinic on your own or I physically drag

you there. Pick one. But we're getting answers today.”

“What's wrong with waiting?” The weak protest dies as soon as it leaves my mouth. Sarah's expression tells me I've lost this battle. In all these years of friendship, I've seen her truly pissed maybe three times. That alone shuts me up.

“Fine.” I surrender, trailing her back to the bedroom where she's already ordering an Uber. Truth is, there's weird comfort in her take-no-prisoners attitude, in letting someone else call the shots when I'm too scared to function.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Emily

My cell vibrates, notifying me I missed a call from Logan. I've been ignoring the buzzing all afternoon. I really can't talk to him right now.

I'm still optimistic. I truly believe the universe is not out to get me, that it hasn't suddenly decided to turn against me. There are people a lot meaner and nastier than I am. Apart from having killed ten goldfish and left the door to my apartment open in the hopes that Demon would decide to decamp, I've never really done anything bad in my life.

Oh, wait... There was that time when I lied to my parents and told them I was sleeping over at Kate's when, in reality, I was making out with Peter Spark in his old Ford. Come to think of it, I already paid my dues for that lie. Peter was so clumsy he couldn't even manage to take my virginity that night.

Okay, there was also that time I lied on my resume. Technically, it was still half true. I did go to college. I just didn't finish. And in my defense, I didn't say I graduated, just that I went to college. So, no, I don't think that was enough to merit eventual

divine retribution.

And then there was the biggest lie of all, but again, there's a justification. You see, when I told Logan Price that I didn't want a romantic relationship with him, I was sincere, or at least I thought I was. The thing is, the heart's a really strange organ. We can't control it.

I don't know if it's the situation I'm in right now or the feeling that there's a sword of Damocles poised to fall on my head, but maybe I should have exercised more caution. Because as much as the heart is a tough, independent organ, if it's hit in just the right spot, it can explode into a million shards.

"You okay, Em?" Sarah digs her fingers into my arm, yanking me back to reality. Her eyes dart to our driver without saying a word.

Our driver who is freaking huge, with half his face covered in some tribal tattoo and a metal bar through his eyebrow. But his eyes—Jesus, his eyes are the worst part—white contacts that make him look like something that crawled out of a horror movie.

Sarah's practically trying to melt into the car door. Can't blame her. He looks like he eats people like us for breakfast.

"...so that's when I finally got my hands on that Cookie Monster lunch box," he says in a squeaky voice, making it sound like Mickey Mouse possessed the Hulk. "Took me eight years."

"Uh-huh, cool," I mumble.

"How are you feeling?" Sarah whispers.

“I’m fine,” I lie through my teeth. “I still don’t get why we’re hauling ass to a gynecologist.”

“You know damn well why,” Sarah hisses, getting all up in my space.

“You’re acting like I’ve been dodging this for months,” I snap back, wiping my palms on my jeans. “I literally just freaked out about it this morning. Waiting a few more days or months isn’t gonna change anything.”

Sarah rolls her eyes so hard they practically do a full 360. “Emily?—”

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“You pregnant?” Our driver’s squeaky voice cuts in from the front. In the rearview mirror, those creepy white eyes lock onto mine, weirdly gentle despite looking like something from a sci-fi nightmare.

My shoulders slump. “I don’t know yet.”

The unease in my expression must say everything because Clark—according to the app, that’s his name—nods once and refocuses on the road.

I feel like I’m on my way to hell. Even though Clark’s driving an old green Toyota and not some sort of boat, I have to admit he would make a perfect Charon. As long as he doesn’t speak, that is.

I see the clinic coming up in the distance, and my heart starts to pound. I half expect to see flames engulfing the huge white building and hear a dark, menacing voice ordering me to enter and welcoming me to hell.

“What are you waiting for? Come on, Emily, we’re here!”

I was wrong. The petulant voice belongs to my best friend, not a demon.

We get out of the car, waving goodbye to Clark and walking quickly to the main entrance. Okay, well, Sarah walks quickly while I drag my feet behind her, desperately trying to put off the inevitable. I feel like a dead man walking.

A pleasant receptionist gives us directions to the gynecology department. We take the elevator to the third floor, where a young admin is seated behind a desk. “Good

afternoon!” she greets us. “How can I help you?”

“We’re here to see Dr. Hall. The name is Emily Baker.”

The young woman checks something on her computer screen and then nods. “All right. Please take a seat, and a nurse will be with you shortly.”

I look around for a place to sit, and my eyes practically bulge out of their sockets when I see the rest of the patients waiting to see the doctor. There are at least five women with enormous bellies sitting next to their partners.

I shake my head. I’m in the wrong place! I shouldn’t be here. But it’ll be useless to try to convince Sarah that we should leave, so I sit down with a sigh next to a woman who seems to be in her eighties. At least she doesn’t have one of those huge, unnerving bellies with a baby inside it. At least, I hope she doesn’t.

“Hello, dear.” She smiles at me, and small wrinkles form at the sides of her mouth. “Is it your first time?”

“Um, no.” What I mean is that I’ve been to a gynecologist before. I don’t know Dr. Hall, but I’m sure he’s no different than all the other gynos, right?

“Ah, well, I went through it four times. I can’t say it was easy, but I wouldn’t trade those experiences for anything in the world.”

I look at Sarah and mouth, “What the hell is she talking about?”

My friend rolls her eyes and prepares to respond when someone calls my name.

“Baker? Emily Baker?” A woman wearing pink scrubs surveys the room.

I consider not getting up in the hopes that she'll go on to another patient, but Sarah isn't on board with that idea.

"We're here!" she says, leaping to her feet and calling the nurse's attention to us. Yep, it's too late to get out of it now.

We follow her to one of the exam rooms inside. There are pictures on the walls of ultrasounds and one of those drawings that depicts the female reproductive system. I wrinkle up my nose. Why would anyone want to know what a vagina looks like from the inside?

The nurse directs me to sit down and draws my blood. "Done," she says, removing the tourniquet from my arm. "Please change into the smock and wait here. The doctor will be in shortly." She hands me the ugly paper garment and leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

"What are you waiting for? Put on the smock and sit down on the exam table," Sarah prods me, repeating the nurse's words.

"You know what? I think I've changed my mind." I lunge toward the door.

"Very funny, Em." Sarah blocks my path, crossing her arms over her chest. "Would you mind telling me why you're refusing to take this seriously? Why are you acting like you don't even give a shit?" Her voice cracks.

"It's not that I don't give a shit, Sarah." Heat rushes to my face. "It's that I don't want to know! You're the one who should stop sticking her nose into my business!"

"I'm your best friend. It's my job to worry about you!" Hurt flashes across her face.

"But there's nothing to worry about. I'm fine." The lie tastes metallic on my tongue,

like the blood from biting the inside of my cheek too hard.

“Emily, sweetie, I'm sure everything will be fine, but we need to know if you're really pregnant. You can't just wait and possibly put yourself or the baby in danger.”

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“There's no baby!” The words rip from my throat. I instantly regret the outburst as Sarah's face crumples.

“You know what I mean!” Her voice rises before she catches herself, inhaling deeply. “You're right. Forgive me, it's none of my business.” Unshed tears glisten in her eyes.

Guilt sucker-punches me in the chest. Sarah can't have kids because of some bullshit called primary ovarian insufficiency they diagnosed when she was nineteen. She never bitches about it, never gets all bitter, but I've seen how she flinches when people talk about having babies, how she holds herself together by a thread when she's holding someone's newborn.

And here I am, probably knocked up without even trying, acting like it's the end of the world when she'd cut off her own arm to be in my shoes.

“No, I'm the one who's sorry.” I yank her into a hug, burying my face in her hair. “You're right, I'm being a total asshole about this.”

Just then someone knocks on the door, and I realize I haven't put on the smock. “Come in,” I call anyway.

The handle moves, and the door slowly opens. The doctor wears a white lab coat with his name tag pinned to his chest. His head is lowered over what I imagine is my medical records.

“Emily Baker?” he asks without looking up.

“That’s me,” I say.

He raises his dark head. Yep, the universe definitely has it out for me.

“Stephen?” I ask, my voice trembling. “As in Stephen, Logan’s friend?”

He nods. “And you’re Emily, his admin. What can I do for you?”

“It’s not his,” I blather. “I mean, the baby’s not Logan’s. It’s... someone else’s.”

Stephen’s dark eyes scrutinize me with such intensity that I’m pretty sure they can see inside me. “Are you pregnant, Emily?” There’s no hostility in his voice, but even so, I can’t help feeling like I’m on trial.

What are the chances that, of all the doctors in New York, Sarah just happened to choose Logan’s best friend? Yep, the entire universe is laughing at me.

“I don’t know,” I murmur. “I tried to take a test, but let’s just say it didn’t end well.”

“I see,” he says simply without taking his eyes from my face. I don’t know much about Stephen except for the few things Logan’s told me. Apparently, they met in college and have been friends ever since. “I’m bound to secrecy, Emily. Whatever you tell me doesn’t leave this room.”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t know if I’m pregnant,” I whisper again, my eyes filling with tears. “Could we just find out once and for all?”

“Of course,” he says with a kind smile. “Do you feel comfortable allowing me to examine you?”

I shake my head vehemently.

“That’s what I imagined.”

Something about Stephen is very calming. I should feel embarrassed because of what happened between him and Kate, or maybe upset about the fact that he could call Logan and tell him everything. Instead, gazing into Dr. Hall’s eyes, I relax a little for the first time today.

“So,” he says, keeping his voice calm and friendly. Maybe it’s a trick they teach them in medical school to calm the patients down. Whatever it is, it works. “There are two things we can do. You can take another pregnancy test if you want an immediate answer or else you can wait for the results of your blood test, but that will take a few days.”

“I don’t want to wait,” I admit, defeated. “But I don’t seem to have any luck with pregnancy tests.”

Stephen smiles at me. “I can help you. I know it’s scary and that you’re very upset right now, but trust me.”

I nod. “Okay, what do I do?”

He turns and goes to one of the wall cabinets, then takes out three packages I immediately recognize as pregnancy tests. “You’ve already taken one, so I think you know how they work. Through that door”—he gestures with his head—“is a bathroom. Take all the time you need, okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper, taking the three packages from his hand and going into the bathroom. Sarah doesn’t follow me this time, and I suddenly feel panicky. What if I can’t pee on the sticks? “Sarah?” I call from behind the door. “Could you sing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle’ for me?”

There's silence on the other side of the door, and then I hear a muffled masculine laugh. Damn, I forgot Stephen was there.

"No, I can't, Emily!" Sarah responds. Even though I can't see her, I'm sure she's blushing.

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“Please,” I beg. “Otherwise, I can’t do it.”

To my great surprise, I hear the tune being hummed on the other side of the door. It’s just not Emily who’s doing it.

In the end, I manage to pee, thanks to the best friend of the father of my maybe-baby. Why can’t my life just be normal for a change?

After putting the cap back on the sticks and washing my hands, I enter the exam room again. “I can’t,” I whisper, looking first at Stephen and then at Sarah. “I can’t look at the results.”

“It’s okay,” Dr. Hall says to me in his calm, soothing tone. “I’ll look for you, shall I?”

I nod. “Yes, please.”

“Have a seat in the meantime. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I climb back onto the exam table, and Sarah stands next to me. Stephen disappears into the bathroom. Neither of us seems to have anything to say.

After what seems like an eternity, Dr. Hall comes back into the room. I don’t need to hear his words. The expression on his face says it all. “Emily, you’re pregnant.”

I nod as my stomach clenches into a knot.

“And it’s Logan’s child.”

It's not a question, but I still whisper a very faint "Yes," as the tears begin to pour down my cheeks.

In this standoff between me and the universe, it seems like the universe has won.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Emily

"It's positive."

Two words. Two fucking words completely derail my life.

I stand on Logan's balcony, counting the clouds shaped like countries I'll never visit. Australia is drifting toward the east. Italy hovers near the setting sun. And right above me, what looks suspiciously like a middle finger—the universe's personal message just for me.

Forty-eight hours since Stephen confirmed what I already knew deep down: I'm pregnant with Logan's baby. A child conceived somewhere between the kitchen counter, the couch, and the shower.

I haven't left my bed in two days except to pee, which is happening with alarming frequency, and pretend to eat whatever Logan brings me. I convinced him I have a nasty stomach bug. The irony isn't lost on me.

My phone buzzes against the tile. Kate again. That's her fourteenth text today.

Kate: Just tell him already. Rip off the Band-Aid. What's the worst that could happen?

I almost laugh. What's the worst that could happen? Oh, I don't know. The father of my child could reject me, fire me, and kick me out on the street. I could end up a single mom living in some roach-infested studio, working three jobs to make ends meet while my kid wonders why Daddy never loved us enough to stick around.

But sure, Kate. Let me just rip off the Band-Aid.

I type back.

Emily: Can't. He told me he never wanted kids. Explicitly. With bullet points and everything.

Her response is instantaneous.

Kate: People change their minds.

Emily: Not Logan.

It's true. Logan doesn't do messy. He doesn't do unpredictable. He likes control and order.

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I close my eyes, but all I see is his face when he talked about Valerie. The raw pain etched into every line, the grief he's carried for years. How can I ask him to face that again? How can I be the one to drag him back to his darkest moment?

A soft knock at the door makes me jump.

“Em? You okay in there?” Logan's voice filters through. “I brought you some crackers and ginger ale.”

“Thanks,” I call back. “Just leave them by the door. Still not feeling great.”

“You've been in there all day. Should I call a doctor?”

I almost burst into hysterical laughter. A doctor. Yeah, I've seen one of those recently. Your best friend, actually. He gave me some life-altering news. Want to hear it?

“No,” I say instead. “Just a stubborn bug. I'll be fine.”

Silence stretches, and for a moment, I think he's gone. Then, “I miss you.”

The words pierce through my defenses, a perfect kill shot to my already fragile heart. Tears spring to my eyes.

“I miss you too,” I whisper, but he's already gone, his footsteps fading down the hall.

Seconds later, I hear the shower turn on in his bathroom. Before I can stop myself,

my mind conjures images of water cascading down his muscular body, droplets clinging to his skin, his hair darkened and slicked back?—

Jesus, these hormones are turning me into a nymphomaniac. How am I supposed to make life-altering decisions when I can't stop thinking about jumping the man who got me into this predicament in the first place?

I grab my phone again.

Emily: What the actual fuck am I supposed to do?

Three dots appear as they both start typing.

Kate: You have options. Three of them, to be exact.

Sarah: Don't make her list them, Em.

Too late. Kate's already typing her bullet points.

Kate: One, you can terminate it. No one ever needs to know. It's your body, and the choice should be only yours. Two, keep the baby, tell Logan, and deal with the fallout. Three, keep the baby, don't tell Logan, and raise the kid as a fierce single mom.

Sarah: Kate! Jesus! A little sensitivity?

Kate: What? I'm just listing the fucking options. Isn't that what friends do?

I stare at the screen. Kate's brutal efficiency is somehow comforting. At least someone's thinking clearly here.

Emily: And what would you do?

Three dots. Long pause.

Kate: I don't know. But I'm not you. And I'm definitely not in love with the father.

Emily: I never said I was in love with Logan.

Kate: You didn't have to. It's written all over your face every time you look at him.

Dammit. Am I that transparent?

Sarah: Whatever you decide, we're here for you. All the way.

Emily: I need to see you guys. Tomorrow. Lunch?

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Sarah: Of course. The usual place?

Kate: I'll bring alcohol. You can sniff it longingly while we brainstorm baby names.

Despite everything, I laugh. Trust Kate to find the darkest humor in any situation.

Emily: No baby names. I haven't decided anything yet.

The next day, I manage to sneak out of Logan's apartment. I leave him a note about meeting a friend for breakfast. Not technically a lie, just not the whole truth.

I make it to our usual lunch spot early, ordering herbal tea and picking at a plain bagel while I wait for Kate and Sarah. The diner's walls are the color of aged egg, and the vinyl booths are cracked in places that always manage to snag my tights. But the coffee is decent, and the pancakes are huge.

Kate and Sarah arrive together, heads bent in intense conversation that suspiciously stops when they spot me.

“Wow, you look better,” Kate announces as she slides into the booth across from me. “Feeling better? Physically, I mean?”

I shrug. “Peachy.”

“You need prenatal vitamins,” Sarah says, sliding a bottle across the table. “I picked these up for you. They're supposed to help with the nausea too.”

The fact that Sarah went out and bought me vitamins breaks something inside me and makes tears well up and spill over before I can stop them.

“Shit, no, don't cry,” Kate says, looking genuinely alarmed. “If you cry, Sarah's going to cry, and then I'll have to stab myself with a fork just to restore balance to the universe.”

I laugh through my tears, wiping them away with the back of my hand. “I'm fine. Just... hormones, I guess.” I take the vitamins and tuck them into my purse. “Thanks, Sarah.”

“Of course.” She squeezes my hand again. “Whatever you decide, we're here for you. Right, Kate?”

The waitress sets down our plates just as Kate nods enthusiastically. “Absolutely,” Kate agrees, stabbing a french fry with disturbing enthusiasm. “Need someone to drive you to appointments? I'm there. Need someone to hold your hair while you puke up your guts for the next few months? Sarah's there. Need someone to help you hide a body if Logan reacts badly? I know a guy.”

Sarah rolls her eyes. “You do not know a guy.”

Kate shrugs. “I could find one. The point is, we've got your back, Em. So,” she says, leaning forward, “have you made a decision yet?”

I stare into my tea and shake my head. “I'm scared.”

“Of what?”

“Everything,” I admit. “Of doing this alone. Of telling Logan. Of not telling Logan. Of being a terrible mother. Of screwing up this kid's life before it even starts.”

“Everyone feels that way,” Sarah says. “Even people who plan their pregnancies down to the day.”

“Not helping,” I mutter.

“Look,” Kate interjects, “you're scared because this is scary shit. But you know what else is scary? Regret. Making a decision you can't take back because you were too afraid to follow your heart.”

“When did you get so wise?” I narrow my eyes suspiciously.

“I read it on a fortune cookie,” she admits. “But it still applies. Next question: are you telling Daddy Dearest?”

The nickname makes me cringe. “I don't know. He's made it pretty clear he doesn't want kids. Ever. But keeping this from him feels wrong.”

“He has a right to know,” Sarah says carefully. “But that doesn't mean you have to tell him right away. You could wait until you've had time to process this yourself.”

“Or,” Kate adds, “you could test the waters. Find out how he really feels about kids without dropping the bomb.”

I consider this. “How exactly would I do that?”

Kate shrugs. “I don't know. Rent a baby?”

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Sarah sighs. “You can't rent babies, Kate.”

“Well, you should be able to. It would solve a lot of problems.”

Despite the absurdity, Kate's suggestion sparks an idea. “I could ask him hypothetically,” I say slowly. “Just to see his reaction.”

“That could work,” Sarah agrees. “Just be careful. Men can be dense when it comes to hints.”

“Especially men who are actively avoiding emotional vulnerability,” Kate adds, pointing her fork at me. “And Logan strikes me as the poster boy for emotional constipation.”

She's right. Logan's built walls so high and thick around his heart, I'm not sure anything could break through.

“I'll figure it out,” I say with more confidence than I feel. “One way or another.”

I can do this. I will talk to Logan. Not about the baby, not yet. I need to know what this is between us. We decided against labeling our relationship, but circumstances have changed. I need to know if he feels what I feel. If there's any chance he might want this child, our child.

Yes, I'm still not ready to say it out loud, but I'm hopelessly in love with Logan Price. Fuck. I love him. God help me, I love him.

Outside his apartment, my heart pounds. The key feels heavy in my palm. As I raise my hand to unlock the door, screams erupt from the neighbor's apartment. I turn to see the door open. A tall man with dark hair and shadowed eyes appears. He cradles one of those baby carriers. Inside rests a tiny girl with hazel eyes shining with tears, though she remains silent. She looks fragile and perfect, with tiny fingers clutching at nothing and a rosebud mouth pursed in concentration.

“Hi, there,” I say. “Everything okay?”

The poor man has dark circles under his eyes, and his jaw is clenched tight.

“Is Logan in?” he asks without returning my greeting.

“I don't know. I just got here.”

His eyes move from my face to the keys in my hand. “Are you his fiancée?”

I bristle at the personal question from a stranger, but before I can respond, he waves dismissively.

“It doesn't matter. I need you to watch her for me.” He gestures toward the baby.

“Wait, what?” My voice rises an octave.

“Half an hour. I only need half an hour to?—”

“So you're dropping the brat off with the neighbor?” a female voice cuts in from inside the apartment. “I don't know why you invent these stories. The little monster's deaf anyway! She can't hear us fight!”

The man looks at me with despair. “Please. I'll owe you.”

“I...”

My grandmother's voice echoes in my memory. How would you feel, Emily, if, in your moment of need, everyone turned their back on you?

I nod, surprising myself. “Okay, but just for half an hour. And for the record, I have no idea how to look after a baby.”

“Neither do I,” he murmurs, handing over the carrier. “I'm Nathan. And this is Sophia.”

“Emily.” My gaze fixes on the tiny human before me. In a few months, will I hold my own child this way?

“Thank you, Emily. I'm in your debt.” He sets the carrier at my feet, gazes at his daughter with a tenderness that transforms his tired face, and then retreats to his apartment, nervously running his hand through his hair before closing the door.

I focus on the little girl. Did this really just happen? I stare as if she were an alien creature. “Hi,” I say awkwardly before remembering. She's deaf. She can't hear me.

My heart contracts. She seems so defenseless. I wave, and she chortles with delight, making me smile despite my nerves. At least she's not crying. I grab the handle and open Logan's door.

“Hey!” he calls from the kitchen. “Where have you been? I thought you didn't feel well.”

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“There was a sort of emergency with Sarah, and I had to go out.” Not a complete lie, but the words stick in my throat anyway. I've never kept secrets from people I care about, and this is the biggest one yet.

“I hope everything worked out okay,” he says, and his eyes drop to the carrier. “Why do you have a baby with you?”

Before I can answer, Bob charges toward me. I've learned to tolerate the enormous dog, accepting that he'll jump and lick my face whenever I arrive. I set Sophia down and brace for a hundred pounds of Saint Bernard. Instead, Bob ignores me, sitting beside Sophia with his tail wagging excitedly.

Demon stalks into the room, tail swaying, and stops inches from the girl before hissing loudly, with her back arched and her fur standing on end. I'm momentarily grateful that Sophia can't hear the sound. Instead, she laughs and waves her arms. Demon seems to roll her eyes before turning away indignantly.

Logan continues to stare, bewildered, awaiting my explanation.

“Your neighbor asked me to watch her for half an hour,” I say. “He's in a bad situation. The mother, or I guess she was the mother, called her a little monster and said fighting in front of her was fine because she couldn't hear them.”

A strange look crosses his face. His shoulders tense as he stands motionless, as if afraid to approach.

“You can come closer. I don't think she bites,” I tease, trying to lighten the

atmosphere.

He surprises me by moving forward, squatting beside her. “Hi,” he says awkwardly.

“She can't hear you. She's deaf, remember?”

“Oh.” His gaze softens with empathy as he caresses her cheek with unexpected gentleness. Sophia gurgles, delighted.

“Looks like she likes you.” My heart somersaults as Logan interacts with her. Seeing his large hand against her tiny cheek fills me with emotion. He would make a good father, gentle and caring. But would he choose to be one?

“Yeah,” he answers distractedly. “I didn't know Nathan had a daughter.”

“She certainly resembles him.” They share the same dark hair, hazel eyes, and determined chin.

“I never thought that guy could be a father. He's always been more of a rich playboy.”

“Well, maybe he shouldn't have dipped his wick quite so often,” I reply, the irony not lost on me. I can't believe I'm judging someone else for an unplanned pregnancy while facing the same situation.

Logan frowns, opening and closing his mouth as if choosing words carefully. “I hope none of my exes ever shows up with a surprise like that,” he mutters, seemingly to himself.

His words hit me hard. “It takes two to make a baby,” I snap. “Would you prefer that your child never know their father? Is that what you're saying?” Heat climbs my

neck.

“Yes, I think so.”

The words pierce my heart. “You're a jerk, Logan.”

“Emily, what's wrong? We're talking hypothetically. I don't have kids scattered around the world.” He sounds puzzled by my reaction.

I breathe deeply. “You're right.” My gaze returns to Sophia's beautiful features, those long lashes and perfect little details. My hand unconsciously moves to my belly. This baby has a father who doesn't want him. The knowledge sits like a stone in my chest.

“What is there between us, Logan?” I blurt impulsively. The question has simmered for months. He's about to respond when the doorbell rings.

Nathan stands at the threshold, looking even more defeated than before. “Hey, thanks for watching Sophia,” he says somberly.

“No problem, buddy,” Logan replies. “Are you sure you're okay?”

“Not really.” He sighs, disheveling his hair further. “You don't happen to know of a nanny you can recommend?”

“Sorry, no. I've never needed one.” The irony makes me want to laugh hysterically. Not yet, Logan. Not yet.

“Me either... until now,” he mutters.

“I'll get the baby.” Logan returns with Sophia. I wave goodbye and receive a toothless smile in return.

I imagine seeing such a smile daily. Behind closed eyes, I picture my baby's face, green eyes like his father and dark hair like mine. Tiny hands reaching for me, the sound of laughter. The image steals my breath. I'm startled by my desire for this future.

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I hear Logan and Nathan exchanging words, but I've stopped listening. Something about Sophia helped me make a decision. Whatever happens with Logan, I will have this child. I will love and protect it. Somehow, we'll manage.

“So what exactly is there between us, Logan?” I ask again once the door closes. My voice carries newfound certainty.

He studies me intently. “Why is it so important? We're good as we are. You said it yourself, we don't need labels.”

“I changed my mind.” I step closer, fixing my eyes on his. I need to see his reaction. I need to know if there's hope for us, for all three of us.

“Do you want this to end? Is that what you're saying?”

“No.” I shake my head vigorously. “No, I?—”

“I like being with you, Emily. I like you. But that's all I can offer.”

“Why?” The word emerges small, plaintive.

“You already know why.”

“No,” I whisper. “I know you're scared. I am, too. But living in fear, it's not living at all.”

“I can't do it.” His thumb brushes my lower lip with heartbreaking tenderness.

“Whatever you're asking, I can't give it to you. I lost everything once and won't survive doing it again.”

Tears spill down my cheeks. Logan backs away, widening the space between us into an unbridgeable chasm.

“I'm going out. Don't wait up.” He grabs his keys and jacket, disappearing without another word or glance. The door closes with finality.

He lacks even the courage to stay. I collapse to my knees, sobbing. How can I continue living with him, working for him, while carrying his child? Logan doesn't want a family, doesn't want me or our baby. He's too scared, and I can't wait for him to find the courage to start living again.

I dry my tears and stand. I have to leave. This was never my home, just a temporary shelter on my journey elsewhere.

In the guest room, I throw everything into my suitcase. Demon saunters in accusingly, amber eyes fixed on me.

“Shit, I guess you're coming with me.” Abandoning the cat seems unfair, though tempting.

I manage to stuff her into her carrier despite her protests, then survey the room once more. My eyes linger on the bed where we made love, the bathroom where we showered together. So many memories in such a short time.

I'll miss this place and my sexy vet. No, notmine. Logan Price was never mine. He gave me butterflies. It was wonderful while it lasted. But butterflies live briefly. They're beautiful and delicate, reminding us some things aren't meant to last.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Logan

As soon as I open the door, I'm overwhelmed by the loud music and the sound of conversation. The place is packed tonight, and it takes me a few minutes to navigate through the crowd to find Stephen.

My friend sits at a table next to the pool table with his shoulders slumped forward. He's got a beer in front of him, and he's so lost in his own thoughts, he doesn't even look up when I arrive.

"Hard day at work?" I slide into the chair across from him.

He jolts when he hears my voice, and for a second, his eyes widen as though he's just seen a ghost. Something flashes across his face, but it's gone before I can identify it.

"More or less," he mumbles, then grabs his beer and takes a long swig. "So what's this sudden urgency to go out? You usually never go out for a drink on a workday. Is everything all right?"

I sigh and signal to the waiter, then ask for a beer. He's right, of course. I never break my routines, especially not on a work night, but I couldn't stay home knowing Emily was in the otherroom, no doubt angry with me. The walls of my apartment felt like they were closing in on me, and I needed an out.

"It's complicated," I say.

"It always is in these cases," he murmurs, almost to himself.

"What do you mean?"

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“Huh?” He waves a hand at me. “Nothing. You're right, it's been a... strange day. I'm just a little distracted. Forgive me.”

“If you want to talk about it—” I start.

“No,” he hastens to say, setting his glass down with a sharp click. “You know, patient confidentiality and all that.” His fingers drum against the table.

“Sure, okay.” I lean back, giving him space. It's odd, especially for Stephen, who's usually so open with me. His shoulders are tense, and the lines around his mouth are deeper than usual. But if he doesn't want to talk about it, I have to respect his wishes.

The waiter arrives with my beer.

“Now,” Stephen says, changing the subject, “why'd you drag me out here?” His eyes focus on me as if my problems might distract him from whatever's eating at him.

I open my mouth, but the words get stuck. “I screwed things up with Emily,” I finally get out.

Stephen shifts in his seat. “Your receptionist? The one crashing at your place?”

“Yeah. Remember when her friend dumped a drink on you at the bar?” I wince at the memory. “Things got messy after that.”

“If you'd asked me, I would've told you sleeping with your roommate slash receptionist was a bad idea.”

“Yeah, well...” Then it hits me. “Wait, how'd you know we had sex?”

He clears his throat and shrugs. “It's pretty obvious you like her. Just a guess.”

“Well, you nailed it, and now?—”

“Let me guess, it's complicated.” His voice softens.

“Yep.” I sigh. “Really complicated.”

“So this is about Emily?”

I nod stiffly. My chest tightens when I think about her, her smile, and how her eyes light up when she laughs. “I think I messed up.” Saying it out loud hurts like hell.

“You gonna explain or should I spend the night playing twenty questions?”

“Sorry, you're right. You know Emily's staying at my place. One thing led to another and?—”

“You hooked up,” Stephen finishes with a hint of a smile.

“Yup.” I take another gulp of beer. “It was great. She's beautiful, fun, a little weird sometimes, but...” I shake my head, feeling like an awkward teenager. “It was really good.”

“Why're you talking like it's over?” Stephen pulls me back to reality.

I shrug, feeling defeated. “Guess it is.”

“Do you love her?”

My eyes go wide, and beer goes down the wrong pipe. I start coughing. “What? No! Hell no!” The denial comes automatically. Love means getting hurt. I learned that lesson years ago.

“Okay,” he says evenly. “So what's the problem?”

“What's the problem?” I snap, then lower my voice. “Emily wants more than I can give her. I'm too screwed up, Stephen. She deserves better.” My knuckles turn white around my glass. “She deserves someone who can give her a family and a future. Not someone who'll wreck her life.”

“I agree.” His words sting worse than I expect.

“Thanks, man. You're a real asshole sometimes,” I growl. Didn't expect that from him of all people.

“Look.” He sighs, softening. “I get it. You like this girl. But you're right. If you don't love her and can't give her more, lether go.” He pauses, studying me. “Just... before you make a snap decision, figure out if that's really what you want or?—”

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“Or what?” My voice gets tight.

“Or if you're just scared.” His words hang between us like a challenge.

My eyes widen. “I'm not scared.” I snort, but it sounds hollow even to me. My hands shake a little, and I put down my glass before he notices.

“So Valerie has nothing to do with this.” It's not a question, and her name feels like a knife between my ribs.

My jaw clenches, and my hands curl into fists under the table. The familiar ache blooms in my chest, bringing up memories I've tried to bury. “I don't want to talk about her,” I growl past the lump in my throat.

“Look, Logan, I miss her too.” His voice gentles. “She was my friend, too. But life goes on. You can't keep punishing yourself for something that wasn't your fault.”

“I know.” Do I? Or have I just been going through the motions for five years?

“All right then.” Stephen leans back, studying me. “So Emily's just not the one. She doesn't make your heart race. You don't feel like you can't breathe when she's not around. You don't want to spend every minute with her.”

A memory flashes. Emily in my kitchen, hair a mess, wearing my T-shirt, laughing at something on her phone. How my heart skipped, how something in my chest loosened, like coming home after a long trip. The thought of her not being there stabs me in a way I'm not ready to face.

“Since when are you such a sap? And no, none of that.” The lie tastes like crap.

“I’m just a romantic.” He shrugs and finishes his beer with a decisive thunk. He suddenly looks sad, as though he’s carrying something heavy. I don’t know what’s up with him today. It’s more than just worry about me.

“I should head home,” I say, standing up. The chair scrapes against the floor. Maybe I can still fix things with Emily and find some way to make it work without crossing my lines.

“Okay, bud, see you.” He punches my shoulder, then flags down the server for another beer. There’s something resigned in how he does it, as though he’s settling in for a long night. I know I should stay and make him talk and be the friend he’s being to me, but all I can think about is Emily.

I’m a shitty friend.

Outside, the cool night air hits me. I flag a taxi since I didn’t drive because I didn’t want to risk it after drinking. I give the driver my address and lean back in the seat.

It’s fifteen minutes home, plenty of time to think about what to say to Emily.

I can’t give her more. The thought’s a broken record, a shield against feelings threatening to drown me. She hasn’t asked me to marry her, but someday she will. It always goes like this. Two people meet, hook up, get engaged, marry. Then comes the white picket fence, the dog, the baby.

And then...

I can’t do it. I can’t risk losing Emily like I lost Valerie. The fear twists in my gut like a living thing with teeth and claws.

The taxi stops, and I pay, the bills damp from my sweaty palm. We can still be friends. I don't want her to quit. I know she needs the money. And I don't want to kick her out. The thought of her struggling, facing the world alone, makes something protective rise in my chest.

The elevator dings, and I step out. I unlock my door and flip on the lights.

But Emily's not there. There's no TV noise, no humming from the kitchen, no soft footsteps.

“Emily?” I call out, my voice echoing in the empty space. No answer.

I walk to her bedroom and knock, then wait. No response, not even sheets rustling. With my heart in my throat and dread spreading through me, I turn the knob and look inside.

The bed is neatly made, the covers smooth, and the pillows perfect. Everything is in order. All Emily's things are gone. Her clothes, her romance novels, everything. The room is eerily clean, like she was never here.

Suddenly, I can't breathe. My lungs won't work, my chest squeezed in a vise. I stumble into the room, frantically looking around as though her stuff might appear if I look hard enough. The closet is empty, the drawers bare.

I sink onto the bed, my legs giving out. She's gone. Really gone. And I didn't even get to say goodbye. I didn't get to tell her?—

Tell her what? That I'm sorry? That I'll miss her? That what I feel for her is more than I've let myself feel since Valerie?

I sit there for a long time, the silence pressing in, until I finally drag myself to my

room. Sleep doesn't come, and my bed is too big and empty. When I finally drift off, my dreams are full of her.

And when I wake, the emptiness is still there, a hole inside me I don't know how to fill.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Emily

When I was eighteen, I packed my bags and left for college, swearing never to return. I declared myself a city girl. I craved skyscrapers instead of suburban houses, subway rumbles instead of cricket symphonies, and the blessed anonymity of crowds rather than the suffocating intimacy of a town where grocery trips became social events.

Yet here I am, back in my childhood bedroom, surrounded by faded rock posters. Bon Jovi grins down with his perfect eighties hair while my snow globe collection gathers dust on the shelf. They're little worlds trapped in glass, much like me now, suspended between a past I tried to escape and a future I can't quite grasp.

My grand plan collapsed. Truth is, it barely qualified as a plan. I knew where I wanted to be, not who I wanted to become. I arrived in New York drunk on dreams but without a roadmap. The city's appetite devoured my savings. Minimum-wage jobs left me hollow, staggering into bed only to wake up and repeat the cycle. My studies withered. My GPA plummeted. My scholarship evaporated. The university's rejection letter reduced my ambitions to cold academic jargon.

Each new job became an adventure, my desperate attempt at silver linings. I reinvented myself with each uniform change, whether balancing on skates or sweating inside a chicken costume. Those disguises armored me against rejection, against plans dissolving, against doors slamming in my face. I never knew what I wanted to become. I convinced myself it didn't matter.

Until now.

I study my silhouette in the mirror, turning sideways. The same soft curve remains, with no visible change yet. But knowing something grows inside me, that there's a heartbeat beneath my heartbeat, leaves me breathless. Terrified. This isn't a job I can quit or a costume I can shed.

I rest my palm against my abdomen, seeking connection with this tiny stranger. Do they sense my fear?

I told my parents immediately. The words spilled out between sobs at the kitchen table that first night home. Dad's face drained of color before flushing crimson, his mouth working silently like one of Ben's fish gasping at the surface. Mom went statue-still, knuckles bleached white where her hands clasped. After the initial shock, after I deflected questions about Logan I couldn't bear to answer, their expressions softened. Excitement about grandparenthood penetrated their disappointment.

"We'll figure this out together," Mom said, reaching across the table for my hand. And I believed her.

Since then, she's bombarded me with advice. Pamphlets appear on my pillow every morning, and she keeps highlighting passages in pregnancy books I never knew she even owned. I've learned that pregnancy essentially grants a free pass. Normal rules bend around a growing belly. Snap at someone? Hormones. Craving pickles dipped in chocolate at midnight? Biology. Too exhausted to reach the remote? Growing a human is hard work.

For eight months, I can get away with almost anything. A cosmic Get Out of Jail Freecard for life's minor annoyances.

If only I could stop thinking about the inevitable conclusion: childbirth. My stomach

knots when I imagine going into labor at the supermarket. The baby drops out of my vagina onto the linoleum between cereal and canned goods, shocked shoppers staring, my child's first moments witnessed by strangers under fluorescent lights. My first act as a mother: public catastrophe.

“Emily, dinner's ready!” Mom's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts.

I tug my shirt down and descend the stairs, trailing my fingers along the banister. The rich aroma of her lasagna fills the house with comforting normalcy. I take the steps two at a time, surprised by how good it feels to be home.

“Emily!” A shrill voice shatters my nostalgic moment. Perhaps I didn't miss my brother quite as much. “Emily, come get this monster!” Ben shouts from the living room.

I find him standing guard before his aquarium, arms splayed like a goalkeeper protecting the net. His face contorts in a theatrical mask of horror. He's grown since I left.

“She's not a monster,” I say, scooping up Satan's Little Helper from where she crouches on the floor. Her tail twitches with predatory anticipation. No need to tell Ben her real name. The irony would sail past him. “She's just a defenseless kitty. Stop treating her like some demon spawned from hell.” I stroke Demon's head, careful to keep my expression neutral. “She won't hurt your precious fish. She can't even open the aquarium top.” Though honestly, I wouldn't put it past her. Demon's mischief borders on supernatural.

“Get that thing out of here,” Ben demands, dropping his voice an octave in a pathetic attempt at authority. For all his posturing, I see only the little boy who begged me to check under his bed for monsters. “I swear, if anything happens to my fish, I'll tell Mom and Dad about you and your friends smoking in your room.”

“You wouldn't dare.”

“Try me.” His eyes narrow to slits.

Our standoff intensifies, neither blinking. The theme from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* plays in my head as we square off amid suburban furniture, invisible tumbleweeds of cat hair rolling between us. Where did I see this scene before? Oh, right, that was the night my Superman came to save me. It didn't go like that, but it's my memory, and I can remember it whatever the hell I want.

And that's when my vision starts blurring, and tears form in my eyes. Stupid hormones. Fuck, I don't want to blink them away and lose the battle against Ben.

“Kids! Dinner! Now!” Mom's voice cuts through the tension.

“Coming!” I call, maintaining eye contact with Ben.

He finally abandons his post but pauses when he reaches me. “Keep. That. Thing. Away. From. My. Fish.” Each word emerges with deliberate menace, though the effect crumbles when his voice cracks on fish. Despite his attempts at intimidation, he's just a pimply sixteen-year-old with baby fat still rounding his cheeks.

I bite back a laugh. The kid knows too much about my teenage indiscretions, and I don't need another parental lecture on responsibility. Not now.

When he disappears toward the kitchen, I glare at the bundle of black fur in my arms. “You need to stop provoking him.”

Demon responds with a long, indignant meow before stretching up to bump her head against my chin. When did I start having full conversations with this cat? Maybe it's the baby. They have inherited strange abilities from their father. Yeah, it must be it.

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My throat tightens at the thought of Logan.

“Emily? Are you coming?” Mom calls down the hallway.

“On my way!” My voice emerges thick with unshed tears. I square my shoulders and march toward the dining room.

Damn hormones.

After dinner, I retreat to my bedroom, exhausted from maintaining normalcy. Pretending interest in Dad's neighborhood gossip, nodding through Mom's gardening plans, deflecting questions about my future.

I burrow beneath my childhood quilt, pulling it to my chin. Demon curls at my feet. My phone glows on the nightstand, illuminating the darkened room. I've kept it powered off since arriving, avoiding the outside world and the temptation to call him, just to hear his voice once more.

Before fleeing New York, I texted Kate and Sarah that I needed space and was staying with family for a while.

And within half an hour, messages and calls bombarded my phone. Their love felt suffocating despite its good intentions. I adore my friends, but being left alone remains a foreign concept to them.

I know they've called Mom for updates. I've caught her whispering into the receiver when she thought I was out of earshot. I can't blame them for worrying.

Grandma would scold me for wallowing. She never tolerated self-pity, especially regarding men. “Women who claim they can't live without some man are fooling themselves,” she'd declare, chin lifted defiantly. “No person is indispensable.”

“How do you know if you're really in love?” I once asked her, confident in my adolescent understanding. “When you can't live without them?”

She laughed a short, dismissive bark. “That's not love, child. That's dependency. Fear masquerading as devotion. A prison, not a choice.”

“Then how do you know?” I pressed.

Her face transformed then, years falling away like autumn leaves, revealing glimpses of the young woman she'd been. She gathered me onto her lap, arms strong despite her age. “You'll know when you can't help but smile at the sight of them. Even after decades together, even when you've memorized every line of their face, their presence will still delight, surprise, and fill you with joy. Love makes your heart smile, Emily, not your face. It lives inside, private and precious.”

“That sounds complicated,” I replied.

“No, baby. It's beautifully simple. One day, you'll understand.” She kissed the top of my head, and I nestled against her, believing despite my confusion.

Now I understand, Grandma.

When Logan entered a room, sunlight broke through clouds in my chest. I remember the unconscious smile that bloomed whenever he appeared. Not because I needed him but because his presence brought me joy.

I'm strong enough to raise this child alone. I don't need Logan to survive. But I'll miss

that heart-smile with an ache no amount of ice cream can soothe.

I curl onto my side, one hand on my abdomen, the other clutching my pillow. We'll manage, little one. Somehow, we'll be okay.

“Have you told him?” Mom sets a steaming mug before me while studying my face as if my answer should have changed in the past few days.

I wrap my hands around the mug. “Nope.”

She settles across from me, face softened with concern. “I'm trying to understand, baby girl. For days, you've raved about this man?—”

“I never raved!”

“Last day you called him, and I'm quoting directly, ‘Superman with a veterinary degree.’”

Heat crawls up my neck. “It means nothing.”

She reaches across the table, capturing my hand in hers. “Why don't you want to tell him?”

I stare at our interlaced fingers. Her hands bear slight age spots, her wedding band worn smooth by decades. Mine show chipped polish and a coffee stain on one thumb. How do you explain Logan's complexity? The maddening, beautiful contradiction of him? I love him with an intensity that frightens me, but he explicitly doesn't want children, and I refuse to force him into a role he never chose.

“Logan doesn't want children,” I finally whisper. “He made that clear from the beginning.”

Mom's eyes widen, but she maintains her gaze. “And you decided to have this baby anyway.”

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“It wasn't a decision exactly. More like...discovering gravity exists. It simply is.” My free hand drifts to my stomach. “This baby just...is.”

“What happens now?” she asks after the silence stretches between us.

“I don't know.” I shrug one shoulder. “Find work. Find an apartment. Figure out motherhood.”

“You're not alone in this. Your father and I?—”

“I know.” I squeeze her hand. “And I'm grateful. But I need to sort this out myself.”

She studies me, then nods. “While figuring things out, would helping at the library interest you? Mrs. Grayson needs someone for the children's reading hour.”

“Reading to kids?”

“You loved it as a child. You'd line up your stuffed animals and read for hours.” She smiles at the memory. “It's just a few hours weekly, not too demanding in your condition.”

My instinct is refusal. I didn't return to be absorbed back into small-town life. But perhaps that's exactly what I need.

“I'll do it,” I say, surprising us both.

“Really?” Mom looks pleased but wary, as if expecting me to retract the offer.

“Really. It sounds...nice.”

Maybe growing up isn't about rejecting your past but rediscovering value in what you've outgrown.

The next morning, I wake unusually early. My nausea has granted a temporary reprieve, leaving actual hunger in its place. I shower, dress, and head to the library before doubt can interfere.

Oakwood Public Library is a squat brick building with enormous windows and a children's section decorated with faded animal murals.

“Emily Baker, is that you?” Mrs. Grayson emerges from behind the desk.

“Hello, Mrs. Grayson.” A genuine smile forms despite my nervousness. “Mom mentioned you needed help with reading hour?”

“Oh, bless you!” She clasps my hands in hers. “Our last volunteer moved to Florida, and these old knees protest sitting on the floor with little ones these days.”

She leads me toward the children's section, chattering about the summer reading program.

“Reading hour starts at ten,” Mrs. Grayson explains, revealing a cart of picture books. “We usually host about a dozen children, mostly preschoolers. You'll select three or four stories. I like having a theme.”

“What's today's theme?”

“Animals,” she says with a warm smile. “I thought we'd start with something fun.”

Animals. They follow me everywhere, crap.

But if there's one lesson I learned from all this chaos, life rarely follows plans. Sometimes, the things we never knew we wanted become exactly what we need.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Logan

The clinic feels wrong without her.

I glare at the reception desk where Ms. Winters sits, typing away like a robot. Everything about her screams efficiency. She always wears a too-perfect ironed blouse and has her hair pulled back so tight, it looks painful. But the worst part is how she answers calls like she's reading from a script. She's a better receptionist than Emily ever was.

And I fucking hate her for it.

“Dr. Price?” Her voice cuts through my thoughts. “Your ten o'clock is here.”

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I nod. "Send them in."

Ms. Winters—Diane, I remind myself, though I can't bring myself to use her first name—has been working at the clinic for exactly one week, four days, and six hours. Not that I'm counting.

Her resume is perfect. Ten years of experience. Computer certifications. References that wouldn't shut up about how organized she is. The logical choice after Emily vanished.

I called Emily's cell repeatedly those first few days. It went straight to voice mail every time. By the fifth day, I accepted she wasn't coming back. Posted the job opening that afternoon, and by Monday, Diane Winters started.

The waiting room is spotless now. The appointment calendar is color-coded. The filing system is organized. No more coffee stains on patient records or misplaced lab results.

It's hell.

Mrs. Henderson waddles in with Brutus wheezing in her arms. The pug's bulging eyes seem to blame me personally for whatever's about to happen.

"Good morning, Dr. Price!" Mrs. Henderson chirps. "Brutus has been just miserable, haven't you, sweetie? His breathing seems worse, and he's not eating."

I force a smile. "Let's have a look at him."

The exam is simple. I prescribe the usual meds and send them on their way.

As I update Brutus's chart, I catch myself listening for Emily's voice and that laugh that's always too loud but somehow perfect.

Instead, all I get is Ms. Winters's typing and her robot voice booking appointments.

“Dr. Price?” She appears at my door. “Your next appointment canceled. Would you like me to move up the afternoon schedule, or would you prefer to catch up on paperwork?”

I stare at her. Emily would suggest takeout during the break.

“Dr. Price?” Ms. Winters prompts me when I don't answer.

“Have you filed the Anderson case?” I snap, harsher than I mean to.

“Yes, sir. All yesterday's files have been processed, electronic records updated, and backup copies made.” She doesn't react to my tone, just stands there with her clipboard, the perfect employee.

“And the Patterson bloodwork?”

“Results came in this morning. They're on your desk, along with the quarterly inventory report and the updated vaccination schedules.”

Of course, they are. Probably alphabetized and color-coded, too.

“The surgical tools?—”

“Sterilized, counted, and stored according to protocol,” she finishes. “I also took the

liberty of ordering more gauze since we were running low.”

My jaw clenches. “Is there anything you haven't handled with terrifying efficiency, Ms. Winters?”

She looks confused. “I... don't believe so, Dr. Price. Is something wrong with my work?”

Everything is wrong. It's too perfect. Too orderly. Too... not Emily.

“The phone system is giving me trouble,” I lie. “I keep hearing static on line two.”

Ms. Winters frowns. “I haven't noticed any issues, but I'll call the technician right away.”

“No,” I say too quickly. “No technicians. Just... fix it.”

“But I'm not qualified to?—”

“Just figure it out!” I bark, immediately feeling like shit when her professional mask slips, showing real hurt underneath.

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“Of course, Dr. Price,” she says stiffly, backing out. “I’ll do my best.”

I run a hand over my face, shame washing over me. This isn't her fault. She's doing her job and doing it damn well. It's not her fault that whenever I look at reception, I expect to see wild dark hair and a smile that lights up the room.

I slump back in my chair, the weight of Emily's absence crushing me. The clinic is running better than ever. Every appointment is on time. Every chart is filed correctly. Every prescription is spelled correctly.

And it's killing me. I miss the chaos.

I pull out my phone, staring at her number. My thumb hovers over the call button. What would I even say if she answered? I'm sorry? Come back?

Pathetic.

Deep down, I know it was the best thing. A clean cut before things got messier.

And yet, that night, I find myself standing in her doorway again, staring at the empty bed, the closet with its hangers all neatly aligned but nothing on them. Even her scent is fading now.

I don't sleep much anymore.

“Coming!” I call, dragging my feet toward the front door. I have no idea who it can be, so early on a Saturday morning. “What?” I bark, flinging the door open.

“Young man, don’t think I can’t pull your ear just because you’ve turned into a wall of muscle. I can and I will,” Mary scolds me. She pushes her arthritic finger into my chest and glares at me through the thick lenses of her glasses.

I feel like cursing, rolling my eyes, snorting. Instead, I take a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Mary, I’m just tired. I had to work late last night, and I was hoping I could sleep in a little this morning without being woken up at the crack of dawn.”

“It’s seven o’clock,” she says righteously.

“Yes, and it’s a Saturday morning.”

She looks at me quizzically, as if she doesn’t see what the problem is.

To hell with it. I need coffee. I can’t deal with Mrs. Potter without a drop of caffeine in my system. Leaving the door open, I turn and head toward the kitchen.

I hear Mrs. Potter muttering behind me, no doubt reproving me for my bad manners. I roll my eyes, grateful she can’t see my face, and go to the espresso machine. The click of her Mary Janes on the floor sounds behind me.

“Logan,” she says.

“Yes, Mary?” I continue to pour coffee into my cup without turning to look at her or the man who’s with her.

“There’s a problem with the guest room bathroom,” she says. “The one Emily was staying in.”

My jaw clenches, and I clutch my cup so tightly between my hands, I can almost hear the china cracking. “Okay.”

“Paul’s here to fix it,” she goes on.

I turn to look at Paul. Up until now, I’ve never paid the slightest attention to the man, though his blue uniform and the bag he’s holding should have tipped me off to the fact that he’s a plumber.

“Fine.” I turn my back on the two intruders. “Let me know if you need anything, Paul. And please try to be quick about it. I’d really love to go back to bed.”

“Logan!” Mrs. Potter scolds.

At the same moment, Paul speaks. “Of course, Mr. Price, I’ll do it as fast as I can.”

Mary sighs. “Follow me, please. I’ll show you the bathroom we’re talking about.”

I hear them walk away and finally drop onto one of the kitchen stools. Running a hand through my hair, I close my eyes. I really am tired.

As soon as Paul and Mary disappear into the guest room, Bob sticks his head out of my room. I guess he’s been waiting until no one else was here to join me. The big guy’s been grumpy and unsociable ever since Emily left. Not that I can blame him.

“How’s it going, buddy?” I say to him, extending a hand to pet him. Bob whips his head toward me and shows his teeth in a growl. I quickly withdraw my hand and don’t try to get any closer to him. He plods over to the corner where his water bowl is, slurps up a little, and leaves the kitchen. Even my dog’s mad at me.

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After half an hour or so and two cups of coffee, the guest room door opens. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” Paul’s muttering.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Judging from her tone, Mrs. Potter’s upset about something.

I turn around and see the two of them walking toward me, both wearing perplexed expressions. “Problem solved?” I ask. A quick look passes between them, but neither one says anything. “Uh, how much do I owe you, Paul?” There’s a weird vibe in the room, and I can’t figure it out.

“You know, Mr. Price, why don’t you just pay me the next time?” Paul says, looking from me to Mrs. Potter. “I really need to get going now.”

“I’ll see you out—” says Mrs. Potter, but Paul interrupts.

“No, ma’am, that won’t be necessary. I know the way. Thank you.”

The man rushes out as if he were fleeing a burning house, closing the door quietly behind him. I turn around to ask Mary what the hell’s going on, but one look at her face silences me.

“Logan Edward Price,” she thunders. “Is there something you want to tell me?” She marches toward me, holding her index finger up in front of my nose. Her eyes shoot daggers at me.

I’m taller than she is, even seated on the barstool, yet the way she looks at me makes

me feel like a little boy.

I swallow hard. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about, Mary.”

It’s the truth. I haven’t done anything besides sit here and drink my damn coffee. So why’s she suddenly so pissed off at me?

“All right, then explain this to me.” She sets something on the kitchen island. It’s a little white plastic stick.

“I don’t kn—” Suddenly, I stop short and look more closely at the thing. “It can’t be,” I whisper, picking up the little white stick. The digital display clearly reads 'PREGNANT' in bold letters.

“Do you know what this is, Logan?” Mary’s tone has softened after she sees the distraught look on my face.

It’s a nightmare, I’d like to tell her, but instead, I just nod.

“This,” she says, pointing at the goddamned stick, “is the reason the toilet was stopped up. After Emily left, I thought it would be a good idea to clean and straighten up the guest room. You know, in case it was needed. I saw that there was something in the toilet that shouldn’t be there, so I called Paul, but the poor man had so much work he couldn’t come until this morning.”

I hear her words, but they don’t make any sense. I keep staring at the pregnancy test. What the hell was it doing in the toilet? I chuckle. So typical of Emily to do something weird like that.

“Logan?”

The laugh dies on my lips. A positive pregnancy test can only mean one thing.

“Logan?” I hear again.

I shake my head. No, there has to be some other explanation. I can’t believe Emily’s really?—

“She’s pregnant, Logan.”

“What?” My head jerks up, and my eyes find Mary’s.

She gives me a kind smile. “Emily’s pregnant.”

“I guess so,” I whisper.

“And it’s yours.” It’s not really a question, but I still nod. I know Emily hasn’t been with anyone else. She’s not that type of girl. “Logan, dear, is this why she left? Why you and Emily aren’t together anymore?”

“We weren’t together to begin with. It’s complicated.” I shake my head again, trying to clear it.

“Do you think I’m some old prude, my boy? I know how sex works. What I don’t understand is why you let her go. She’s carrying your child.”

“But I didn’t know that!” I blurt, running a hand nervously through my hair. “And even if I had, it wouldn’t change anything. Emily and the baby will be better off without me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I don’t want to be a father. I can’t.”

“All right, son.” She takes a deep breath. “You know, I tried for years to convince your grandparents to ask for custody of you. But they always told me a child needs to grow up with their own parents.”

“Don’t you agree?”

“No. A child needs to grow up with the people who love him.”

I don’t know why, but her words hurt. I already love my child, even though I’ve never met him or her. Even though I don’t know his name. It’s precisely because I love him that I know he’ll be better off without me.

Mary seems to notice the change, because she reaches out and caresses my cheek as if she wants to console me. “You’re a good man. I know you’ll make the right decision. Don’t let your past decide your future, though. Emily’s not your mother, and she’s not Valerie. What happened was a tragedy, but you can’t allow your ghosts to haunt you for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t know if I can do it,” I whisper, closing my eyes to keep my tears from spilling over.

“I understand,” she says after a few moments. “The choice is yours.” With a pat on my shoulder, she walks toward the door. I hear it open. “Logan?” she calls one last time. “I truly believe the things I’ve told you. Not all parents should raise their children. Some, like Daniel Price, aren’t cut out for the job.” She pauses. “But you’re

not your father.”

The door closes, and silence falls again in the apartment. I hate it, the silence. Because now I can hear the thoughts that are piling up in my mind thick and fast, screaming at me.

I never wanted a child, but then Valerie got pregnant. I was happy when I found out. In fact, I never believed it was possible to be that happy. Until the day I lost both of them. The woman I loved and my son.

I swore to myself I would never make the same mistake again. I only dated much older women after that. Women who definitely didn't want children and who would do anything to avoid them. Women who were focused on their careers and only wanted a one-night stand.

Until Emily.

She was a mistake, but she was the best mistake I've ever made.

I hold the roses tightly as I walk the path I know by heart. Five years and my feet still remember every turn. The cemetery is quiet today. It's just me, the birds, and whatever ghosts hang around these places.

Her headstone looks the same. Clean. Simple. Nothing like the mess she left behind in me.

Valerie Anne Collins. Beloved daughter, friend, and partner. Forever in our hearts.

I kneel, brushing away some dead leaves before putting the flowers down. My fingers linger on her name carved in the stone.

“Hey, Val.” My voice comes out rougher than I mean it to. “Been a while.”

The wind picks up, rustling through the trees. I sit down on the grass, crossing my legs like we used to do when we had picnics in Central Park. Back when everything made sense.

“So... something happened.” I clear my throat. “I met someone. Her name's Emily.”

I find myself smiling a little, which feels weird to do here. “She's nothing like you. Total disaster on legs. The first time I saw her, she almost wrecked her delivery scooter trying not to hit some stray cat.”

I pick at the grass beside me, pulling out little blades and rolling them between my fingers.

“You'd have gotten a kick out of her, I think. She doesn't take any of my shit. Calls me out when I'm being an asshole.” I laugh, but it gets caught somewhere in my chest. “Which is... pretty often, actually.”

The silence sits heavy around me. I spent years talking to a piece of marble, pretending that somewhere you can hear me.

“She's pregnant, Val.” My voice cracks on the words. Feels like ripping open an old wound. “Found out today. Emily's pregnant with my kid.”

I have to stop, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes. They're burning, and I can't... I won't... Fuck. I'm crying anyway.

“I'm so goddamn scared.” The words tear out of me. “After what happened with us, with our baby, I don't know if I can do this again.”

I wipe my face roughly with my sleeve. “What if I lose them too? What if history just keeps repeating, and I'm stuck watching everyone I love?—”

My voice gives out completely. I sit there, shoulders shaking, feeling pathetic and broken and so fucking terrified I can barely breathe.

It takes a few minutes before I can speak again.

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“I know what you'd say.” I sniff, getting myself under control. “You'd tell me to stop being a chickenshit. That I can't hide forever.”

I pull out my wallet and take out the photo I've carried for five years. It's worn at the edges, creased from being folded and unfolded. Valerie smiling, hand on her barely there bump. Our future that never happened.

“I think I love her, Val.” My voice is barely a whisper. “Emily. I love how she crashes through life like a hurricane but somehow leaves everything better. I love how she talks to that evil cat of hers like they're having actual conversations.”

My thumb brushes over the photo one last time.

“I love how she makes me feel alive again.”

I carefully tuck the photo under one of the lily stems. “I'll always love you. But I can't keep using you as an excuse anymore.” I stand up, my knees protesting after sitting so long on the hard ground. “I'm gonna find her. Tell her I want to be there for her and the baby.” I take a deep breath that feels different somehow. Lighter. “I'll probably fuck it up. God knows I didn't have the best example growing up. But I want to try.”

I press my hand against the cold marble one more time. “I think it's time I start living again.” My voice breaks. “That's what you'd want, right? For me to be happy?”

Only the wind answers, but for once, the silence doesn't feel empty.

As I walk away, I don't look back. Tomorrow, I'll drive to Emily's parents' place. Tomorrow, I'll see if I can fix what I broke.

But today, I say goodbye to my ghosts to make room for something new.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Emily

“Emily?” Someone gently shakes me, the mattress dipping under their weight. My mother's voice is soft. “Emily, we need to go, or we'll be late for the game.”

I whine, pulling the covers over my head like I used to as a teenager. “Oh, Mom, I don't feel like watching a soccer game all morning. I'm too tired.”

“If you don't want to go, it's fine,” my mother says, patting what she probably meant to be my shoulder but is actually my hip. “Benjamin will understand.”

I peek out from under the covers, squinting against the morning light streaming through the window. My mother's face is lined with more wrinkles than I remember. Her hair is grayer than brown now, but her eyes are the same: kind, patient, and filled with a love that has never wavered.

“I know, darling.” She kisses my forehead, her lips cool against my skin, a familiar gesture that makes my throat tighten with unexpected emotion. “It's the pregnancy,” she says, smoothing my hair from my face. “You'll see, you'll feel better later.”

“I really hope so,” I murmur, wrestling with a sudden wave of nausea. The morning sickness has been relentless, and my body no longer feels entirely my own.

“Would you mind feeding Ben's fish when you get up? We're running late, and there's

no time to do it now.” She stands, smoothing her slacks, her wedding ring catching the light as she moves.

“Sure, Mom, no problem.”

She gives me one of those sweet smiles only mothers know how to give, a smile that says, I love you, and I'm proud of you, and everything will be okay all at once and leaves the room.

If it weren't for my sudden queasiness, I would leap out of bed and do a victory dance. I hate soccer. The endless running back and forth, the incomprehensible rules, the fake injuries, and the dramatic falls. I don't understand the rules, and I always fall asleep during the games, my head lolling onto my dad's shoulder until he gently nudges me awake.

“But now that you're here,” I say, giving my belly a couple of little pats, the skin still soft, not yet stretched taut, “I don't have to go to the stupid games anymore!”

I grin, a small victory in a series of losses. Then, just as quickly, guilt washes over me. I don't know why, but taking advantage of my unborn child this way makes me feel like a bad mother, using them as an excuse before they're even born. Oh well, an entire ice cream carton will help me forgive myself. Just thinking about that makes my stomach growl loudly.

Throwing the covers off, I put on my slippers and climb out of bed. The nausea has passed, replaced by a hunger so intense it's almost painful. Demon meows annoyingly and rubs against my calves.

“Okay, okay, I'll feed you, little monster,” I tell her, my voice rough with sleep. “Just give me a few minutes to wake up.” I stretch, my back cracking satisfyingly, my muscles protesting the long night in one position.

Obviously, the selfish furball doesn't care that I'm still half asleep. Her needs are more pressing than my comfort. She keeps weaving in and out of my legs as if trying to push me faster toward the kitchen, or else her plan is to make me fall down the stairs and kill myself, a plot that doesn't seem entirely implausible given her history. Her tail flicks impatiently, her yellow eyes following my every move with predatory focus.

When I finally get downstairs, still in one piece despite Demon's best efforts, I make myself a cup of tea. And I hate it. It's dirt water with sugar, and I can't even start to understand why people drink it. It's tea, not coffee. Shit. Now I crave coffee. Dammit, I want my coffee back! The rich, bitter aroma that used to be the highlight of my mornings now turns my stomach, another small loss in a growing list.

I sigh, close my eyes, and drink my tea. Yuck.

After feeding the cat, I go into the living room and take the top off the aquarium. The stupid fish all swim up to the surface, opening and closing their little mouths like synchronized swimmers, their eyes bulging, their scales flashing in the sunlight. I'm not falling for it this time, though, their silent pleas for more food. Ben only gives them a handful of food, a pinch between his fingers that seems inadequate to my untrained eye. Though they seem ravenous, I do the same thing, resisting the urge to shower them with flakes.

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Pleased with myself for not giving in to the little creatures and being responsible, I wander back to the kitchen, where I open the freezer and pull out the carton of gelato. Opening the carton, I realize with bitterness that it's almost gone, just a few spoonfuls left at the bottom. I'll have to ask my mom to buy more or make a trip to the store myself. Or not.

Grabbing a spoon and the half-empty tub of gelato, I go back to the living room and drop onto the sofa with a sigh of satisfaction. On the TV, I begin to flip through the channels. None of the programs look interesting, but I settle on a cooking show. It's nice to have the house all to myself for once. The silence is broken only by the TV and Demon's occasional meow. I begin to feel sleepy again, the ice cream sitting heavy in my stomach, my eyelids drooping despite my efforts to stay awake.

Who knows how much later, I awake with a start, feeling something cold dripping onto my chest. "Shit!"

I jump to my feet and look with horror, first at the ice cream stain on my shirt and then at the sofa cushions, the pale leather now marred by a spreading puddle of chocolate.

I bite my lower lip, trying to come up with a quick solution, my mind racing. Finally, I turn the couch cushion over and hope my mother never sees the stain. It's a childish solution, but the best I can come up with on short notice. I've just finished covering up my crime when I hear a car turn into the driveway, the crunch of tires on gravel announcing their return.

I'm congratulating myself on getting away with it, at least I hope so, when my eyes

alight on the aquarium in the corner, the light filtering through the water casting rippling patterns on the wall.

Fuck!

The aquarium lid lies on the floor where I abandoned it, and there sits Demon with her black tail swishing in slow motion and a fishtail protruding from her jaws.

Her yellow eyes meet mine with unmistakable satisfaction. She doesn't just look like she's eaten Ben's favorite fish. She looks like she's thoroughly enjoying my impending doom. If cats could high-five, she'd be raising a paw to the universe right now.

“You didn't,” I whisper, horror mounting as I notice the empty aquarium. “Oh god, did you eat the entire fish family?”

I stumble toward the tank, knocking my shin against the coffee table and releasing a string of profanities that would make a sailor blush. The aquarium water is suspiciously still, devoid of the usual hyperactive fish activity. A single plastic plant bobs in accusation.

When I peer inside, I see the lone survivor, Ben's albino guppy, the ugly one with the bulging eyes.

“You're the only witness,” I tell it seriously. “Never forget what you saw here today.”

It's then I hear footfalls on the front walk, the familiar rhythm of my brother's steps.

“No!” I whisper, bile rising in my throat, my heart pounding against my ribs. I can't let my brother come into the living room.

I run to the front door and throw it open, my bare feet slipping slightly on the polished floor. “Ben, I can explain!” I squeak, lifting my hands in surrender, my voice high and frantic. “I’m so sorry! Please don’t kill me!”

Ben doesn’t respond. The silence stretches unexpectedly and eerily. Bracing for the explosion of teenage fury, I peek through my fingers, expecting to see my brother’s face contorted with rage. But the figure standing on the doorstep isn’t my gangly, pimple-faced brother.

Suddenly, my legs turn into wet noodles, unable to support my weight, and my heart starts to smile, a warmth spreading through my chest that has nothing to do with hormones or pregnancy and everything to do with the man standing before me.

“Who’s Ben?” His voice is deep and resonant, just as I remember it, a balm to wounds I didn’t know needed healing.

And in that moment, looking at him, I know my grandmother was right. This is love, not dependency, fear, or need, but joy. Pure, unexpected, overwhelming joy that makes my heart smile even as tears spring to my eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Logan

“Who’s Ben, Emily?” I ask her again.

“My brother,” she says in a whisper, staring at me with her eyes wide. She’s pale and looks like she’s just seen a ghost. Her fingers tremble slightly against the doorframe, and for a moment, I’m thrown back to the first night we met, when she looked at me with that same mixture of fear and awe after nearly running me over with her scooter.

“Oh, okay,” I say as a wave of relief washes over me. “Can I come in?”

She looks behind her and back at me. She seems nervous and keeps chewing on her lips so hard, I'm afraid she's going to make them bleed. The dark circles under her eyes tell me she hasn't been sleeping well. I wonder if the baby is keeping her up at night with morning sickness or if thoughts of me have been haunting her the way thoughts of her have been haunting me. Every night since she left, I've stared at the ceiling of my bedroom, remembering the way her body fit perfectly against mine, the scent of her hair on my pillow.

“It's not a problem if you don't want me to,” I hasten to say. “We can talk here if you prefer.”

I don't want to have this conversation standing on the front step, but I'll do whatever it takes to get Emily to listen to me. I'd kneel in the snow if that's what it took. I spent the three-hour drive rehearsing what to say, and even now, the words don't seem adequate.

She throws another glance behind her and takes a deep breath. “No, it's fine. Come in.” She steps to the side, continuing to look around her as if she's afraid something might jump out at her at any moment. A loose strand of auburn hair falls across her face, and I resist the urge to tuck it behind her ear.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, beginning to worry.

She hesitates, then nods. “Sure, of course.”

It doesn't sound like the truth, but I won't insist. I step into her house, immediately enveloped by warmth that goes beyond temperature. This place is nothing like my apartment's stark white walls and minimalist décor. Photos hang on the walls. I recognize a much younger Emily in some of them, gap-toothed and grinning in a soccer uniform, dressed up for what must be a high school dance, her arm around a petite blonde; I assume there is Sarah.

One photo in particular catches my eye. Emily as a little girl sitting on the lap of an elderly woman with the same warm eyes. They're laughing, and something about their expressions makes my chest ache. I never had family photos like this growing up. The only pictures in my childhood home were the ones my father would drunkenly tear off the walls when he was in one of his rages.

“You have a beautiful home,” I say, trying to break the embarrassing silence.

“Um, thanks, I think.” She clears her throat, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “Can I offer you anything?”

“A glass of water, if that's okay.”

She nods and quickly walks to a door that I imagine leads to the kitchen.

I'm left alone in the living room. The furniture is all cherrywood, worn but well-cared for, with quilted throws draped over the backs of chairs. There's an empty aquarium in one corner of the room, the water still and clear, waiting for inhabitants. I could

give her some fish for it, I think, wondering if I could get some points with her family that way. Maybe tropical ones, with bright colors that would make her smile. The image of Emily smiling makes my heart clench. I haven't seen that smile in too long.

A stack of board games sits in an open cabinet beside it. I can almost picture Emily and her family snuggled on the couch watching a movie, passing bowls of popcorn between them, laughing together. The kind of normal, happy family scene I only ever saw on television growing up.

I feel a pang of regret at the thought that I may never be included in that beautiful family scene. I hope it's not too late. When I found the pregnancy test in the guest bathroom, it was like being hit by lightning, terrifying and enlightening all at once. Suddenly, all my fears seemed small compared to the possibility of losing Emily and our child forever.

The door creaks, and Emily comes back into the room, holding a glass full of water in each hand. Her fingers look pale, wrapped around the glass. "Do you want to sit down?" she asks hesitantly when she sees I'm still standing in the middle of the room.

I nod, a sudden lump in my throat making it impossible to talk. I follow her to the couch, where she sets the two glasses down on the coffee table and sits down. I choose a place at the other end of the sofa, giving her space. I know my presence is making her nervous, and I don't want to upset her or somehow hurt the baby. The thought of our child growing inside her still feels surreal. I try to swallow, but my throat closes, and I can't breathe. Grabbing the glass of water from the table, I take a big swallow and feel the cool liquid slide down my throat.

"Why are you here, Logan?" Her voice is tired. She seems exhausted. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she regards me with her big doe eyes, the same eyes that looked up at me with such trust and passion in my bed. I broke that trust when I pushed her away.

“I wanted to see you.” It sounds inadequate even to my own ears.

“Why?” She doesn't make this easy, but then, why should she? I hurt her. I hurt her in ways I swore I never would when I first realized I was falling for her.

I don't know exactly what I was expecting, but I don't like seeing Emily like this, so cold and hesitant. I want to take her in my arms and tell her I'm sorry, that I've been an asshole and that I want her back in my life. But I can only talk to her for now. I hope she'll unbend a little bit when I finish saying what I have to say.

“I'm sorry, Emily. I made a mistake?—”

“No,” she cuts me off, her voice firm, though hurt flickers in her eyes. “Don't apologize. It wouldn't be fair. I knew perfectly well what there was, or rather, what there wasn't, between us. Whatever it was, Logan, it was wonderful. But we want different things. I understand that, and I'm not blaming you for it. You've been honest with me from the start. You told me right away you didn't want to get involved. You have no reason to feel guilty.”

Her words are generous, far more generous than I deserve. I remember that night in my apartment when she asked me what was between us, and I was too afraid to admit what I truly felt. I remember the tears in her eyes, the way her face fell when I told her I couldn't give her what she wanted. I told myself it was better this way, that I'd only cause her pain in the end. Truth is, I was a coward.

“Please, let me explain.” I slide closer to her on the sofa but stop when she retreats, pressing farther into the corner of the couch. This isn't how I wanted things to go. I imagined coming to her house, taking her in my arms, and kissing her until she forgave me. Turns out, it's not that easy. And the sad thing is that words aren't my thing. I've never been good at expressing my feelings, which is another legacy of my father, who taught me early that showing emotion is a weakness.

I clear my throat. “I know what I said, and to be honest, I’m still really uncertain about things. I don’t know if I’ll ever deserve you, but if you give me another chance, I’d like to be there for you and our baby.”

The expression on her face goes through a slow transformation. Her eyes open wide, her mouth falls open, and her lips form a big O as her breathing quickens and becomes irregular. A flush spreads across her cheeks, and she presses a hand to her heart. “Stephen told you,” she murmurs, obviously still in shock.

Her words come out of left field. They’re not at all what I expected. How would Stephen know? “What? How does Stephen come into it?”

“Oh!” She presses her hand to her mouth and shakes her head, a flash of panic crossing her face. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“Emily,” I say, forcing myself to keep my voice low and even, “what does Stephen have to do with all this?”

“He... I... Sarah...” she stammers, her gaze darting around the room as if she were looking for an escape. My heart contracts when her eyes fill with tears. She looks so small and fragile curled up on the couch, but my Emily is stronger than she appears. She survived on her own in New York City, worked jobs that would have broken most people, and somehow managed to remain the most positive person I’ve ever met.

“Shh, kitten,” I soothe her, moving over until I’m next to her. I wipe away a tear with my thumb, the pad of my finger tracing the delicate curve of her cheek. Her skin feels warmer than I remember, flushed with emotion or perhaps the pregnancy. “It doesn’t matter. You can tell me when you’re ready. There are so many things I want to know. For example, what a pregnancy test was doing lodged in the guest room toilet.”

Her rosy cheeks become even rosier, and she ducks her head as she does when

embarrassed.

“But for now,” I continue, “I just want you to know I was wrong. I've been a jerk. I allowed my past to determine my present.”

The ghosts of Valerie and my mother have haunted me for too long. I see that now. I was so afraid of history repeating itself that I couldn't see the future I might build with Emily, a different one where love doesn't end in tragedy.

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I take her face between my hands and force her to look at me. Her pupils are dilated, dark pools that I could lose myself in. “I'm a fucked-up man, Emily. And I know that you deserve much more than what I have to offer you, but I can't help being a selfish bastard and wanting you all to myself.”

“Does your heart smile when you see me?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Huh?” I missed this part of Emily, the part that needs an instruction manual to decipher. I hope she'll give me another chance because I can't wait to read it. These moments of pure Emily-ness, the unexpected questions, the way her mind works so differently from anyone else's, are part of what makes me love her so much.

“Does your heart smile when you see me?” she repeats. She's obviously not joking, so I make an effort to take her words seriously even though I'm not sure what they mean. I think about how I feel when I see her walk into a room, how my chest tightens, the warmth that spreads through me, and how everything else seems to fade into the background.

“I think so,” I say after hesitating. “I'm really happy when I'm with you, and I want to try to make things work between us if that's what you're asking.” I study her face closely, trying to see the most minimal change in her expression. I'm terrified I gave the wrong answer. Emily's questions often have layers of meaning that I don't fully understand until much later.

Instead, the corners of Emily's lips begin to curl up, and I watch in wonder as her entire face transforms. “I love you too, Logan Price,” she says, the biggest smile I've

ever seen lighting up her face. Her eyes crinkle at the corners, and those adorable dimples appear on her cheeks.

I frown, confused. “But I haven't said it to you yet.”

She shrugs, the familiar mischievous glint returning to her eyes. “So? You're in love with me, right?”

“Well, yes.” I let go of her face and run a hand through my hair, feeling wrong-footed, as I often do with her. “I just wanted to say it in a more appropriate way.”

I imagined some grand gesture, some perfect moment where I'd finally tell her how I felt. A candlelit dinner or a walk along the Hudson at sunset.

She tilts her head to one side. “Why? Would that change anything?”

“No, of course not. It's just that?—”

“Okay,” she breaks in, clapping her hands together with that particular energy that's so uniquely Emily. “If it's that important to you, I'll take back what I said, and you can tell me first in whatever way you consider appropriate.”

“It doesn't work that way,” I splutter, unable to keep from smiling. God, I missed this, missed her. She cuts through all the nonsense and gets straight to what matters.

She waves a hand in my face, those slender fingers dancing through the air. “Why does it matter how you say it? You love me. I love you. Why do we need to complicate it with words? And if you still want to prove it to me, I mean really prove it to me, then we can be together for, I don't know, seventy or eighty years, and see how it goes.” Her smile is overwhelming, like sunlight breaking through clouds after a storm.

“You're really weird, Emily.”

“I know, but despite that fact, you're hopelessly in love with me.” She says it with such confidence, such certainty. The fear and hesitation from earlier have vanished, replaced by the bold, fearless, and completely unpredictable Emily.

“No,” I say, unable to resist teasing her a little. Her smile begins to waver, so I hasten to finish my thought. “I love you because you're you. I'm beginning to think normalcy is boring.”

And it's true. My life before Emily was orderly, predictable, and utterly empty. She came in like a whirlwind, knocking everything off balance, and somehow, in the chaos, I found what I was missing.

She opens her mouth, probably to make some other mysterious comment I don't understand, but I close it by pressing my lips to hers. The taste of her is intoxicating. I want to spend the rest of my life trying to understand the marvelous mystery that Emily is. Still, right now, I want to savor every inch of her skin and worship the perfect body that belongs to the woman I love.

“We should go to your room,” I murmur against her lips, my voice husky with need.

She nods hesitantly, and her cheeks flush a deep rose. “Okay,” she whispers.

Rising, she takes me by the hand and leads me upstairs. Her fingers are warm and small in mine, and I squeeze them gently, reassuringly. Her room looks like a teenager's room, with faded posters of rock bands from the early 2000s. A collection of snow globes lines one shelf, and stuffed animals are piled high on a window seat. I can tell it hasn't been touched since she left it to move to New York City. I would prefer it if the bed were bigger, but it will do.

I take her arm and pull her against me, then devour her mouth while lifting the hem of her T-shirt with my other hand. There are too many layers of cloth between us. I need to see her naked. I need to push myself inside her. It's been so long, too long, since I've felt the warmth of her body against mine.

Her shirt falls to the floor along with the sports bra she's wearing. Her breasts seem fuller than I remember, another sign of the pregnancy. I take one nipple into my mouth, then the other, circling the sensitive peaks with my tongue. "I can't decide," I murmur, wishing I could suckle on both her beautiful breasts at the same time.

"I don't care," she moans, letting her head fall back and tangling her fingers in my hair, "as long as you don't stop."

I push her toward the bed, continuing to suck her nipples as ordered. The backs of her knees hit the bedframe, and she loses her balance, falling back onto the bed. Her hair fans around her like a dark halo against the pale blue sheets.

"God, you're beautiful," I say, running my eyes over her as she lies fully extended on the mattress. Her body still takes my breath away. The gentle curve of her hips, the constellation of freckles across her chest, the small birthmark shaped like a teardrop on her right thigh.

She flashes me a cheeky smile. "What do you say we leave the sweet nothings for later? I have more pressing needs right at the moment." She arches an eyebrow suggestively, and my cock hardens painfully in response.

I chuckle, but I know exactly what she means. I tear off my clothes, tossing them onto the floor. Emily's eyes darken as they rake over my body, lingering on my erection.

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“God, you're beautiful,” she murmurs, parroting my words.

“What do you say we leave the sweet nothings for later? I also have more urgent needs right now,” I repeat her response, pointing to my erect cock, which is standing proudly at attention.

“I can see that.” She licks her lips. She really does look like an adorable kitten at times, especially when she eyes me like I'm a bowl of cream. I hook my fingers over the elastic waistband of her sweats and pull them off together with her underwear. I could keep marveling at how beautiful she is, but instead, I decide to show her.

Leaning over her, I kiss her on the lips and slide my tongue into her mouth. She moans and twists underneath me. With every movement we make, the tip of my cock presses against her clit. The sensation is maddening with the slick, warm heat of her against me. I know I'll come even before entering her if I don't stop. Reluctantly, I remove my lips from hers and trace an invisible line from her mouth to her neck and down the center of her chest. But when I reach her flat belly, I stop.

Under this skin, our child is growing. The thought is staggering, a miracle I never thought I'd experience. Valerie was three months along when she died. We had names picked out. Matthew for a boy, Sophia for a girl. I never got to see her belly grow round, never got to feel a kick, never got to hold my baby in my arms. The grief was overwhelming, and I vowed never to put myself in that position again. Now, though, as I look at Emily's still-flat stomach, I feel something I never expected: hope.

Planting a chaste kiss on her belly button, I confess, “I'm scared.” My voice is choked with emotion. “But I'm also... happy.” My throat tightens around the words, but I

force them out.

Emily caresses my head, sinking her fingers into my hair. “I’m scared too,” she whispers, “but I know that everything will be okay with you by my side.”

Her trust in me is humbling. She believes in me more than I believe in myself, and somehow, that faith makes me want to be worthy of it. I lift myself off her, resting on my elbows, and look her in the face. Her eyes are bright, her lips slightly parted.

“I love you,” I say, the words finally finding their way out. Without waiting for her answer, I reclaim her mouth. I had so many naughty things in mind that I wanted to do to her, but right now, the only thing I want is to make love to her. To show her with my body what I sometimes struggle to express with words, that she is everything to me.

The head of my cock finds her wet opening. I slowly slide inside her, savoring every second, every inch of her warm, tight channel gripping me. I never considered having my own family, but Emily was right. My heart truly smiles when I’m with her. I move my hips faster and harder, and the walls of her pussy clench the length of my cock. I know she’s close. Her breathing becomes more erratic, and her nails dig into my shoulders.

“Come with me,” I order her, my voice strained with the effort of holding back my own orgasm. “Now, Emily. Come on my cock.”

I suppress her cry of ecstasy with my mouth as I thrust deeper and harder inside her until my orgasm slams into me like a freight train. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me as I empty myself into her, my hips jerking spasmodically.

“I love you,” I gasp once I catch my breath and can speak again. “I love you so much that?—”

“Emily?” a woman's voice calls from downstairs. “Darling, we're back.”

Emily's eyes fly open. She pushes me off her and sits up on the bed, her face a mask of panic. “We have to get out of here,” she whispers, terrified. “We need to leave before he?—”

An enraged scream interrupts her words, coming from somewhere downstairs.

“Oh no!” She drops her face into her hands, her shoulders slumping.

“What is it? You're scaring me.” I reach for her, wanting to comfort her, but she's already scrambling off the bed.

“We have to go, Logan,” she repeats. Jumping to her feet, she begins to gather up our clothes from the floor.

I stare at her, bewildered, with no idea of what I should do.

“Get dressed,” she orders me, throwing my clothes at me and hopping on one foot as she attempts to pull on her pants. Her breasts bounce enticingly with her movement, but the look of panic on her face quickly sobers me. I follow suit. I have no intention of meeting Emily's parents in my birthday suit.

Once I'm dressed and look halfway presentable again, I notice that Emily has pulled out her suitcase and is tossing all her things into it, haphazardly grabbing items from drawers and tossing them in.

“Kitten, don't misunderstand me, I can't wait to get back to New York and have you at home with me again, but what's the huge rush?” I button my shirt and try to smooth my hair, which is no doubt sticking up from Emily's eager fingers.

She shoots me a look, her eyes wild. “Really? What's the huge rush?” she repeats. “He'll kill me if we don't leave right away, Logan!” Her voice rises. She's becoming hysterical, reminding me of the night we first met when she was nearly run over by that SUV.

“Emily, please, calm down. Talk to me. Who is going to kill you? What's going on?” I place my hands on her shoulders, trying to still her frantic movements. Her skin is warm against my palms, and she trembles slightly.

The answer comes from the other side of the door. An adolescent male voice shouts furiously while fists hammer the door. “Open this door! I swear I'll tell Mom and Dad. I'm going to tell them everything. Everything, Emily! They'll know about that time you ditched school to go to the shopping center with Sarah and Kate! And they're also going to find out how you were caught making out with Scott Bennett in the supply closet at school, and you got two hours of detention!”

Seeing how loud the kid is yelling, I'm sure her parents already know everything.

“Who's Scott Bennett?” I ask Emily, amused, crossing my arms over my chest and raising my eyebrow. A small flame of jealousy flickers in my chest despite my amusement. I've never considered myself the possessive type, but the thought of Emily with anyone else makes my jaw clench.

She rolls her eyes, a hint of her usual spirit returning. “Do you want to stop wasting time and help me finish packing? I don't know if you've noticed, but our time is limited!” She zips the suitcase closed with an emphatic tug.

“You do realize we'll have to leave the room to leave the house, right?” I point out, gesturing toward the door where the pounding continues, punctuated by increasingly creative threats.

She nods. “And?”

“Your brother's right outside the door. You can't leave without running right into him.”

“Not true!” she exclaims, running to the window. She pulls back the curtain, revealing a small ledge outside. “Here's our escape route!”

“You're insane.” The thought of a pregnant Emily climbing out of a second-story window is enough to send my heart into overdrive. I'd like to keep arguing with her, but Ben's obviously losing his patience outside the door. The pounding has increased in intensity.

“You killed them all! My precious fish, you killed every one of them!” he sobs. “I knew you would, I knew it!”

I can't help but feel sorry for the kid. He seems really upset. “Emily, what did you do?” I ask, suddenly understanding the empty aquarium downstairs.

“I didn't do anything!” she blurts, throwing her arms in the air. “It was Demon! She ate them!”

The image of that tiny black cat fishing in the aquarium is both disturbing and oddly hilarious.

I can't hold back my laughter. Ben's devastated, and Emily appears to feel genuinely sorry for her brother, but this whole situation is just plain ridiculous. Just when I

think my life can't get any more surreal, Emily Baker proves me wrong once again. “Why don't you apologize to him and explain what really happened?”

“Well, um...” She bites her lower lip like she always does when nervous. “I might, just might, be a little bit guilty in this.” She looks like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“Okay, go on.” I cross my arms over my chest and try to look stern, though a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

“I took the cover off the aquarium to feed them,” she says, rushing out the words, “but then I forgot to put it back on, and well, you know the rest.” She looks up at me through her lashes, clearly hoping for sympathy.

“Emily!” I say in a reproachful tone, though I can't quite keep the laughter out of my voice. It's so typically Emily, chaotic, well-intentioned, and absolutely disastrous.

She lifts her arms, palms faceup, and shrugs, giving me that impish grin that never fails to make my heart skip a beat.

And in that moment, watching her standing there with her hair disheveled, her cheeks flushed, and that mischievous sparkle in her eyes, I know with absolute certainty that I made the right decision. Life with Emily will never be boring or predictable, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

EPILOGUE

Emily

Six and a half months later...

Logan's warm hand slides across my hip, and his body heats up my back like a furnace. Sunlight sneaks through the gap in our curtains, turning our bedroom all golden and cozy.

“Mmm,” I mumble, brain still foggy with sleep. “Time's it?”

“Still early,” he whispers right against my ear, sending goose bumps all over. “We got plenty of time.”

His hand keeps moving up under my sleep shirt to grab my boob. I gasp when he touches me. Being pregnant has turned my breasts into these super-sensitive zones where every little touch feels like grabbing a live wire.

“This okay?” Logan asks, all cautious like he's been since my belly started growing. It's both sweet and kinda annoying how protective he gets.

Instead of bothering with words, I just push my butt back against his morning wood. “Way better than okay.”

His thumb circles my nipple, and I moan like I'm in one of those cheesy movies. God, it feels amazing, though, and it's almost too good to handle.

“Damn,” he mumbles against my ear, voice all gravelly. “Love those sounds.”

“Blame the baby.” I twist around to face him. “Everything's like... cranked to eleven.”

His eyes go dark, and his pupils get so big that there's barely any green left. “Everything?”

“Oh yeah.” I nod, reaching down to grab his hard-on through his boxers. “Especially this bad boy right here.”

He makes this growly noise, pushing against my hand. Then his mouth is on mine. He's not gentle at all, but hungry and demanding, while his tongue slides against mine in a way that makes me think about what I want him doing between my legs.

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I push his shoulders, and he gets the message, rolling onto his back so I can climb on top. My baby bump makes things a little more difficult now. It's weird having this physical reminder of us right there while we're getting it on.

Logan runs his hands up my thighs, pushing my shirt higher until I get impatient and just yank the damn thing off. The air feels cool on my naked skin as I sit there on top of him. He looks me up and down as though he's memorizing every inch, from my bigger boobs to my round belly and the flush I can feel spreading across my chest.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he breathes, cupping my boobs, circling my nipples with his thumbs. Not just hot or sexy, but gorgeous, as if I'm some kind of treasure or something.

I moan again, grinding against him, where I'm already wet and throbbing. Being pregnant has screwed with my hormones big time, leaving me horny at the most random moments.

“Wanna taste you,” Logan says, voice rough with wanting. “Come up here.”

It takes me a second to figure out what he's asking for, and when I do, my face burns hot. “Don't think I can?—”

“I got you,” he cuts me off, hands on my hips guiding me up his body until my knees are on either side of his head, my center right over his mouth. “Won't let you fall.”

When his tongue touches me, I cry out, grabbing the headboard to keep from collapsing. He doesn't hold back at all, licking and sucking at my clit while his hands

grip my thighs to keep me where he wants me.

“Logan,” I pant, my hips moving on their own, riding his face. “Oh my god, that's?—”

He hums against me, and the vibration just adds to everything, pushing me closer to the edge. My pregnant body is crazy responsive.

“Let go,” he says, his breath hot against me. “Wanna feel you come on my tongue.”

His words push me over, my thighs shaking as pleasure crashes through me, so intense I see stars. Before I can even catch my breath, he flips us over, being careful of my belly as he gets between my legs.

“Need you now,” he growls, pushing into me in one smooth stroke.

I cry out again at how full I feel, still sensitive from coming once already. He stops, checking my face for any sign that I'm not into it. Always so damn careful.

“I'm fine,” I tell him, wrapping my legs around his waist to pull him deeper. “Please move already.”

He does, finding a rhythm that's not too rough but definitely not too gentle either, each thrust hitting this spot inside me that makes my toes curl. Another orgasm starts building already, my body ready for more in a way it never was before the pregnancy.

“Feel so good,” he murmurs, eyes locked on mine. “So tight around me, so perfect.”

His words turn me on almost as much as what he's doing. I find myself talking back, telling him how he fills me up just right, how I wake up wet from dreaming about him, how sometimes I touch myself in the shower thinking about his cock inside me.

He groans, rhythm stuttering a bit. “Say that again.”

“I dream about you,” I repeat, voice breathy and needy. “About your cock inside me, about coming all around you.”

“Fuck,” he hisses, thrusts getting harder, more desperate. “You're gonna make me come.”

That's exactly what I want, to see him lose it because of me. “Then come,” I urge him, squeezing around him. “Fill me up.”

His movements get all jerky and uncoordinated, his breathing harsh against my neck. I can feel the moment he lets go, his body tensing up as he comes with a groan that has my name in it.

The feeling sets me off again, a gentler orgasm than the first but still amazing, waves of pleasure washing through me as I hold him close.

After, he rolls to the side, keeping one arm around me and his hand resting protectively on my belly. “You sure that was okay?” he asks, still worried about the baby.

I laugh, still catching my breath. “More than okay. The doctor literally said sex is good for us, Logan. Encouraged, even.”

“I know, but?—”

“No buts.” I shut him up with a kiss. “Unless it's my butt, which is also available for action.”

He laughs, the sound rumbling through his chest. “You're insatiable.”

I snuggle closer. “Blame the hormones. And maybe the ridiculously hot guy in my bed.”

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His expression gets all soft. “Our bed,” he corrects me. “Our home. Our baby.”

Those simple words fill me with this warmth that has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with the life we're building together. It's not what either of us planned, but somehow, it's exactly what we both needed.

Pregnancy is weird as hell. Everyone says it's this beautiful miracle, but let me tell you, my body's been telling a different story. I spent the first few months puking my guts out any time I smelled coffee or anything fried. And morning sickness? What a joke! Try all-day-and-sometimes-three-a.m. sickness. I'm permanently exhausted, my ankles are swollen to twice their size, and my belly's so huge I can't even reach the computer keyboard when I sit at my desk.

But there've been some pretty cool moments, too. The first time I felt the baby move, I had this weird fluttery feeling inside me, like butterfly wings. Logan's whole face lit up when we heard the heartbeat at the first ultrasound.

We've come a long way since those early days. After the Great Fish Massacre at my parents' house, for which my brother still gives me the cold shoulder, even though Logan bought him this crazy expensive aquarium setup, we returned to New York. We started figuring out how to actually live together. Some days are harder than others. Logan still wakes up in the middle of the night sometimes, covered in sweat and freaking out, terrified of losing us like he lost Valerie and their baby. But we talk through it, hold onto each other when it gets scary, and he's usually back to being my grumpy veterinarian by morning.

“How can I help you?” I ask the last patient of the day, straightening the appointment

cards just because.

I'm back working for Logan, even though he tried hard to make me stay home and rest. We had our first real knock-down, drag-out fight over it. Eventually, I made him understand that being pregnant doesn't mean I'm suddenly useless. I like coming to work, even if my relationship with most animals is still... complicated.

Plus, I'm not going to lie, I enjoy too much watching the looks on the clients' faces when they find out Logan and I are together. He's mine, ladies! I get this petty little thrill when Mrs. Hilton or one of the other desperate housewives in his fan club walks in and spots my engagement ring.

The woman standing at my desk keeps staring at me with her mouth open, not saying a word. Her eyes are fixed on something under my desk, and she looks grossed out.

"Um, ma'am? Can I help you?" I ask again, trying to figure out what she's looking at. Did I spill ice cream on the floor again? I can't see anything from my angle!

"Ew!" she mutters. "That's disgusting."

"What?" I snap, about ready to lose it. These pregnancy hormones have made my temper super short. Last week, I cried because Logan bought the wrong peanut butter, then started laughing at how ridiculous I was being. "What's your problem?"

She doesn't say anything, just keeps pointing at something under my chair.

"Seriously?" I don't realize how loud I've gotten until the door behind me opens, and Logan walks in. His hair's all messed up, and he looks tired but happy. He's been working extra hours lately to make sure everything at the clinic is running smoothly before he takes time off when the baby comes.

“What's going on out here?” he asks. He's got his phone pressed to his ear, obviously in the middle of a call.

“No idea! Ask her!” Frustrated, I point at the woman, who's turned this weird greenish color. She keeps staring at the floor under my chair with this horrified look.

“I think I'll come back another time,” she says, turning around and running for the door. “Dr. Price, your fiancée needs your help!” she calls over her shoulder before slamming the door behind her.

Logan looks at me, confused, and I just shrug. I don't have a clue what her deal is.

“Hey, Stephen, I'll call you back later,” he says into the phone.

Stephen's been super involved in our lives since that day in his office. He's been Logan's rock through this whole baby journey, always there with advice or reassurance when Logan freaks out. We already asked him to be the baby's godfather, and he got all emotional about it, which was sweet. Kate and Sarah are still bitching about it, but I couldn't choose between them, so Logan's friend was the easier choice.

“You don't have to hang up. I'm totally fine.” I start to get up from my chair when this sharp pain stabs through my belly. It feels like someone's wringing out my insides like a wet dishcloth. I can't help the little whimper that comes out.

Logan rushes over, almost dropping his phone. His face turns the same weird color as the woman who just left. “Putting you on speaker, buddy,” he says, setting the phone down on the desk. “Don't hang up. I need you!”

“What's happening?” Stephen asks through the phone.

“Hey ther—” Another super painful cramp grabs my belly, and I scream. It's like the

worst period cramp ever times a thousand.

“Emily? Emily, what's wrong?” Stephen sounds worried now.

“Her water broke. I think she's in labor.” Logan's voice sounds weird, all high and tight. I look down and finally see what the woman was staring at: there's a huge puddle spreading across the floor under my chair. Well, that's embarrassing.

“I'm sending an ambulance right now. Get ready, dude. Your kid might be born today.” Stephen sounds calm but excited.

“What?” I gasp, doubling over as the cramping that started this morning suddenly intensifies. I thought I wouldn't even notice when labor started! These aren't the gentle waves I read about. This is worse than my nightmare about giving birth at the grocery store. I can't have a baby in a vet clinic!

“Shhh, just breathe,” Logan says, pushing my hair out of my face. His fingers feel cool against my skin, which suddenly feels super hot. “Everything's gonna be fine.” There's this weird look in his eyes like he doesn't quite believe it himself.

“What is it, Logan? What's wrong?” I grab his shirt, yanking him close to my face.

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“What's going on?” Stephen asks through the phone.

“Nothing,” Logan says, sounding totally unconvincing. “Nothing's wrong.” His eyes meet mine, and I can see him fighting his way back, pushing through the fear.

“Okay, put Emily on the exam table. It's not ideal, but it'll work.” Stephen's all business now.

“What? No way!” I protest. I've spent enough time on that cold metal table, thank you very much.

“Emily,” Logan says in that soft voice. “Please.” His eyes beg me, and I can see how hard he's trying to stay calm for me.

There are these little lines around his eyes that weren't there before. His jaw clenches so tightly I can practically hear his teeth grinding. I know how much he's been dreading this moment. Throughout my pregnancy, he's been torn between being super happy about the baby and terrified that history might repeat itself. He's been to every doctor's appointment, asked a million questions, and made backup plans for his backup plans. I really don't want to give birth in a vet exam room, but I nod anyway. I just hope the ambulance gets here fast.

Logan picks up his phone and sticks it in his pocket, careful not to hang up. Then he puts one arm under my knees and the other behind my back and lifts me as if I don't weigh anything, even though I'm basically a baby hippo at this point. He carries me into the exam room and sits me on that cold metal table.

Why do I always end up here? Normal people don't have these problems. Normal women give birth in hospitals, with doctors and nurses and epidurals!

Logan takes out his phone and puts it next to my leg. “Okay, we're here. What do?—”

He's cut off by another scream from me as a contraction rips through my body. It feels like being torn in half from the inside.

“What do I do, Stephen? Tell me what to do!” There's panic in Logan's voice as he looks from me to the phone and back. He runs his hand through his hair, making it stand up all over. Despite the pain, I feel this rush of love for him. He's trying so hard.

“Both of you need to calm down! Take a deep breath!” Stephen orders. I don't know which of us he's talking to, but we both follow his instructions, eyes locked on each other. It doesn't help with the pain, but it's something to focus on.

“Logan, check how dilated she is,” Stephen says.

“Wait, what does that mean?” I ask. We took the childbirth classes, but they didn't cover this part in detail. Logan ignores my question, hooks his fingers in the waistband of my sweatpants, the only pants that still fit me, and pulls them down.

“What are you doing?” I squeak, suddenly feeling all shy even though this guy has seen every inch of me a million times.

“It's gonna be okay, Em,” he says in that voice he uses with scared animals. “Just try to relax.”

Right. Like I can relax while my fiancé's undressing me on a metal table in a vet clinic with his best friend on speakerphone! He gets my sweatpants and underwear

off, then puts his hands on my knees and spreads my legs. The position is way too familiar from all of our sexy times, but this context could not be more different.

“Oh my god, Stephen, I can see the head! I can see the baby's head!” Logan's voice is full of wonder and total terror.

“Good, good. Just stay right there. Now it's up to Mama to push,” Stephen says, all calm and encouraging.

But I'm not listening to Stephen. I'm staring at Logan between my legs and processing what he just said. “What do you mean, you can see the head?” Then it hits me. “Oh my god! There's a baby coming out of my vagina! Logan, get out of there! I don't want you to see this!”

Stephen laughs on the other end of the line, and Logan looks up at me, tired and desperate. “Emily, our baby is literally being born right now. Please just focus on that, okay?”

I try to nod, but another contraction hits, and I start screaming my head off. The pressure is insane, unlike anything I've ever felt.

“Push, Emily,” Logan and Stephen say together. “You got this!”

I start pushing, thinking that as soon as I see this kid, I'm going to give them hell for what they're putting me through. Nine months of feeling like crap, and now this pain. This baby better be cute.

For what feels like forever, the only sound in the room is my screaming. Then suddenly, there's another sound, this tiny, angry cry that's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

I open my eyes—I didn't even realize I closed them—and see Logan holding this tiny, bluish creature in his arms.

“It's a girl,” he whispers. “We have a daughter.” Tears fill his eyes as he brings her to show me. A daughter! We decided not to find out the sex, wanting to be surprised. Now, looking at her scrunched-up little face, I can't imagine her being anyone else.

She's perfect. Ten fingers, ten toes, and lungs that work just fine based on how loudly she's screaming. She's got a little tuft of dark hair on her head, and her nose is a tiny version of Logan's. Just perfect.

The door bursts open, and two paramedics rush in with a stretcher, but it's like they're not even there. It's just Logan, me, and our little girl. After all the chaos of the last hour, this moment feels strangely peaceful.

“See?” I say to him softly. “She's not even a minute old, and she already adores you. She knows you're the best dad in the world.” It's true. Our daughter has stopped crying and is looking up at Logan with this serious expression as if she's studying his face.

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Logan smiles at me, then looks back at our daughter. The shadow I've seen in his eyes so many times is completely gone, replaced by a joy so deep it takes my breath away. "Just like you're the best mom."

I laugh weakly. "Don't be ridiculous, we both know I'm gonna suck at this. I just hope I don't forget to feed her like I do with the cat." It's a bad joke, and I'm too exhausted to pull it off.

Logan chuckles anyway. He leans down and kisses my forehead, his lips lingering there. "You're going to be an amazing mother, Em. You already are." Then he turns and does the same to our daughter, giving her the gentlest kiss on her tiny forehead. "Welcome to the world, Ava Josephine Price."

"Ava Josephine," I repeat softly, testing the name on my tongue. We agreed on Ava months ago for a girl.

Logan shyly suggested it one night as we lay in bed, his hand on my belly. "After my mother," he explained, eyes misting over. "Her name was Ava." It was one of the few times he spoke of her without pain clouding his features.

"It's perfect for her," I whisper, touching our daughter's tiny hand. "Your mom would be so proud of you, Logan."

His eyes meet mine, shining with tears. "You think so?"

"I know so," I say firmly. "Look at what you created, this beautiful girl, this life we have. You're nothing like your father. You're everything good that came from her."

He swallows hard, one tear escaping to track down his cheek. “Thank you,” he manages, voice rough with emotion. “For giving me a family again. For believing in me.”

Somewhere in my mind, I hear my grandmother's voice. You'll know when you can't help smiling at the sight of them. Even after decades together, even when you've memorized every line of their face, their presence will still delight, surprise, and fill you with joy. Love makes your heart smile, Emily, not your face. It lives inside, private and precious.

She was right. My heart is smiling.

“Welcome to our crazy family,” I whisper, running a finger over my baby girl's super soft cheek.

Logan wraps his arm around us, pressing his face against my hair. “You did it. You were amazing.”

“We did it,” I correct him, leaning into him. “Though I deserve way more credit for the last part.”

He laughs softly, kissing my temple. “Fair enough.”

I had a plan. But Grandma, again, was right. Having a plan and having a good plan isn't the same thing. And yet, sometimes, what looks like a total mess is just the universe's way of putting things exactly where they belong.